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Gerald Noonan

Canadian Duality and the Colonization of Humour

A funny thing happened to Canada on its way to its 120th year: it never had a war of independence. Except for that, Canada might well be so much like the United States it wouldn't be funny—or, as I maintain, funnier.

Both the United States and Canada began as North American English-speaking colonies of what was soon called Great Britain. The common origin accounts for, among other things, the common language, English, and the confinement (as in this article) of the literary canon for humour, as well as for most other genres, to the Anglo tradition—even though in Canada's more mosaic culture that necessitates (within a population one-tenth that of the United States total) some rather major exceptions, such as the Quebec legacy of the co-founding French, and all the preserved heritage of the native peoples and more recent immigrants. Linguistic and cultural diversity in itself fosters greater variety of humour, but my argument here is that the lack of that war I mentioned is much more fundamental to the Canadian way of seeing—and being funny about—things. It is a fairly unusual way to become independent—without a war. In Canada, independence evolved. There was no abrupt cutting of the ties that bind to the mother country. There exists in Canada still a strain of "British heritage," both acknowledged and unacknowledged—something unknown in the U.S., I suspect, outside of a couple of closets near Boston Common.

Along with the invincible British heritage, there is also in Canada visible and invisible American propinquity. A Canadian's choice of television, movies, magazines, and books, not to mention cars and cereal, is heavily weighted, numerically, economically, and nutritionally, by the nearness of the U.S. and the undefended, unstoppered border. Nonetheless, Canada's political and historical connections, to go back to the beginning, are inescapably British. Canada has become the place where British tradition meets contemporary American culture—even if neither of the source countries recognize or condone the consequent aberrations. The result for the Canadian is cultural schizophrenia. As one of our critics has said: "Canada is not British and it is not American—but it is partly both and always struggling to be something distinctively other. Hence, in

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much Canadian writing we find a strange sense of a tightrope walker. To relieve the tension we keep laughing at ourselves, mocking any tendency to fall on one side of the wire or the other" (Pacey xvii).

In sum, what is significant is not so much the funny thing that happened to Canada on its way to being 120 as the basis of a funny thing, namely duality. And duality compressed to brevity is the soul of humour, duality being central to the pun, to irony, to ambiguity, to incongruity, and to an unlabelled number of other juxtapositions of tangential stances. The stereotypical slip-on-the-banana-peel is not funny if done by a scampering child; the humour occurs when, by a banana peel, the pompous have their downfall. Duality makes possible a different angle of perception, even of stereotypes. Because of Canada's particular historical development and geographical location—(as well as the existence of that mosaic culture that a focus on Anglo literature necessarily ignores)—the place is rampant with duality. The presence of the "other," linguistically, culturally, is a facet of life in virtually every section of the country.

That extra dimension of duality distinguishes Canadian humour with a subtle element difficult, reportedly, to detect at first. Neither the American critic nor the British (even with mother-tongue in cheek) finds it easy to recognize, since both are products of an imperialist, non-dualistic culture. An allegory pertinent to the British instance has the critic on his first visit to Canada sighting a moose, an animal that does not exist in Britain, and exclaiming: "What a very ungainly looking deer!" (an animal that does exist in Britain). The Canadian humorist, in contrast, has an inbred facility for giving the moose its own artistic autonomy, in accord with its own time and place, for separating the moose from the deer, or in general making careful and sensitive juxtapositions. A balanced duality (or seemingly straight-faced and balanced) generates the essence of Canadian humour, a way of dissolving in laughter the cross-patterns of "opposites in tension" (Ross ix). The precariousness of Canada's position between Britain and the United States, and the bilingual and provincial sectionalism within its own borders, enforces a careful strain of double-think and self-restraint. As another critic has said: a tightrope is "no place for flailing arms" (Watters 544).

As imperialist critics go, the American species resembles the British, but since Americans instantly (not to say unthinkingly) identify moose—as well as deer and other continental works of art—the allegory of the automatic American imperialist response is more complex. An anecdote of a few years ago about baseball and a blackout illustrates the non-duality of the American outlook. When the eastern seaboard of the U.S. and part of the province of Ontario were plunged into darkness by a massive power failure, one of the more dramatic happenings occurred at Yankee Stadium where a tightly-contested baseball game was in progress. It was the bottom of the fifth, the batter was digging in at the plate, the pitcher looking in for the sign, both ready to give "one hundred and ten percent." Suddenly, the lights go out. Hours afterward, reporters cluster about that last batter up, asking "How did it feel?", and "What did you think?" "Well," he said. And here you have your demonstration of American imperialism. "I thought it was the end of the world. And so . . . and so I headed for first base."

The man possessed an admirable singularity of outlook. He had no doubt about his cultural goals, his purpose in life, the essence of his being. That kind of person may make a good baserunner but would, I am almost certain, make a very poor humorist.

The background may be clearer now for consideration of Stephen Leacock's assessment that in humour "the Englishman loves what is literal . . . the American tries to convey the same idea by exaggeration." Leacock added that "English humor is always based on fact, whereas American humor often deals with what really could never have happened except in the imagination" (qtd. in Watters 542). That baseball player, in other words, who, as the world comes to an end, is intent upon taking his base may well require exaggeration to a higher power in order to perceive the humorous duality that dwells down deep in things. Hence, there is a strong tendency in American humour toward the tall tale—"it was cold," says Johnny Carson, "it was *so* cold that . . ."—and a tendency toward what J. B. Priestley has called a "hard cutting wit and almost vindictive satire" (11).

British humour, on the other hand, has historic reason to be literal and fact-oriented. The British Empire stretched out, from its small island base, from sun to sun. Her Majesty's order throughout the empire depended on efficient communication, on literal ties that bind, and loose, hard facts. Unlike the broad ever-extending expanse of the American frontier, where the tall-tale hyperbole merely escalated the already large-size national dream, the British Isles were conscious of layers of power that relied on precise networks of the literal.

Nonetheless, in the traditions of both, in the unrolling frontier of America's heartlands and in the muddling-through of English inlands, there exists an overweening seamless national confidence that makes a broad sense of humour possible (and makes a much broader target available for the outside observer than for the insider). In the days of pre-electronic journalism, when an ultra-heavy fog was supposed to have sealed off the English channel preventing all communication between England and Europe, the front-page headline in a London newspaper duly reported: "Fog isolates continent." The thought never occurred that England was isolated, any more than it occurred to the baseball player in the Yankee blackout to doubt the wisdom of getting to first base.

In international politics, one could take a jaundiced view of such blind blackout chauvinism, whether it stems from the economic might of a United States, or the mightily long history of a Britain. Humour, however—a certain kind of it at least—prospers in security; jollity may not maketh a prosperous man, but prosperity maketh for jollity. Thus England has P. G. Wodehouse and what has been described as his "amiable nonsense of characteristic British humor" (Priestley 11). The United States has Thurber with his Walter Mitty fantasies. And the U.S. national self-confidence can also manage to "both provoke and withstand the iconoclastic satire of a Sinclair Lewis" (Watters 543).

Canada does not have the wealth or strength to indulge either in blind self-aggrandizing jollities, or in ill-humored self-rendering satire. The Canadian critic, R. E. Watters, puts it this way:

> As a people bent on self-preservation, Canadians have had to forego two luxuries: that of forgetting themselves in gay abandon and that of losing their tempers in righteous wrath. Yet there is a kind of humor that combines full understanding of the contending forces with a wry recognition of one's ineffectiveness in controlling them—a humor in which one sees himself as others see him but without any admission that this outer man is a truer portrait than the inner—a humor based on the incongruity between the real and the ideal, in which the ideal is repeatedly thwarted by the real but never quite annihilated. Such humor is Canadian. (543)

Watters says that the Canadian attitude of "'calculated diffidence' would never draw attention to itself in humor by exuberant slapstick or by linguistic pranks in the form of explosive wisecracks" (543). As he points out there is very little of either in the work of Stephen Leacock. A problem arises, as a result, in the appreciation and assessment of Leacock's work and of Canadian humour generally. "Good tempered restraint"—in the cause of humour—"is less easy to detect than slashing attack" or embroidered hyperbole (544).

The basis of Canadian humour rests squarely upon that "full understanding of contending forces." And at its economical best, Canadian humour coalesces the two contradictory viewpoints within the supreme compression of a single phrase or word. To help explain the achievement of that I have recourse to some comments by Tom Wolfe about the art of writing versus the art of film-making. "In print," Wolfe says, "a writer can present a . . . detail and then nudge the reader [ideally, to achieve the ultimate compression of humour, the nudge occurs within the same phrase] to make sure he knows its significance." Film cannot do both things at once, as language can, and thus is forced into the non-subtlety of a double-take or pratfall mode. As an example, Wolfe quotes Balzac's description of the living room furnishings of the pretentious social-climbing Monsieur and Madame Marneffe in *Cousine Bette*. Balzac describes "The furniture covered in faded cotton velvet, the plaster statuettes masquerading as Florentine bronzes . . ." Wolfe's point is that film cannot present in the one dimension, as the verbal phrase does, the concept within the masquerade of the covered furniture and of the plaster as bronze. Wolfe writes that "The movies . . . can present the same details but cannot point out the significance except through dialogue, which soon becomes very labored"—or through making the "status points over-obvious visually . . . the mansion that is *too* big, the servants who are *too* formal"—the statuettes that are either too much plaster or too much bronze (49).

Wolfe's comparison with film makes us realize the inherent power of compression that exists in the printed word. That is the compression that makes possible the utterance of the Canadian vision, the collision of two viewpoints in one simultaneous expression. Here is Stephen Leacock in his *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* describing the onset of morning on the fateful day of the picnic excursion aboard the lake-going Mariposa Belle:

> The long call of the loon echoes over the lake. The air is cool and fresh. There is in it all the new life of the land of the silent pine and moving waters. Lake Wissanotti in the morning sunlight! Don't talk to me of the Italian lake or the Tyrol or the Swiss Alps. Take them away. Move them somewhere else. I don't want them. (36)

Note that Leacock's narrator here extols the delights of Lake Wissanotti in the morning while conveying at the same time a perverse consciousness of the more internationally acknowledged beauties of Italy or the Swiss Alps. That duality is a consistent key to the nostalgic events dramatized in *Sunshine Sketches*. The narrator is determined to enjoy local life on its own terms even though he is unrelentingly aware of its many inconsistencies.

At the end of the Mariposa Belle excursion, the major inconsistency, of course, is that the rescuers who come to the aid of the grounded steamer have to be rescued themselves and hauled to safety up to the solidly grounded deck, just as the leaky lifeboats, unused for years, sink ignominiously beneath the now-saved would-be life-savers. "Saved! by Heaven," says the narrator, "saved by one of the smartest pieces of rescue work ever seen on the lake" (52).

The contradiction of Leacock events melds into humour, sometimes by means of the congruent contradictions within the narrator, and sometimes by the comic duality that Leacock gives to individual characters. The town undertaker, for instance, Mr. Golgotha Gingham, has obviously chosen his holiday-excursion suit with great care. For the steamer jaunt, he has selected "a neat suit of black, not of course, his heavier or professional suit, but a soft clinging effect as of burnt paper that combined gaiety and decorum to a nicety" (43). That combination of "gaiety and decorum," just the thing for an undertaker on a picnic, within a "neat suit of black" is surely an example of verbal overlay that, as Wolfe would suggest, will forever confound the film-maker.

The older women on the cruise have a comic duality too. They certainly would never miss the annual outing but once aboard, they gravitate "into the cabin on the lower deck and by getting around the table with needlework, and with all the windows shut . . . soon had it, as they said themselves, just like being at home" (43).

Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches* is in large part a magnified memoir, and it is most often the narrator who in his comment and reflection supplies the humorous duality. The narrator's voice, taken in context and in sufficient dosage, demonstrates how distinctively Canadian humour works. Here he is on young love, "The Fore-ordained Attachment of Zena Pepperleigh and Peter Pupkin": "Zena would look at the stars and say how infinitely far away they seemed, and Pupkin would realize that a girl with a mind like that couldn't have any use for a fool such as him" (101). After a spurious bank robbery, the narrator comments on the way of small-town justice and the attitude toward the handicapped: "One man was arrested twenty miles away, at the other end of Massinaba county, who not only corresponded exactly with the description of the robber, but, in addition to this, had a wooden leg. Vagrants with one leg are always regarded with suspicion in places like Mariposa, and whenever a robbery or a murder happens they are arrested in patches" (121).

The duality in an election speech by one of the characters, John Henry Bagshaw, an aging politician, is chronic: "I bear," he says, "malice towards none and I wish to speak with gentleness to all, but what I will say is that how any set of rational responsible men could nominate such a skunk as the Conservative candidate passes the bounds of my comprehension" (139). The narrator's

comment on another passage in Bagshaw's speech extends the concept of duality beyond the bounds of the character to national image. Bagshaw is making his last hurrah: "'I am an old man now, gentleman,' Bagshaw said, 'and the time must soon come when I must not only leave politics, but must take my way towards the goal from which no traveller returns.' There was a deep hush when Bagshaw said this. It was understood to imply that he thought of going to the United States" (138).

Since Leacock's death in 1944, the world has become more pluralistic, led by the cultural levelling and leavening of television, and it supports the thesis of this essay that a "disproportionate number" of Canadian comedy writers, perhaps "as many as 100," have found employment in the U.S. supplying scripts for prime-time "sit-coms" and comedy revues such as *Saturday Night Live* and *Second City* (according to Toronto staff at ACTRA, the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, TV, and Radio Artists). The TV world of the U.S. is far removed from "the first Puritan settlers [who] had crossed the ocean to found their city set upon a hill, an example to other nations, a chosen people, the grain that God had sifted from a whole nation to plant in the empty continent." Certainly "the sense of special selection, of possession of a new and higher truth, became secularized" by the process of history and, eventually, by the glare of television lights. But, judging by the recent phenomenon of Ollie North, it may be true still to say that "it did not diminish" entirely, but "Instead, it grew stronger" (all from Conway 103). And a duality of mind, not one-mindedness, however splendid, is the more useful attribute in the presentation of humour for a pluralistic audience.

Canada, too, retains its identity as "the product of the pragmatic nineteenth century rather than of the ideological eighteenth. We are not children of the age of revolution," and though "we too have become secularized . . . the habit of mind persists. Our history has not conditioned us to vest any one political doctrine with universality. . . . Political and social norms could be no more than relative, all touched with imperfection, even though in varying degrees" (Conway 104).

That expression of national identity, with its "imperfection" of "relative norms," eminently suits the general situation of a television comedy, the "sit com," as it does Northrop Frye's refining comment that "the theme of the comic is the integration of society" involving "a catharsis of the . . . comic emotions, which are sympathy and ridicule" (43). Again, sympathy and ridicule spring more easily, if not eternally, to mind the more one can "put on" the other's persona—as Marshall McLuhan (a leading thinker, with Frye, on the Canadian sidelines) used to stress.

Humour is often a major element in the serious work of Canadian novelists (e.g., Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Atwood, Mordecai Richler) and poets (e.g., Atwood, Earle Birney, Al Purdy), but in works of more unalloyed humour the pluralism engendered in the postmodern electronic world keeps Canadian duality focused upon particular regions. Writers of humour since Leacock have not achieved his universality, and for the most part follow the path of W. H. Drummond (1854-1907) and Robert Service (1874-1958), whose verse was interna-

tionally popular at the turn of the century, in exploring well–defined worlds. Even so, despite Drummond's focus upon the French-Canadian *habitant*, the issues and language he used were often as much from his own life and invention as from Quebecois reality (Noonan, "Drummond"). And for Service, in his sagas of the Canadian north, it was the inner loneliness (*pace* duality) that he emphasized in the life of his swashbuckling fortune-seekers in the star-lit Yukon.

In the wake of the Second World War, Paul Hiebert's spoof of critical biography, *Sarah Binks* (1947), is a timely development of a growing Canadian ambivalence and disenchantment about the rural life. His narrator's solemn pronouncements on the fictional Sarah's flat poesy—rivalled only by the flatness of Saskatchewan prairie—triggers the reader's rueful awareness that our ostensible desire to get back to the land, to a world of innocent perfection, is hemmed in by so many incongruous improbabilities that even the momentary self-delusion is laughable (Noonan, "Incongruity and Nostalgia").

Despite Hiebert's reference to boundless prairie where, to quote Sarah, "The hand of man hath never trod" (27), and his assurance that Sarah, like "no other poet has caught in deathless lines . . . the baldness of [Saskatchewan] prairie" and "the richness of its insect life" (xix), he was "given to understand" by a professional appraiser advertising in the *New York Times Book Review* "that this Canadian poetess did not really merit the praise I had bestowed upon her and that perhaps as a Canadian I might be overrating her talent" ("Comic Spirit" 62).

Among the more recent writers of humour, Saskatchewan's Max Braithwaite continues to recall nostalgically the foibles of provincial life. Far removed, at the eastern end of the country, columnist and author Ray Guy counterposes the old and the new in Newfoundland outport life. In Ontario, three early novels of Robertson Davies (*Tempest-Tost*, 1951; *Leaven of Malice*, 1954; *A Mixture of Frailties*, 1958) focus, like Leacock in *Sunshine Sketches*, upon the small town, but Davies' novels of a fictional Salterton are crafted much more in the comedy of manners convention. In Toronto, the central and most populous city, Jack MacLeod, an academic, satirizes academia in *Zinger and Me* (1979) and undermines the national identity in *Going Grand* (1982). On the west coast, humorist Eric Nicol appears to be sufficiently anchored in urbanity and sufficiently distanced from the urban centre as he continues to wax prolific as columnist, author, and playwright, assessing the nuances and nuisances of current lifestyle. One of his most successful plays in Vancouver, *Like Father Like Fun* (1973), had no success at all (a parallel perhaps to *Sarah Binks*) when it was transposed, under the title *A Minor Adjustment*, to Broadway.

In general, the export of Canadian humour in the round has met a similar fate, and that serves as a useful reminder that humour as an international language and phenomenon retains in the transposition its own subtle boundaries. The essential duality at its core will continue to require familiarity with the contours and mixed reality of the chosen homeground.

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