The Canadian Distinctiveness into the XXIst Century - La distinction canadienne au tournant du XXIe siècle

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In the twentieth century, Canada came to occupy a significant place in the world. Our reputation continues to grow: in terms of our technology, our government policy, and, I will argue, our culture. The forces of continentalization continue to increase, yet Canadian culture remains — and, I believe, will remain — distinct and distinctive, the reflection of our unique sensibilities. Canada’s cultural agencies play an important role in fostering the expression of this sensibility. We must ensure that they have the resources to continue doing so.

In the past half-century, Canada has accomplished a great deal in the cultural arena. We have built an admirable arts infrastructure within the country and we have produced a significant number of artists and writers whose work is appreciated worldwide. A number of factors have contributed to the success of Canada’s artists and to the quality — and qualities — of artistic and cultural endeavour in this country. These rest very largely in the Canadian sense of community and the institutions that stem from it. Canadian art, taken as a whole, reflects a medley of many community voices.

North-South integration is, however, changing the face of Canada. It is important in these circumstances that we have a clear idea of the differences between Canadian and American sensibilities. Equally important to note is the importance of the Crown agencies that sustain our Canadian distinctiveness and the authentic voices of our artists.

Our International Stars

Over the past several decades, Canadian culture has gained an increasingly important profile on the international scene. We have only to
think of writers and playwrights such as Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, and Michel Tremblay; musicians such as Ben Heppner and Diana Krall; filmmakers Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg, and François Girard; of such popular entertainers as Céline Dion and Shania Twain. In attracting a wide following in many countries, Canada’s artists have, each in his/her own way and media, touched on and explored universal human themes. There are Canadian Studies programmes in many countries. Canadian literature is studied in universities all over the world.

Factors in our Success

The success of our artists can to some extent be attributed to ease of travel and the multiplication and speed of communications – another area in which Canada is a leader. I would also attribute it to government cultural policies of the last fifty years, policies that are facing new challenges as we move into the twenty-first century. These, however, are subsidiary factors. The ‘Canadian sensibility,’ more than anything else, accounts for the international success of our artists. I want, therefore, to begin by looking at the quality of artistic and cultural endeavour in this country and what it reveals about the Canadian sensibility.

One aspect of that sensibility is the acceptance of a plurality of groups. Our culture is a medley of many community voices. Northrop Frye in The Bush Garden pointed out that “unity and identity are quite different things ... and ... in Canada they are perhaps more different than they are anywhere else.” He went on to explain, “Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in a political feeling.”1 “Real unity,” he continued, “tolerates dissent and rejoices in variety of outlook and tradition” (Frye 1971: ii, vi).

One of the oldest paintings in the Canadian collection of the National Gallery of Canada illustrates this point: that Canada is made up of many communities, pursuing their own cultural expression while sharing the support of a unified political system. I am thinking of the 1807 portrait of Joseph Brant by William Berczy. The subject of the painting, Joseph Brant, was a hereditary chief of the Mohawks. He led the Six Nations in support of the British during the American Revolution and afterwards brought them to Ontario to settle. The Six
Nations have produced an impressive number of outstanding artists. Pauline Johnson, daughter of a Mohawk chief, was the first Aboriginal poet to achieve an international reputation. Last fall, Six Nations photographer Greg Staats won the Council's Duke and Duchess of York Prize in Photography.

William Berczy, the painter, was also an immigrant to the young province of Ontario. Born in Bavaria, in present-day Germany, he led a group of German settlers to New York state in 1792. Finding arrangements there uncongenial, he brought his group to Markham (just north of Toronto), where they settled in 1795. Berczy had received extensive training as a painter in Europe. Once established in Canada, he turned to art again as the source of his livelihood. Both these men represent communities moving into Canada and sharing their cultural heritage.

Over the past two centuries, this pattern of a diverse artistic tradition nurtured by the unceasing contribution of immigrant communities has repeated itself thousands of times. Finding a home and some degree of economic security in Canada, artists have worked comfortably with a foot in each of two cultures — that of their origins and that of their point of settlement. The nineteenth-century Dutch-born artist, Cornelius Krieghoff, was the subject of an exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada (October 2000 to January 2001). He painted what many people see as quintessential scenes of French-Canadian life. Yet, however well the paintings achieve this objective, they also show clearly an indebtedness to the Dutch tradition of winter scenes. From the prairies, in the mid-twentieth century, we have a manifestation of this very pattern of nourishment from immigrant traditions: the deeply Orthodox work of the Ukrainian-born artist William Kurelek.

In recent years, Canadian culture has been greatly enriched by the work of artists Asian born or of Asian descent. I think of writers Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, and Michael Ondaatje; of filmmakers Paul Wong and Mina Shum; of musicians Adyita Verma and Jon Kimura Parker; and of painter Takao Tanabe. The work of Canada's outstanding artists reflects the qualities of dozens of contributing communities that make up the Canadian cultural landscape. In addition to those just mentioned, we are indebted to the Armenian community (Atom Egoyan), the African community (Djanet Sears), and the Italian community (Nino Ricci).

In French Canada, the cultural tradition is so long and rich, and the names legion, that it is difficult to know where to begin. Keeping
to artists widely recognized at the closing of this century, a perusal of the European cultural press will turn up in short order the names of Anne Hébert, Robert Lepage, François Girard, and Michel Tremblay.

No other country, proportionate to its population, produces such a wealth and variety of art as Canada.

**North-South Integration**

Is the pool of Canadian artistic talent, or the environment that forms that talent, threatened by globalization and international market forces? I am cautiously optimistic. Currently, we have a large pool of talented artists, and our environment of internal and international mobility is a great stimulus to the creative imagination. Canada is also relatively prosperous and there is a significant art audience. To this extent, we can feel quite confident about the vitality of Canadian culture and its expression through the work of practising artists in the immediate future.

The area where I have deep concerns, however, is in the long-term future of the distinctively Canadian cultural institutions that support that talent and market. International stars do not spring forth *sui generis*. All artists require some kind of incubation period, during which they depend for support and encouragement on their families, communities, and countries while they learn their trades and develop their distinctive styles.

This kind of support, even at the simplest family level, is dependent on two major factors: the economy and political will. For Canada, the terms *globalization* and *international market forces* really mean *continentalization*. In the last two decades we have witnessed the gradual integration of the Canadian economy into the American. The recently proposed merger of Canadian National with the giant U.S. railway, Burlington North Santa Fe, is symbolic of the north-south trade axes that are replacing the traditional east-west axes that had their origins in earlier European patterns of exploration and colonization.

One indirect effect of this realignment has been the movement of head offices to the United States. With these head offices go both corporate and private resources: potential sponsorship money, expertise in the voluntary sector of the arts, active community contributors, and audiences. It is clear, furthermore, that for the United States, culture is business. Americans do not take kindly to any country that might try,
forcefully or even very tentatively, to protect its own culture or limit the spread of American culture. Although cultural products were exempted from the North American Free Trade Agreement, pressure on the cultural front will not let up, as was evident in the controversy over split-run magazine publications.

In any case, we all know that physical or regulatory barriers, in this age of Internet, satellite dishes, and electronic commerce, will not in themselves be enough to sustain Canadian cultural distinctiveness. Canadian artists and arts organizations need direct, broad-based, institutional support.

**American versus Canadian Sensibility**

Let me now make a couple of broad generalizations about what it is we are trying to preserve. First, the Canadian sensibility has traditionally shown a greater deference to authority and a greater respect for community than the American. The American sensibility is more individualistic and more prone to view social relations in contractual terms, as agreements between equals that can be broken off at any time.

Seymour Martin Lipset has been a leader in documenting the differences between American and Canadian sensibilities. In *Continental Divide*, he describes the difference between America’s classical libertarian sensibilities that emphasize distrust of the state, egalitarianism, and populism, and the conservative British and European sensibilities of Canada, that are “accepting of the need for a strong state, for respect for authority, for deference” (Lipset 1990:2). The divide between Canada and the United States is dwindling, he says, as both sides move toward the middle. The contrast is of degree, not of absolutes. But in its tradition of social and health services, government ownership, and what Lipset calls “constitutional rights to ethnocultural survival,” the Canadian sensibility is still very different from that of the American (Lipset 1990:3). In his list of differences Lipset mentions as well the ability of Canadians to maintain healthy, liveable inner cities. This is a factor of some importance in fostering a vibrant cultural life.

The rest of the world is intrigued by the difference in sensibility that shows up in Canada’s cultural products. We are North Americans but we have not shed our roots in other parts of the world. In Marshall McLuhan’s words, Canada is a “borderline” case. It is borderline in the literal sense of being a population spread out in a thin band along the
U.S. border. It is also borderline in the historic sense of always having been at the periphery of much larger imperial entities: French, British, or American. It is borderline in the sense of being vulnerable: its continuing existence is precarious. McLuhan saw this borderline characteristic as an asset: "Canadians," he wrote, "are the people who learned how to live without the bold accents of the national ego-trippers of other lands" (McLuhan 1977:227). He added a fourth interpretation: in this sense, borders are not barriers so much as openings that create a sense of perspective, making it possible to interpret events and to mediate among diverse groups. Canada's many internal borders – political, religious, ethnic, psychic – act as intervals that make what we say and do resonate for others.

This more thoughtful and attentive attitude toward the world in all its cultural variety is the specific quality informing the Canadian sensibility. As Margaret Atwood put it in "Nationalism, Limbo and the Canadian Club," Americans see themselves as "a huge healthy apple pie, with other countries and cultures sprinkled around the outside, like raisins." We see ourselves, she argues, as a raisin, and the other parts of the universe as "invariably larger and more interesting" (Atwood 1982:87–8).

The Need for Crown Agencies

I have argued that, to preserve the variety of outlook that is a distinguishing feature of the Canadian sensibility, Canadian artists and arts organizations need direct, broad-based institutional support. That support has traditionally been provided through our cultural Crown agencies. Our Crown agencies embody Canada's more thoughtful and respectful attitude towards the wider world. They arose from the recognition that, given a small population spread over a vast area, there would be gaps that society itself could not fill, where the state would have to step in without interfering.

The sensibility that produced our Crown agencies recognized the wisdom of having a political regime that clearly distinguishes between the head of state and the leader of the government. It recognized that there are many important questions that the government leader and his or her elected party colleagues must tend to; but that there are also others that must be dealt with in the public realm, while being kept at arm's length from politicians. For that reason, we now have over thirty
major Crown agencies in this country. Among them are some of our most important cultural institutions, including the National Gallery of Canada and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Peter Newman and Angus Reid, among others, have pointed out how Canadians are losing their distinctiveness (Newman 1995). That respectful openness to the world is disappearing. Our turning inward, as Lipset points out, entails some loss of awareness. In making us more American, it may also, however, yield benefits through increased self-confidence, self-reliance, and individualism. The full implications of this transformation of the Canadian psyche will be apparent in the coming decades; we can, however, point out some early effects. The economic integration of Canada with the United States is far more complete than the cultural integration. It has entailed the loss of a large number of Crown agencies operating in the economic sphere: CN, Canada Post, Air Canada, and PetroCanada. These agencies were privatized because of international market forces.

In cultural terms, however, Canadians tend more than ever to define themselves in terms of their difference from the United States; our cultural Crown agencies continue to support those differences. For half a century or more, these agencies have been the sustaining force behind the voices that make up a distinctive Canadian artistic ethos. It is my belief that they will continue to provide the best bulwark against the loss of that distinctiveness.

As Charles Taylor pointed out, art is “a crucial terrain for the ideal of authenticity.” Support for Canadian distinctiveness implies support for what is authentic in the work of our artists; and this ideal of authenticity “requires that we discover and articulate our own identity” (Taylor 1991:81–2). Authenticity may be self-referential in manner but the matter must serve to articulate something beyond the self. I do things my way but not I do my thing. What we do must be a response to the larger claims of nature and our world, but the artist, in responding, must do so in his or her own authentic voice. Our cultural agencies give artists an opportunity to develop authentic voices. They give resonance to those voices; they support what is best and most authentic in the work of our writers and artists; they sustain our Canadian distinctiveness, our specific sensibility, and our way of apprehending and evaluating the world. In the United States, the National Endowment for the Arts, for example, is not empowered to make grants to individual artists. Individuals, in the libertarian tradition, are on their own. The Canada Council for the Arts, on the other hand, reserves 20
per cent of its grants budget for grants to individual artists. Individuals in Canada have a place in a civil network.

As the forces of continentalization grow stronger, Canada urgently needs a reaffirmation of the policies that support Crown agencies in the cultural sector, among them the Canada Council for the Arts, the CBC, the National Film Board, the National Gallery, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and the National Arts Centre. Artists themselves overwhelmingly recognize the importance of these agencies. As Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk explained: "With Council financing and video as our tool, we have been able to record and save our culture" (Kunuk, in conversation with Canada Council, 1999 August). And as Acadian writer Antonine Maillet wrote: "Sans doute aurais-je écrit, avec ou sans le Conseil des Arts. Mais aurais-je pu le faire au même rythme, et avec la même liberté ? Le peuple acadien n'avait pas d'antécédents d'écriture avant ma génération. Il avait besoin d'un encouragement inconditionnel et ferme pour croire à son étoile, pour réaliser l'impensable de faire franchir à une culture le passage de l'oral à l'écrit." (Maillet, correspondence with the Canada Council, 1999).

In concluding, let me be clear that I do not think there is anything wrong or morally inferior about the U.S.-style libertarian sensibility. We should realize, however, that for Canadians to embrace that sensibility would leave us without the real ground of our distinctiveness and the raison d'être of our sovereignty. It is not the fact that an artist or a producer of art was born in Canada or is a Canadian citizen that is going to interest others. It is the distinctiveness and authenticity of that artist's sensibility, of his or her way of perceiving and evaluating the world.

My final note is one of optimism. Whatever the political and economic changes we face, I think that Canada will remain distinct. An irreducible factor making for Canadian cultural distinctiveness is our land. Canadian culture, whatever forms it may take, will always have to shape itself to our demanding geography and landscape. Ontario poet Al Purdy recognized this:

during the fall plowing a man
might stop and stand in a brown valley of the furrows
and shade his eyes to watch for the same
red patch mixed with gold
that appears on the same
spot on the hills
year after year
and grow old
plowing and plowing a ten-acre field until
the convolutions run parallel with his own brain –


I sincerely hope that Canada’s cultural agencies will be empow-
ered to continue fostering this creative tension in our artists’ voices
between the places that we come from and the place where we are
throughout the twenty-first century.

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