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**“Comics in the *Cambridge History of Canadian Literature*:
Is Sequential Art the Future of the Canadian Literary Canon?”**

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Canada is a strange country. In fall 2016 its greatest living English-language writer, Margret Atwood, the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays praised all over the world since the 1970s, authored *Angel Catbird*, a graphic novel featuring a super-powered man-cat-owl hybrid. Just imagine Mario Vargas Llosa or José Saramago scripting comics and you will feel receptive to the topic I am about to address. “Sequential art,” the term used in the essay’s title, was coined by US artist Will Eisner to name the subject of the course on comics-making he taught at New York’s School of Visual Arts in the 1970s and 1980s.

This paper is both a testimony and an attempt to reflect on my experience as contributor of the “comic art and *bande dessinée*” chapter of the *Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* (henceforth referred to as *CHCL*). I was contacted in 2006 by Dr. Eva-Marie Kröller, UBC Professor of Canadian and Comparative Literature and *CHCL* co-editor, to write a chapter on Canadian comics, both French and English, for this collection. The text commissioned finally appeared as chapter 23 in this 31-chapter book under the title “Comic art and *bande dessinée*: from the funnies to graphic novels” (Gabilliet 460-477).

The request was not inspired by some sort of ‘commercial’ concession on the part of Cambridge UP nor by cultural tokenism on the part of the editor. It was rather motivated by the desire to remedy a deficiency plaguing all previous Canadian literary histories so far, including Kröller’s own 2004 *Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*—the systematic neglect of comics as part of the national literary canon despite the importance and representativeness of the comic medium in contemporary Canadian culture, a fact once pointed out to Kröller by Vancouver artist Ken Lum (Kröller 2004a: 28 note 4).

The initial challenge was twofold. First I was to summarize the essentials of Canadian comics history since the mid-19th century in 6,000 words (plus the works cited list). Second I was to tell this story from not-too-grim a perspective, which was no easy assignment. After all, from the standpoint of a cultural historian, comics publishing in Canada has suffered from the same four “colonial” diseases that have chronically plagued the country’s cultural production: 1) the overwhelming difficulty of competing with inexpensive French, British, and American comics previously amortized on their original national markets; 2) the limited

interest of the Canadian public in home-made cultural products; 3) the reluctance of national producers to distance themselves from foreign (in this case primarily US) models and formats; and 4) the insufficient size of the domestic market to support a national comics industry. Add to this the chronic contempt against comic-books since the 1930s and the result is an extremely bleak picture. Hence, following the editors' recommendations, I decided to behave rather as an art historian and played up the nation-building and identity-affirming qualities of various Canadian comics and cartoonists since 1849. And naturally enough, because in order to create a coherent historical narrative of comics-making in the two Canadas I had to make certain choices and emphasize certain works at the expense of others, I ended up acting as canon referee.

Regardless of the qualities and flaws of the end-product (which, already at the time of its writing ten years ago, imperfectly reflected the state of the Canadian comics history up to 2007) I would like to take advantage of the next few minutes to reflect on the "canonical" dimension of this project in relation to English-Canadian literary history. The *CHCL* was by no means the first large-scale history of Canadian literature but it was the first one to include comics in the body of "CanLit" to the extent of devoting an entire chapter to it. To make a comparison with a previous, similar project, William H. New's 2002 *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* comprised only a short entry titled 'Comic Books and Graphic Novels' (Beaty 221-223). By contrast the *CHCL* editors' decision to devote a whole chapter of the book to comics was likely to appear to outside observers as a definite, even voluntarist step forward in cultural legitimization since it implied that, by the early 21st century, the medium and its products had become worthwhile of being enlisted in the canon of Canadian literature.

This development testifies first to the changing composition of any canon. I define a literary canon not as a set body of works but as the result of "canonical construction," i.e. the evolving dynamics under which the conditions of legitimization of literary works are defined, and undergo constant redefinition, within a historically and geographically determined literary field. Legitimization occurs through distinction; distinction is a dual process by which literary artifacts are *de facto* sorted and subsequently hierarchized by a variety of arbiters (mass media, publishers, authors, academics, teachers, etc.), both on a national and global scale. However, distinction has ceased to be a consensual process roughly since the 1960s-70s, when the articulation between culture and identity politics, formerly a non-problem, became the basis of definition of canon-worthy material in informal negotiations among the various agents interacting in the literary field. From an aesthetic issue the literary canon has become a political issue (Scholes 147).

My purpose here is not to discuss the technicalities of canon-making but rather address what I think is an essential characteristic of recent Canadian cultural history. Taking the inclusion of comics in the table of contents of *CHCL* as an index of the most recent state of the Canadian literary canon, I would like to answer two connected questions. The first one is: “What historical reasons, if any, account for the eventual integration of comics into the Canadian literary canon by the early 21st century?” The second question is: “To what extent does this process reflect analogous cultural developments in the USA, Great Britain, and France (the three countries with which Canada has been most directly connected historically)?”.

My hypothesis is that the phenomenon is closely linked to what I call the comprehensive outlook of Canadian intellectuals on cultural production, which I think is an aspect particular to postcolonial Canada. The reference to Canada as a postcolonial society may sound puzzling to South Americans. Yet postcolonialism is an analytical grid that has been used extensively in the Canadian social sciences and humanities (with of course notable variations between Anglophones and Francophones) to account for the cultural changes the country has gone through since World War II (Moss 1-23).

Starting in the 1950s, Canada experienced the emergence of a unique brand of cultural nationalism, which generated a form of “open-ended elitism” that laid the groundwork for the present-day legitimization of high-end comics as literature in Canada. The watershed in this process was the work of the “Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences” (aka Massey-Lévesque Commission); its 1951 *Report* originated a federal policy of support for the arts that took off in 1957 with the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts. This policy anticipated the 1958 Broadcasting Act, which introduced the first quotas of so-called « Canadian content » in radio and TV programming. Although post-war Canadian cultural policy was engineered by elitist ‘culture vultures’ endeavoring to ward off the penetration into the country of American popular culture, it ironically assumed the form of a protectionist policy shaped essentially by a nationalist agenda. “Canadian culture” (a set phrase to refer specifically to Canadian-made cultural commodities) was then free to exist and develop in a politically protected environment where national origin superseded aesthetic determination. Thus the age-old universalist dichotomies between highbrow and lowbrow found themselves disrupted by the political will to promote and protect Canadian creation and creators. The bulwark erected to limit the penetration of American culture thus

enabled both highbrow and lowbrow Canadian-made material to thrive in a context of limited competition with US-made products.

By the 1960s cultural elitism had fused with cultural patriotism. The defense and illustration of national identity became a matter of debate and controversy before, during, and after the “International and Universal Exposition” organized in Montreal in 1967 to celebrate the centennial of Confederation. In Canada, both French and English, the surge of collective rebellion that characterized most western countries in the late 1960s assumed the form of cultural nationalism; the discourse of English Canadian intellectuals was essentially anti-American and anti-colonial, while the discourse of their French Canadian counterparts was by and large anti-Anglophone and anti-federalist. As a result, the literary avant-garde that arose in the Toronto small press as of the mid-60s (with the foundation of publishers like Coach House in 1965, of Anansi in 1968) combined ideological discourse with no-holds-barred artistic innovations inspired by the reliance of pop art on popular cultural forms.

The earliest such endeavor, in 1967, was *Scriptures Sequence eleven*, a special issue of the Toronto experimental magazine *grOnk* entirely conceived by bpNichol, a practitioner of concrete poetry who was then emerging as a major figure of Toronto’s literary avant-garde scene. Nichol’s lifelong fascination for the medium led him to create numerous other pieces of comics-form poetry until his death in 1988 (Peters). In 1969-70 Coach House produced *Snore Comix*, the very first Canadian underground comix whose irregular, approximately comic-book-sized installments subsequently featured bp nichol himself and several actors of the Toronto pop art and Dada scenes. Other remarkable contributions to Toronto’s comics avant-gardism were the “visual novels” of the British-born artist Martin Vaughn-James published in the early to mid-1970s—*Elephant*, *The Projector*, *The Park*, and *The Cage*.

Unlike its American and European counterparts, the English Canadian literary avant-garde used comics to produce innovative forms while having no connection whatsoever, either in form or in content, with the mainstream comic-book industry. It is difficult to find objective reasons for this particularity. Yet I think one can reasonably relate it to the seminal function of bp nichol’s visual poetry, which was a precursor in attracting critical attention to hybrid word-and-picture forms as far back as the late 1960s. The influence of nichol’s work should not be underestimated: thanks to him Anglophone Canada has been the only area in the western world in which concrete poetry and its offspring, visual poetry, have caught on as legitimate *literary* forms. In the US, Britain, or France they have been regarded at best as artsy by-products to be studied in the light of fine arts rather than the object of literary criticism.

The early canonization of bp nichol's visual poetry arguably laid the groundwork for the development of a critical tradition characterized by the acknowledgement of a broad range of literary forms, including word-and-picture artifacts. This tolerance toward literary hybridity, which has never really been evinced by the American, British, or French literary establishments, may be read as genuinely specific to postcolonial culture, because hybridity is a clearcut strategy to break with canons and tastes rooted in elitist traditions. Moreover this tolerance may be read as the continuation of the comprehensive tradition that underlay Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada*, first published in 1965. Despite a title with impressive canonical overtones, that encyclopaedic project encompassed religious, theological, and philosophical writings as well as travel books, as legitimate parts of the national literary history; in the expanded second edition of 1976 were added such areas of writing as Canadian history, physical sciences and engineering, and biological sciences (Klinck 1976 vol. 3). From Klinck's magnum opus to the *Cambridge History of Canadian Literature*, English-Canadian literary history in the last half-century seems to have been determined by aesthetic concerns as much as by patrimonial awareness.

Given this pattern, the legitimization of comics in Canada in the last couple of decades may be interpreted as the result of two main factors. The first one, linked to the globalization of publishing markets, has been the general rise of comics in the cultural hierarchies of Anglo-Saxon countries, essentially thanks to the growing visibility of the 'graphic novel' format, following the Pulitzer Prize awarded to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1992. It is important to note that the context was different in Quebec because of the specificity inherent in the Franco-Belgian 'album' format, which allowed legitimization to start off in Francophone markets in as early as the late 1960s). The second factor: the public responded positively to the growing attention of media and literary periodicals—both national (*Literary Review of Canada*, *Quill & Quire*, etc.) and international (*Bookforum*, *New York Times Book Review*, *TLS*, *Le Monde des Livres*, etc.)—to high-profile graphic novelists as of the 1990s (Dave Sim, Chester Brown, Dave Cooper, Seth in southern Ontario; Julie Doucet in Quebec) because the Canadian-made comics noticed by mass media and academics alike were high-end, prestige products testifying to exceptional creativity within the comic art medium and consequently impossible to confuse with run-of-the-mill US superhero comics.

In conclusion the time has come for me to answer the question I asked in the title of this presentation: "Is Sequential Art the Future of the Canadian Literary Canon?" Well, I don't know and I honestly believe it is not a very relevant question in the first place. What I

do find interesting, though, is that the inclusion of comics in the Canadian literary canon by the editors of the *Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* was a belated testimonial to Canada's postcolonial specificity, which since the mid-20th century has allowed the construction of national cultural hierarchies on the basis of completely different criteria from countries with universalist cultural traditions, like France, Great Britain, and the USA.

Even if the contemporary world is becoming increasingly media-connected and media-saturated, cultural hierarchies have not yet disappeared. The legitimacy bestowed by academic institutions on artforms or media traditionally considered lowbrow results from more complex phenomena than increased media visibility, which in itself does not equal legitimacy. It takes specific conditions for cultural products to become canon-worthy in a given place at given times. In the western world, Anglophone Canada has proved more receptive to comics because of the higher tolerance to hybridity in its artistic ethos that emerged in the wake of the federally supported cultural nationalism of the 1960s.

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Summary

This paper, both a testimony and reflection about the author’s experience as contributor of the “comic art and *bande dessinée*” chapter of the *Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* (Cambridge UP, 2009) discusses the challenge of summarizing the essentials of Canadian comics history since the mid-19th century in 6,000 words and proceeds to answer the following question: why does Canada’s literary canon integrate comics whereas its French and American counterparts, for instance, have so far failed to do so? This phenomenon appears closely linked to one aspect of Canada’s postcolonial specificity—the country’s intellectual elites’ comprehensive outlook on cultural production. This “limited elitism” approach actually became a hallmark of Canadian cultural policy as of the 1950s following

the Massey Commission's introduction of the "Canadian content" concept and the subsequent development of an open-ended conception of national culture. Canada's cultural context provides a very interesting example of the ongoing legitimization of comics in the 21st century but also, more broadly, of the dynamics that permanently rewrite a national literary canon.

Keywords: Canada; comics; Canadian literature; literary history; canon.

Biographical note

Jean-Paul Gabilliet is Professor of North American Studies in the Department of Anglophone Studies at Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France. He specializes in the cultural history of comics, cartoons, and graphic novels in the United States and Canada. Besides a number of scholarly articles about comic art in North America and Europe, he has authored *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (UP of Mississippi, 2010) and *R. Crumb* (PU Bordeaux, 2012) a French-language biography of the famous US underground cartoonist.