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“Characterized by a Sophisticated Response”: Herb Wyile’s Resistance to Neoliberalism

KIT DOBSON

IT WAS AN IMMENSE PRIVILEGE to be able to participate in the roundtable in commemoration of Herb Wyile’s work that took place at Congress 2017, assembled by Tanis MacDonald and organized under the aegis of both the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English and the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures. That roundtable consisted of, in alphabetical order, Jennifer Andrews, Clint Burnham, Matthew Cormier, myself, and Heidi Tiedemann Darroch. Held in a packed classroom in Ryerson’s Victoria Building, it was an opportunity for colleagues to meet and to discuss Herb’s legacy. The panel was perhaps particularly poignant for those of us who were unable to make it, in July 2017, shortly thereafter, to the conference at Acadia University organized in his honour. The event at Ryerson marked, I feel, a moment in Canadian literary studies, one in which those in the room were galvanized around shared feelings of loss, but also feelings of solidarity, generosity, and compassion for those who labour in the academy in a challenging moment at which neoliberal(izing) forces seem too often to be gaining the upper hand. It was, for me, the sort of moment that generates the positive charge necessary to continue to negotiate the tricky terrain of the contemporary moment.

The roundtable at Congress presented us with a challenge: on the one hand, we were there to assess the intellectual labour of one of our now-departed colleagues. On the other hand, it was also a roundtable through which I hoped to express an affective affiliation with the spirit of Herb’s work rather than simply with its external forms (that is, with Herb’s affective legacy and not just the intellectual legacy of his publications). I suspect that many who were in attendance might share the latter inclination, alongside the former. This parallel process derived, first, then, from engagements with Herb’s publications, and, second,

from my own — or “our” own, if I dare use the collective pronoun — more personal interactions with Herb. I would like to argue, however, that these are ultimately inseparable dimensions of the same thing in this case, and that, particularly in my own interactions with Herb, the generosity of spirit that he brought to our too-limited interactions were mirrored by the generosity that he brought to the texts that he read, the writers with whom he interacted, and the concepts that he engaged. In all of those respects and more, I find Herb Wylie to be exemplary.

In his 2011 monograph *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*, Herb argues — and here I get to slip into the wonderful present tense with which we talk about texts, momentarily eliding the fact that my face-to-face conversations with Herb have ended — that Atlantic-Canadian literatures written in English are “characterized by a sophisticated response to the double-edged and profoundly disempowering vision of the region” that is the result of globalization’s reduction of the space to a series of banal stereotypes (6). Instead, Wylie looks toward instances of “resistance” and “consciousness” that signal a changing approach to Atlantic Canada. *Anne of Tim Hortons*, in my estimation, does well when read as part of a scholarly project that offers readers ways to engage earnestly with the challenges of the global flows of capital without capitulation or despair. Wylie notes, for instance, that while global capitalism intensifies and accelerates many of the tensions within and between communities, Atlantic-Canadian literature’s insistence upon the specificity of place, in and of itself, can already function as a form of resistance to “the mobility, deracination, and sense of placelessness that characterize our highly technological, globalized consumer society” (233). Through his readings of the recent literatures of Atlantic Canada, he demonstrates how nuance, playful interaction with the “Folk” stereotypes of the region, and conscious re-inscriptions of the space respond in forceful ways to the thrust of neoliberal ideologies in Canada and to the very real challenges facing people in the Atlantic region.

I have to admit that it took me a second reading of *Anne of Tim Hortons* in order to understand Herb’s insistence upon the role of the region. Now that I have done so, *Anne of Tim Hortons* is important, in my view, for the ways in which it takes much of the theory around globalization and neoliberalism that had been produced up until that point and then situates it very meaningfully within that regional con-

text. In this respect, the monograph augments the interest in the region evident in so much of Herb's work, but it manages to take thinking around globality very seriously as well. As he notes, "neo-liberal ideology has had a profound influence in reinforcing the image of Atlantic Canada as politically, culturally, and economically parochial" (21). In order to understand what is at stake, Herb carefully navigates the politics of neoliberalism and then situates these politics, very concretely, in Atlantic Canada. This move is an important one because it happens against the theory itself, which often proposes a deracinated vision in which different regions are effectively different parts of the same thing. To be able to take the smooth structures of the global, then, and find their striations, their faults and fissures, and use those as openings to find where the Atlantic may lie in all of this hubbub requires nimble thinking and agile writing. For myself, as a critic situated in another of those regions — the prairies and Alberta more specifically — the possibility of using the quasi-utopic (though ultimately dystopic) language of the global against itself in order to locate the region is, I find, empowering.

As a scholar who has worked with similar theoretical apparatuses and as someone with, I hope, similar political commitments as those expressed in his work, I have found Herb's writing to be important in informing my own efforts to date. For me, though, the connections are also affective and personal. I met Herb for the first time at a conference in Spain several years ago, where I was not only happy to put a face to a name that I had known for some years, but where I was also happy to delve into conversations about the state of CanLit and some of our shared concerns about the world and the academy. I was grateful for Herb's open-minded and open-hearted attention to myself as a young upstart, and our conversations continued after the conference ended, greatly improving, along the way, my understanding of his publications.

My final interactions with Herb were important for me and for my development as a scholar and as a person. At my home institution, our applications for sabbaticals are accompanied by a letter of support for the sabbatical plan. This letter is written by a faculty member from another institution. I approached Herb for this letter of support, which he very graciously wrote for me, leading to a sabbatical that I spent in Montreal at a vital time in my life (let's call it a mid-life recovery). It was a tremendous, radical privilege, the sort that I wish I could share

with everyone who reads this piece. In conversations that took place around his writing of that letter, Herb and I discussed what it meant to go on sabbatical — not only what a tremendous privilege a sabbatical is, but also what is involved in practical terms. We also spoke, more broadly, about what it meant to work as an academic and what kinds of self-care are needed in order to persist in this demanding and sometimes-hostile environment. At the time, I was absolutely burnt out; I was ready, perhaps, to leave the academy entirely. Herb could tell. Herb generously advised me about what to expect on my sabbatical, and gently let me know that returning from sabbatical is one of the hardest parts — advice that continued to help me to navigate my return from sabbatical the year afterward, too.

Even if I find myself now, in looking back over that correspondence and re-reading our final emails to each other, reading more into it than may have been there on the page or in our conversations, I hope that Herb wouldn't mind me saying that his kind words at that time are one of the reasons that I've decided to persist in the academy in order to do the best work that I can and to support deserving, emerging colleagues, just as he supported me. His passing came not long after our exchanges, and, while I was unable to attend Congress 2016 at the University of Calgary, I know that he was a force to be reckoned with there, very shortly before he left us.

Mentorship takes many forms. I have been blessed to have wonderful mentors throughout my academic career — something that I neither take for granted nor that I think comes easily. Herb has taken his place as one of them. His intellectual labour, which seeks to find the good — the pertinent, the provocative, and the useful — in the works that he studied and the writers with whom he interacted, is something that I have found deeply instructive. Our interactions, too, have taught me, I hope, about the value of attending to others' challenges, struggles, aspirations, and dreams. Sometimes mentorship happens where one least expects it, and that, in this case, was my experience of Herb Wylie.

As our community mourns the passing of a scholar whose engagements have been marked by generosity and commitment — as well as, in my view, a “sophisticated response” similar to that which he read in Atlantic literatures — I hope that I can contribute to a discussion that focuses upon how academic discourse can build the future of the ways in which scholars move through the world. In her introduction

to issue 41.1 of *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Cynthia Sugars invokes Herb's "integrity, his enthusiasms, his hard work, his fairness, and his unmatched humour" (8) as she mourns his passing. These are all qualities that, in my view, can contribute to building a better academy. This present issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* — a journal to which Herb was deeply devoted — provides an opportunity to think, in tandem with his scholarly project, about how we can create a university, too, without capitulation or despair. In the Introduction to his collection of interviews with writers of historical fiction, *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction*, Herb wrote that in that project he "resolved to provide a forum" for thinking and reflection (3). In that case, he provided a forum to think about history and historical fiction in Canada. But the idea of providing a forum remains an important one, I think, in looking at the ways in which Herb's work and editorial practices have provided us, more generally, with a forum for thinking, for writing, for research, and for convivial conversation.

At the forum that took place at Ryerson, there was a spirit that mixed mourning, loss, conviviality, and a shared commitment to do work that is often challenging, but that remains always worthwhile. We told stories of our interactions with Herb and remembered him fondly. We cried, which is not something that we are often invited to do in academic contexts. Two of my former students, who were in attendance, found it instructive to see a room of professors in tears — they shared with me that it allowed them to see how much strain faculty carry on their shoulders as they strive to create the best experience possible for their students — sometimes against very long odds. Our stories of Herb's intervention in our lives were all punctuated with notes of the kindness that he brought to his interactions, and my conversation after the forum with his daughter, too, was a testament to his compassion. While kindness and compassion are quiet affects that might not immediately generate a buzz, they are ones that, I have come to realize, are among the most important to cultivate in the academy. That a group of scholars have come together, now across multiple venues, to celebrate the life and work of Herb Wylie suggests precisely how such quiet affects can play an important role in bringing academic communities into being and into persisting. And that, friends, is worthy of our gratitude.

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