

Constructing Canada: Historical Fiction and the Nation's Violent Mythos

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies,

University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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by

Robert Zacharias

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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
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ABSTRACT

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson famously argued that the nation is an invented construct disseminated through print and united by an anonymous community of readers. This process of imagining community can certainly be seen in Canadian literature, when, following the country's success in the First World War, a proliferation of nationalist novels helped to construct a mythos that enabled Canadians to see themselves as a separate and distinct nation. Recently, however, a collection of Canadian historical novels has begun a process of *undermining* the nation that such literature supposedly constructs. These novels participate in a renewed critical debate on theories of nationalism; taken together, these two related fields offer useful commentary on the function and implications of national literatures.

This study examines the role of English-Canadian historical literature in relationship to the Canadian mythos, tracing a trajectory by which Canadian authors attempt to write and re-write the national narrative, before coming ultimately to question the narrative itself. I will revisit Hugh MacLennan's influential and patriotic *Barometer Rising* as an example of nation-narrating literature; Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* as an example of a novel that attempts to correct or amend the traditional narrative; and Wayne Johnston's *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* as an example of literature that questions the very act of narrating the nation, seeking instead to expose the contradictions inherent in the national mythos. Using the theories of Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin, and Homi Bhabha, I argue that the Canadian mythos—like every national narrative—receives its authority from a violent founding event, and thus contains a latent threat that can and must be resisted in the nation's cultural production.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter One: | |
| <i>Canada as Catastrophe: Barometer Rising and Founding Violence.....</i> | <i>17</i> |
| Chapter Two: | |
| <i>Memory and Monument: Re-writing the Nation in The Stone Carvers.....</i> | <i>46</i> |
| Chapter Three: | |
| <i>"The old abiding limbo": The Colony of Unrequited Dreams as the Canadian Condition.....</i> | <i>78</i> |
| Postscript..... | 112 |
| Works Cited | 118 |

Introduction

The past is made of paper.
- Margaret Atwood

Canada is much less geography than it is idea, much less nation than it is notion; this much has been well-established by now. From Atwood to Wyile, Canadian criticism has a long tradition of wrestling with Canada as an idea, and this is the space from which this study will arise; we begin by joining a discussion that has been going on for some time now. However, the point of departure here will offer a new perspective on what has become a traditional Canadian question: What if, rather than searching for an essential national identity, we focus on the myth—or *mythos*—that already animates the national consciousness, and examine the foundations on which it rests?¹ What if the authority of the nation does not lie in any political document, but in an act of founding violence? What if every rendition of *O Canada!* is, in fact, a threat, re-inscribing acts of violence that established not the political state but the national mythos of the country, binding citizens together in a tenuous and unnatural union? In short: What if the nation of Canada is, in fact, a violent mythos?²

¹ I use *mythos* as a replacement for the word *myth* in order to avoid the lengthy theoretical history of *myth* that threatens to overdetermine the word, loading it with critical possibilities that unnecessarily complicate our discussion. As M.H. Abrams writes, “a reader needs to be alert to the bewildering variety of applications of the term ‘myth’ in contemporary criticism.” In its most historico-political sense, it is defined by the *Random House American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* as follows: “The pattern of basic values and historical experiences of a people, characteristically transmitted through the arts.” As should be clear, I am not suggesting that this switch in terminology absolves me from addressing the important criticism surrounding *myth*; rather, I hope that using *mythos* will allow me to focus my attention on criticism that more directly affects my discussion. It is for similar reasons, I expect, that writers like Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm avoid the word *myth* in their own studies on nations and nationalism.

² Working definitions are required for at least two more of the key terms being used in this study: *nation* and *violence*. While these words will be questioned and problematized by the study itself, it is worth beginning with something approximating an agreement on these terms.

Although coming into use relatively recently—the modern sense of the word arriving no earlier than the eighteenth century, according to Eric Hobsbawm (3)—*nation* is a famously difficult term to define. In his seminal *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Hobsbawm writes that “the word ‘nation’ is

If we accept Benedict Anderson's famous suggestion that the nation is but an imagined community formulated on a sense of shared time and space, it follows that both the construction and any subsequent reconstruction of that shared time and space have profound political implications. Works of fiction, I will argue, hold a prominent position in both the construction and on-going negotiation of Canada as an imagined community—especially popular works of historical fiction, which reach a wide audience and often explicitly take the nation's past as their central concern. Over the past decade, English Canada has seen an explosion of historical novels revisit key moments in the construction of the nation, unsettling many of the long-held assumptions inherent within the national mythos. This study traces the role literature plays in constructing, sustaining, and deconstructing Canada's national mythos, attempting to uncover the source of its authority and questioning its political implications. Using a theoretical approach informed primarily by works by Jacques Derrida and Homi Bhabha, I seek to

today used so widely and imprecisely that the use of the vocabulary of nationalism today may mean very little indeed" (9). To escape the impasse of writing about a concept he cannot define, Hobsbawm suggests that "in approaching 'the national question [...] it is more profitable to begin with the concept of 'the nation' (i.e. with 'nationalism') than with the reality it represents" (9). That is, he advocates examining "the 'nation' as conceived by nationalism," defining *nationalism* as "primarily a principle which holds that the political and national unity should be congruent" (9). Such an approach harkens back to the work of Benedict Anderson, whose highly influential *Imagined Communities* reads the modern understanding of the nation as intricately connected to the political state. Anderson's definition of the term *nation* will be of primary importance for this study: "it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). This study will begin with the *nation* in its modern sense, which, admittedly, threatens to ignore the fact that the word *nation* became connected with the political state only very recently, and has a rich history outside and prior to such a designation. Nonetheless, I would argue, with Hobsbawm, that the nation today is "a social entity only insofar as it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state, the nation-state, and it is pointless to discuss nation and nationality except insofar as both relate to it" (9-10). While we will discuss both the nation and the state, then, the words are far from synonymous; the mistake of conflating the two is not as innocent or natural as one might think, and their differences will prove vital.

The term *violence* is also problematic, but it may be usefully understood in contradistinction to *force*. The two are often set as legal opposites: *violence* as unsanctioned force, *force* as sanctioned violence. However, the distinction between *force* and *violence* is valid only insofar as the authority of the sanctioning body is recognized, whether it be a state, a religion, or other authority. When the legitimacy of the authority itself is questioned—as it is by Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Homi Bhabha—the boundary between *force* and *violence* blurs and threatens to disappear. For the purposes of this study, then, I will use *violence* as a simple synonym for *force*, be it physical, epistemological, or otherwise, as this conflation of the terms approximates the linguistic ambivalence proper to these terms. When I want to identify specifically "sanctioned" or "unsanctioned," "moral" or "immoral" versions of violence, I will mark them as such.

demonstrate that Canada's contemporary historical fiction is a site of active cultural resistance, and that this resistance is necessary to counter a mythos that is ultimately founded upon the violent inception of the nation. In illustrating the shifting role of literature in the national myth, my thesis will trace a trajectory from Hugh MacLennan's patriotic exercise in nation-building entitled *Barometer Rising* (1941), to Jane Urquhart's self-conscious examination and re-writing of the national mythos in *The Stone Carvers* (2001), to Wayne Johnston's satirical unsettling of the very idea of national pedagogies and mythoi in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998).

CANADA AND THE VIOLENT MYTHOS

By suggesting that I intend to examine a national mythos, I mean to say that I want to study the nation's collective image of itself, which is composed of the common narratives that imbue the Canadian past with significance, and that place and unite contemporary Canadians within a shared narrative of national progress. With Eric Hobsbawm, I want to "stress the element of artefact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations" (10), and argue that the national mythos is constructed through an inorganic process that can be traced and analysed. Importantly, I see national mythology as operating independently of the state; while the mythos of nation has certainly been used by the political state, it would be "surely too easy," as Benedict Anderson writes, to attribute its creation to "the icy calculations of state functionaries" (201). To the contrary, Anderson suggests that the mythos better reflects a "deep reshaping of imagination of which the state was barely conscious, and over which it had, and still has, only exiguous control" (201). In place of a state conspiracy,

Anderson suggests that the primary vehicle for the “deep reshaping of imagination” that allowed one to “think the nation” was the novel, which he defines as “a device for the presentation of simultaneity in ‘homogeneous, empty time’” (25).³ This latter reference, quoting the work of Walter Benjamin, illustrates Anderson’s claim that the novel accommodated a shift from vertical, religious thought, which subsumed world history and population into one community under God, to horizontal, secular thought, which allows for the division of that all-encompassing “divine community” into separate nations. This movement from religious and regal-divine to secular myths will prove important for us, as will the attendant shift in the role of the written text.

According to Anderson, literature plays an essential role in the creation of the national mythos. In his early discussions of the construction of the Philippines, for example, he turns to a novel by José Rizal (26), and for the origins of Mexico he turns to a novel by José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (29). Later, in a similar discussion on the creation of the American nation, he turns to novels by Herman Melville and Mark Twain (203). Following Anderson, then, we might also expect to find novels that illustrate and participate in the construction of the mythos of Canada. Indeed, in *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, a study on how the First World War shaped the Canadian myth, historian Jonathan Vance confirms these expectations, writing that “while Canadians waited for the official record, they set about compiling their own story of the war, in countless local and battalion histories, poetry collections, novels, and short stories” (163). Vance goes on to suggest that Canadians then “took their mythicized version of the war, with all its inaccuracies and half-truths, and gave it legitimacy as

³ In fact, Anderson attributes this to both the novel and the newspaper. However, it is fair to consider the newspaper as a type of novel in Anderson’s work, as he writes, “the newspaper is merely an ‘extreme form’ of the book, a book sold on a colossal scale” (34).

history. Their memory was transformed into a gospel” (163). Through literary means, the memory of Canada’s role in the war became a national mythos.

The importance of the First World War for the Canadian mythos can hardly be overstated; Vance himself catalogues a series of critics who posit that the mythological birth of Canada itself occurred in the First World War, concluding that, in the popular imagination, “the Great War had truly been a journey from colony to nation” (228). It is of particular importance that Vance locates the origin of Canada’s national mythos in the country’s military success in the so-called “Great War”—a war that took place nearly five decades after the British North America Act marked the origin of the nation as a political state—for it suggests that the mythological origin of the nation has an important connection to acts of violence. Indeed, taking this “Great War”—a name which surely indicates more than simply “massive” or “unprecedented”—as the origin of Canadian mythology places Canada in line with Ernest Renan’s famous 1892 essay “What is a Nation?” Examining the Germanic invasions of Gaul from the fifth to tenth centuries, Renan argues that “in spite of the extreme violence of the customs of the German invaders, the mould which they imposed became, with the passing centuries, the actual mould of the nation” (44). By *nation*, Renan more likely refers to the mythos than to the state, for he writes that “a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle [...] a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future” (53). In a passage worth quoting at length, Renan insists that nations are, in their essence, inherently violent, and suggests that the ability to forget the past is essential for nation-building:

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in

the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality. (45)

This passage will be increasingly significant as the study progresses; let us simply note here that in addition to his comments on the need to forget ordinary violence, Renan views historical inquiry itself as a threat to the nation. It is a sentiment that Vance argues was held by many Canadians in the wake of the war, writing that “Because it threatened to undermine the foundations of the nation’s memory of the war, critical enquiry had no place” (173). The past must be forgotten, it seems, in order to secure the mythical-historical foundations of the nation.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson alters Renan’s argument by suggesting that, rather than expecting complete forgetfulness from its citizens, the national mythos requires citizens to “remember/forget” the atrocities in a nation’s past, thereby reinscribing civil wars and violent battles as inevitable family squabbles and necessary growing pains: “Having to ‘have already forgotten’ tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be ‘reminded’ turns out to be a characteristic device in the later construction of national genealogies” (201). While Anderson suggests that such “remembering/forgetting” is undertaken in order to unite the victim and victimizer under the national banner (200–203), it is clear that, if this were indeed the case, the event would necessarily be forgotten without qualification once the unification is complete. That this is not the case—that we are asked to continually remember what we have forgotten—suggests that the power relationship between the victim and the victimizer remains essential to the “unified,” ostensibly “post-violence” nation.

In “Force of Law,” Jacques Derrida takes this discussion on the violence at the nation’s origin a step further, explaining why it is so important that citizens not be allowed to simply forget the violent events in their country’s past. The violence at the nation’s origin must be remembered, he suggests, because it comes to constitute the threat of force from which the state draws its remarkable authority. Here, Derrida is extending the work of Benjamin, who writes that the state would lose its legal authority—the law being the expression of its authority claim—without this threat: “When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears,” he writes, “the institution falls into decay” (“Critique” 288). Both Benjamin and Derrida trace the origins of state authority back to an act of founding violence, and both find this violence to be an insufficient and unjustifiable locus of legal authority. For, coming as it does *before* the legal system, originary violence cannot be properly considered “legal” or “illegal.” Rather, it is always only legitimated after the fact; the violence establishes the state, which, in turn, sanctions the violence *post hoc*. In *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Derrida refers to this as “ipseity,” which he defines as “the power that *gives itself* its own law” (11). This moment of exception, or aporia, in which a nation’s law is suspended to allow for its own constitution, exposes a deep uncertainty at the heart of the state; it marks a deep internal contradiction that the state effaces only by resorting, time and again, to the threat of that same violence. For this reason, Derrida writes that a nation begins with a “contract contracted with a history that retracts in the instantaneous event of the deciding exception” (*Rogues* 101).⁴ According to Benjamin, the law of the state is not merely implicated in the violence of its origin, but is, in fact, a continuation of that

⁴. In this passage, Derrida is speaking in regards to *all* sovereignty claims; those made by nations as well as those made by individuals.

same violence: “Lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power” (“Critique” 295). Rather than being used simply to re-write the violent past into something of a family history, then, the state’s originary violence is remembered for another reason altogether: to serve as a threat of violence that silences those who might consider opposing the narrative of the dominant mythos and to re-enforce state control. That is, the law of the state is, always, “a threatening violence” (Benjamin, “Critique” 285).

Although Derrida’s and Benjamin’s essays focus on the function of the political state, it is, in this case at least, but a short step from state to nation. In Canada, the birth of the political state was relatively peaceful, but the birth of the nation, as we have seen, was necessarily bathed in blood.⁵ Neither the state nor the nation can claim a single, unproblematic originary moment, however; even the seemingly clear origin of the political state can be problematized by the later addition of other provinces. We must understand that the nation in particular is not *created*, in the singular sense. Rather, its internal contradictions mark it as existing in a constant state of decay, so that its presence must be reinforced, re-inscribed on a daily basis. This is the reason that Renan can write that “a nation’s existence is a daily plebiscite” (Renan 53). In place of the historical

⁵ The birth of Canada can, of course, only be considered peaceful in a relative sense. In addition to the eradication of Aboriginal populations, there were numerous battles for control of the territories, including French, British, and American troops, and several small but nonetheless violent rebellions which accompanied the process of the nation-building. It was a politically volatile process, as well, including two solid years of wrangling between the Quebec Conference (1864) and the London Conference (1866). Even so, in relation to the extreme violence of the revolutions in France and the United States of America, the official origin of Canada can be fairly considered peaceful.

facts, then, the national mythos offers an “official past” that maintains the memory of an originary violence but attempts to rewrite it into narrative that subsumes that violence into the nation’s legal jurisdiction, thereby containing and yet effacing violence within the mythos itself.

This understanding of the nation has significant political implications. In a passage worth quoting at length, Jonathan Vance describes the function of a national pedagogy that relies upon an “official,” mythicized memory of the past:

The past becomes an excuse for the present [...] The dominant memory claims that the status quo exists because the past wills it. In doing so, it sets out what should be remembered (as well as how it should be remembered) and what should be forgotten. Individuals who do not subscribe to the dominant memory, who refuse to forget or remember what it prescribes, become subversives. Their private memories are driven underground, to exist as a potentially threatening undercurrent to the social order. (9)

For Vance, the “dominant memory” is in reality a means of suppressing minority voices; in a nod to Benedict Anderson, he describes the mythological power of the Great War as being of sufficient force to help minorities “rise above their ethnicity and join the imagined community that was post-war Canada” (245). Indeed, Vance identifies a strong connection between the “Great War” and poor treatment of minority cultures in Canada, a reminder that our treasured mythos of Canadian Multiculturalism is founded upon internment of “Galicians” and other “enemy aliens” in the First World War—a process that was repeated in the Second World War with the internment of Japanese-Canadians.

Vance’s suggestion that “individuals who do not subscribe to the dominant memory... become subversives” is echoed by Homi Bhabha’s statement that “the boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the Western nation may imperceptibly turn into a contentious *internal* liminality providing a place from which to speak both of, and

as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent” (213 – 14). Bhabha’s theories of cultural resistance offer a means of questioning Canada’s national mythos. In Canada’s attempt to institute diversity as a national trait, for example, Bhabha’s theories would suggest that Multiculturalism is a means by which the mythos attempts to conceal the strong tension between national unity and cultural differences—a specific example of the larger tension between the national mythology (pedagogy) and the contemporary realities of national life-in-progress (what Bhabha calls the “performative” element of nationalism). Multiculturalism may seek to rewrite damning historical events as disagreements between siblings rather than as crimes committed by a dominant culture against minorities (Anderson 201), but such homogenization serves to naturalize the differences between cultures and to devalue the minority experience, creating a false sense of unity in what is, in fact, a split national identity.

Rather than smooth over such tensions between the national mythology and historical reality, Bhabha’s theories encourage us to emphasize and to explore the contested site, which he identifies as a “Third Space.” Using Derrida’s challenge to the referentiality of the sign, Bhabha challenges the narrative quality of national histories, locating an opportunity for cultural resistance *within* the sign. There is a “temporal caesura [in] the time-lag of cultural difference,” writes Bhabha, which functions as “a space between the symbolization of the social and the ‘sign’ of its representation” (340). According to Bhabha, then, this caesura creates a moment or space for re-consideration and re-configuration of a nation’s culture. Importantly, rather than viewing the resulting uncertainty in terms of crippling relativism or political anarchy, my thesis will follow Derrida’s argument that such uncertainty is, in fact, a necessary condition for national

justice and cultural progress. If we refuse to allow uncertainty in the present, argues Derrida, we will always live within the confines of a stable but flawed concept of the past. And if, as Robert Young writes, Bhabha's use of Derridean theory "demonstrates how dissonant, non-syncretic theory can shift control away from the dominant Western paradigm of historicist narrative, temporality, and univocality – but also how any 'new history' must, necessarily, be almost unrecognizable as 'history'"(156), then this thesis argues that historical fiction constitutes an important example of this "new history."

HISTORICAL FICTION AND THE STRUCTURE OF MYTHOS: THREE NOVELS

If we accept the theses of Anderson and Vance, literature has played an important—even central—role in the construction of a mythos of the Canadian nation. According to Herb Wyile, however, a movement in recent Canadian literature has begun the process of *undermining* or unsettling the very nation that historical fiction has traditionally been understood to be constructing. Writers of contemporary historical fiction have recognized the on-going nature of this campaign as an opportunity; where the nation is a "daily plebiscite," there are daily opportunities for cultural change. "Instead of contributing to the ideological consolidation of the nation as an 'imagined community,'" writes Wyile, "much contemporary Canadian historical fiction can be seen in terms of Homi Bhabha's essay 'DissemiNation'" ("Speculative" 6-7). Indeed, Bhabha's essay does offer a means of productively reading Canadian fiction, claiming as it does that today's critics "are faced with the challenge of reading, into the present of a specific cultural performance, the traces of all those diverse disciplinary discourses and institutions of knowledge that constitute the condition and contexts of culture" (233). In

this study, then, I aim to follow Bhabha's prescription for the contemporary critic into three works of Canadian historical literature.

My first chapter locates Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* in the tradition of myth-forming literature identified by Vance. I return to MacLennan's work because in a Canadian study following Anderson's claim that the novel is the key to the "deep shaping of the imagination" that allowed us to "think the nation" (25), it is the obvious place to turn, for, as Marlene Goldman writes, "many critics regard [MacLennan] as father of the Canadian novel" (7). Critics as varied as Robert Cockburn, Alec Lucas, David Arnason, Dorothy Farmiloe, and R.D. MacLulich have recognized the importance of MacLennan's national mythologizing, even arguing that his attempts at "constructing a Canada" are somewhat too obvious to be aesthetically effective (Lucas 10). While accepting the critical consensus that names MacLennan "the spokesman for the Canadian Establishment" (Goetsch 5), I argue that the novel's critical elaboration has not fully understood the source of the novel's mythic authority. Rather than reading the work as locating the foundations of the nation in the rejection of American and British tropes (as Goetsch does [5]), I argue that it is *Barometer Rising's* use of World War One and the Halifax explosion that functions as an originary violence meant to authorize MacLennan's version of a Canadian mythos. In fact, the novel re-writes the "Great War" as a bloodless, abstract idea; it functions in the novel as a mythological punishment upon Europe for its way of life that implicitly presents Canada as a pure and more wholesome nation. As George Woodcock and William H. New have noted, the heavily symbolic nature of the novel's characters encourage us to read the novel as an object lesson in Canadian pedagogy. This interpretation of the Halifax explosion effectively obliterates

the nation's colonial past and provides MacLennan's Canada with a blank slate upon which to write the nation, containing a barely-veiled threat directed at those who might have reason to remember it differently.

My second chapter suggests that the construction of the Vimy Ridge Memorial in Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* can be read as an extended metaphor for the process of constructing the nation's official memory of the Great War. Just as Bhabha's time-lag "keeps alive the making of the past" (*Location* 364), Urquhart's novel elongates the process of memory-building as a national narrative in order to offer a closer examination of problems in its signification. Indeed, *The Stone Carvers* exemplifies the growing sense of uneasy self-consciousness in literary discussions of the Canadian nation. Not only does Urquhart "liberate history from closure," as Anna Branach-Kallas writes (167), but the novel also undertakes a re-writing of the nation's official past; by re-inscribing Canada's experience in the "Great War" as a multicultural love story with one of the characters belonging to the "enemy alien" other, Urquhart offers a new, more heterogeneous narrative of the First World War.

Although Branach-Kallas concludes that Urquhart's "'alternative' reconstruction" saves the novel from being a typical "nihilistic deconstruction of the past" (172), I argue that it shows how the process of deconstruction is never inherently "nihilistic." Urquhart employs a deconstructive time-lag that allows for the ethical process of re-evaluating a nation's memory by which forgotten pasts are added to an ever-evolving present. In fact, when critics such as Laura Ferri and T.F. Rigelhof note the multicultural nature of history in *The Stone Carvers*, their readings seem to suggest that, far from a brush with nihilism, Urquhart's historical multiplicity is firmly controlled by the uniting mythos of Canada as

the Multicultural nation. While I attempt to read the multiplicity of cultures in the novel—like its suggestion of the multiplicity of history—as a gesture towards a heterogeneity of the past rather than a new pedagogical unity of the present, the novel *does* falter on this point: by offering another mythos that finds its authority in the Great War, Urquhart’s novel remains subject to the very questions it raises about national narratives that are based upon violence.

While Stan Dragland suggests that Wayne Johnston’s *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* belongs “alongside other nation-making epics” (208), I argue that the novel is about nation-*shaking*. The third chapter of my thesis argues that Johnston’s novel is a playful but unrelenting subversion of historical documents, destabilizing the idea of author(ity) in order to establish a new, dynamic understanding of the nation that parallels recent work in critical theory. As Wylie writes, in its “challenging of various forms of authority”, *Colony* is “a part of a larger postcolonial renegotiation of Canadian history, Canadian culture, and Canadian Identity” (“Speculative” 260). Incorporating Derrida’s *différance* to explain how history’s reliance on an endless series of intertextual documents undermines its ability to construct meaning, I read *Colony*’s superfluous number of “real” and “imaginary” historical documents as a satirical attack on the notion of historical authority. Importantly, Bhabha sees the resulting cultural uncertainty of such historical excess as a “Third Space”—an ideological moment of cultural openness which becomes an opportunity to reconsider and reinterpret the past—without simply replacing it with a new, “improved” narrative.

Like *Barometer Rising* and *The Stone Carvers*, *Colony* raises concerns about Canada’s multicultural heritage. While Danielle Fuller argues that the appearance of

Beothuks at *Colony*'s conclusion tokenizes the Aboriginal experience, I suggest that the passage can be seen as an image of all that is absent in the novel, reminding us of the multiplicity of history and the limitations of any single written text. The fate of Nancy April in the novel functions as a quiet gesture towards the genocide of the Beothuk Indians, simultaneously highlighting and re-enacting yet another act of violence at the origin of the country's mythology. Bhabha would read this self-conscious repetition of the nation's erasure of the Aboriginal experience as an example of how mimicry can constitute cultural resistance: "Mimicry [...] problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the 'national' is no longer naturalizable," he writes. "What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model... mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*" (125). Revisiting and "repeating" the confederation of Canada's final province, *Colony* proposes a dynamic and ever-shifting understanding of the nation in place of the naturalized narrative put forward in *Barometer Rising* and revised by *The Stone Carvers*.

* * *

Addressing the recent explosion of historical fiction in Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood argues that without any pure, reified past, in lieu of any official and untouchable history, all history is open for reconsideration and ethical exploration: "The past no longer belongs only to those who lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it" (*Search* 39). Taken together and understood in contrast to the static, pedagogical version of our nation's past and its

implications for our present cultural performance, these novels can be read to suggest that creating and retaining cultural and national identity in Canada is a dynamic and recurring struggle. I argue that the multiplicity of pasts in contemporary Canadian fiction is not a prescription for anarchy but a necessary condition for a meaningful, ongoing reconsideration of the concept of the nation in its full plurality. Our national myths must become—and remain—a site of resistance, not of residence.

Chapter One

Canada as Catastrophe: Barometer Rising and Founding Violence

Although there has been debate on the quality of his work, few would deny Hugh MacLennan's importance to Canada's literary tradition. Even fewer would accuse him of exhibiting any false modesty; even at the outset of his career, the so-called "father of the Canadian novel" was acutely aware of his role in the nation's literature (Goldman 7). In fact, with the first words in his first novel, MacLennan announces that his work will constitute a new beginning for Canadian literature. Seeking to justify the use of Halifax as the setting for *Barometer Rising* (1941), MacLennan's foreword makes the remarkable claim that "because there is as of yet no tradition of Canadian literature, Canadians are apt to suspect that a novel referring to one of their cities must likewise refer to specific individuals among its characters." The implication, it seems, is that he deems *Barometer Rising* to be the first truly Canadian novel, and, as such, its audience must be taught how to read such a work. Reflecting on the novel some time after its publication, MacLennan re-iterates this claim, arguing that he wrote *Barometer Rising* into a literary "vacuum" ("Thirty" 52). Moreover, MacLennan is not alone in his claim that *Barometer Rising* initiated a new Canadian literature. David Arnason, for example, describes the novel as "the first novel written in Canada, by a Canadian, in which a peculiarly Canadian consciousness manifests itself" (68). What is it about this novel that authorizes its claim to be the origin of Canadian literature?

To answer this question, we must return to the tradition of Canadian literature that was, despite MacLennan's claim to the contrary, well-established prior to the publication

of his novel. William Douw Lighthall, for example, who founded the *Society of Canadian Literature* some twenty-five years previous to *Barometer Rising*'s release, had long since begun his "quest to strengthen Canadian nationhood through the written word" (Vance 100). Lighthall was clear as to what he thought would be required to establish a Canadian tradition. Speaking in 1918 of the literary effect of Canada's participation in the Great War, he predicted that "young men and women of genius—some probably returned from the contest—will celebrate its glorious deeds, will drink deep inspiration from that brilliant band of heroes who are already beginning to render our circles illustrious with their presence. [...] This is our Homeric Age [...] the story is too grand to be forgotten" (qtd in Vance, 100). Even earlier, in 1910, L. M. Montgomery had expressed a similar sentiment with her suggestion that "a real national literature will be born" only when the country's disparate parts "are welded together by some great crises of storm and stress" (qtd in Vance, 226). In spite of the fact that there had been Canadians writing literature since the signing of the British North America Act, both Lighthall and Montgomery recognized that the formation of a tradition of Canadian literature would require something other than itself to constitute a national mythos: it would require an act of war.

THE GREAT WAR AND THE TRADITION OF CANADIAN LITERATURE

In Canada, the First World War would be the "great crisis" that allowed literature to forge a national mythos. As the violence of the Great War set the stage for the creation of a national literature, it also became the foundational moment in the formation of a national consciousness, the "deep reshaping of imagination" that Anderson says is

necessary to allow citizens to “think the nation” (25). As Jonathan Vance explains, “Confederation had established the administrative framework for a Canadian nation but had created nothing more than an arid and sometimes ineffectual edifice. Only the memory of the Great War could breathe life into Canada, giving birth to a national consciousness” (11). True or false, the belief that the Canadian war effort marked a national coming-of-age is well-established; Vance writes that “Canada’s progress from colony to nation by way of Flanders [...] has become the standard method of judging the impact of 1914-18” (10). Even in a study on *Barometer Rising*, Elspeth Cameron notes that “the turning point had been the First World War: many believed that Canada had ‘come of age’ on the battlefields [...] she had emerged, because of her considerable war effort, as a nation in her own right” (135).

In *Death So Noble*, Vance surveys the nation’s artistic response to the war in an examination of how this interpretation of the war came to such prominence, turning again and again to the “*literary proof* of the war’s potential as an agent of Canadianization” (my emphasis 245). The literary interpretation of the war, he concludes, offered a story of martyrdom and heroism that gave meaning to the sacrifices of individual communities, thereby providing a narrative that allowed the nation to conceive of itself as a unified entity. “This version of the war, enshrined in poem, novel, and history book, was not subject to variation, nor was it conceded that another version could be just as valid,” he writes. In the construction of a mythos, facts are but a skeleton for the larger structure: “Strict adherence to historical fact was desirable, but only if such facts did not contradict the myth. It was the myth, not fact, that was paramount; it had to be safeguarded against

anything, even an indisputable truth, that threatened to undermine it” (163). At its birth, then, the nation is a mixture of fiction and violence.

By 1941, when his *Barometer Rising* presented the Great War as a nation-building experience, MacLennan was undoubtedly working within a well-established area of the national memory. And yet, in spite of the novel’s popular reception, Vance’s study—which surveys literally hundreds of literary responses to the war—never once mentions MacLennan’s novel. Among the various potential reasons for this, the most obvious must be the novel’s late publication. Vance’s time frame is 1919-1939, making his study more concerned with the immediate reaction to the war than with later retrospectives. In addition, the novel takes the Great War as its background, rather than as its clear focus; there could be some debate over whether the novel can be categorized as a “war novel.” Perhaps most important, however, is the fact that *Barometer Rising*, with its rejection of “Mother Britain” and its colonial heritage, does not fully support Vance’s reading of the postwar literature. For example, Vance claims that for the nation’s literary imagination, “the First World War was not a break with the past; it was a fulfilment of the principles by which Canada had evolved as a nation” (157), making Canada’s transition from colony to nation an extension of Britain’s glory. By the time MacLennan’s *World War One* novel was published, however, the world was already two years into *World War Two*, and *Barometer Rising* offers a starkly different view of the war than the earlier literature.⁶ Far from seeing Canada as an extension of British glory, MacLennan’s novel insists that the Great War was the culmination of the worst aspects of European history,

⁶ Of course, not all the earlier war literature celebrated the war; the late 1920s saw an anti-war movement in Canadian literature spawn some impressive aesthetic achievements. According to Vance, however, such literature simply bolstered the conventional interpretation of the war, rallying the nationalists into more fervent declaration of their beliefs (186-188). MacLennan’s book, by contrast, neither celebrates the war nor offers a consistent criticism of it. Instead, I will argue that he *uses* the war for its violence.

and marks a clear break between Britain's past and Canada's future. As his protagonist Neil Macrae muses, "How many in Europe would have the will-power to live naturally under such an intolerable burden of guilt as theirs would be? The war was no accident, but the logical result of their own lives." Playing question-and-answer with himself, MacLennan's narrator asks, "Why should Canada escape the results?" Because, he answers, "though a part of the war, they were innocent of the cause of it [...] No matter what the Canadians did over there, they were not living out the sociological results of their own lives" (257). In MacLennan's Great War narrative, then, in contrast to a heritage traced by Vance, Canada is not the extension of the Old World of Britain, but its New World antithesis.

Although the novel concludes by spending an inordinate amount of time teaching of Canada's glorious separation from its colonial past, it begins by illustrating Canada's decay as a colonial state. Consider the first image of Halifax, in which the city appears as the insipid limb of a dying empire: the novel begins with an unnamed everyman looking for an identity, walking through the streets of colonial Halifax to "test whether he belonged here and had at last reached home" (1). "Smoke hung low in the streets" as he looks in a "dirty window of a cheap restaurant"; seeing that "the interior was empty", he enters and sits on a "warped stool" to be served by a man in a "soiled apron" (1). *Smoke, cold, dirty, empty, warped, and soiled*—this collection of words with negative connotations are all present in the novel's opening paragraph. MacLennan makes it clear that Canadians have had their fill of their colonial heritage; lest we assume that the unnamed narrator and his filthy city are still loyal subjects of the Queen, the second paragraph sets us straight. "You English?" asks the man with the soiled apron. "No,"

replies the man looking for a home, "I used to live here" (1). A man has returned from the battlefield looking for his identity; as it turns out, his nation is on the same mission.

And here, I think, we have arrived at the logic behind MacLennan's claim that *Barometer Rising* is initiating a national literature. In his eyes, the literature of Lighthall and Montgomery lacked the powerful event necessary to constitute a national mythos, and yet the Great War literature surveyed by Vance likewise failed to establish a tradition of Canadian literature; instead, it simply extended the British tradition. Accordingly, *Barometer Rising* takes great pains to avoid coming across as a British narrative. While most World War One novels were set in the front lines of Europe, MacLennan sets his in Halifax, barely ever crossing the Atlantic. The overpowering violence of the Halifax explosion serves to wipe the national slate clean of its British past, allowing Canadians to truly think the new nation. MacLennan is remarkably candid in regards to his literary aspirations, having his narrator muse that "Maybe when the wars and revolutions were ended, Canada would begin to live; maybe instead of being pulled eastward by Britain she would herself pull Britain clear of decay and give her a new birth" (257). Tellingly, the birth of the nation, the moment in which "Canada would begin to live," comes only with the world-wide violence that results in the death of the colonial father. As Arnason puts it: "the war is leading the rest of the world to self-destruction, while it leads Canada to self-knowledge" (69).

WHY WAR? HEGELIAN VIOLENCE AND THE THREAT OF NATIONAL UNITY

Whether extending a British legacy or instituting a new Canadian one, both national mythologies appeal to violence of the First World War to enforce and legitimize

their claims, despite the fact that Canadian Confederation had taken place some fifty years earlier. How was the war, with all its bloodshed and violence, able to forge a national consciousness in a way that confederacy could not? “How,” as Vance asks, “could a war that saw the deaths of 60,000 Canadians and the wounding of 170,000 others become a constructive force in the nation’s history?” (11). According to Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, nationalistic rhetoric never attempts to ignore the horrors of warfare, and we should not be surprised that an epic battle—even one fought thousands of miles away from a country—should become an integral component of the national mythos. Indeed, the horrors of war need not be downplayed or sanitized to authorize a mythos; to the contrary, war can bring a nation together precisely *because of* its extreme violence.

While Vance suggests that nationalism arises in times of war as an attempt to give meaning and legitimacy to the death of loved ones, both Benjamin and Derrida argue that nationalism also uses violence to establish authority for its mythos; the violence of the war becomes an authorizing presence in all subsequent laws and governmental structures—not merely those that comfort or protect the families of the fallen. Indeed, Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” argues that the authority of the state rests upon a law that was created *post hoc* to justify its violence. In this reading of violence, the focus on the Great War in Canadian nationalism reveals the way in which violence is necessary to coerce the citizen into accepting the mythos of the nation—especially in projects like *Barometer Rising*, which explicitly aim to establish a new nationalism. As Vance writes:

Those people who believed that the war had almost single-handedly fashioned a national consciousness saw in the war tremendous potential as a constructive force in the life of the country. [...] It was at once an object lesson, a source of inspiration, and a focus for unity; it was the magic elixir that could cure the

country of any ill. The heritage of the war could [...] defeat the subversive elements that menaced postwar society. (229)

In keeping with Benjamin and Derrida's critique of founding violence, Vance's study nonetheless shows how the "magic elixir" of the war as a force for nationalism turns out to be nothing but intimidation: "At every turn, the potentially unruly were reminded that the memory of the war remained a powerful antidote to disruption" (230). The threat of violence, manifested as the "memory of the war," fought to stifle dissenting voices and worked to form a homogeneous national mythos. Any forces which might question the new mythos became new targets of the country's violence, as political dissent and cultural heterogeneity were rewritten as Canada's Great War enemies. Vance writes that for those eager to build a national consciousness, "any form of revolution, even the most modest, constituted an assault on Anglo-Canadian values that was no different than the Kaiser's attack of 1914" (231). "Having vanquished the armies of the Kaiser in the field," he continues, "the Canadian Corps could turn its attention to 'the enemies within our Dominion'"—and "there was no need to identify those enemies specifically" (229). The threat is clear, for we all remember how Canada treated the armies of the Kaiser—we became a nation on their graves.

This vague-but-deadly threat is obvious in some of Canada's most famous war literature, including John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields": "If ye break faith with us who die," it reads, "We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders Fields" (qtd in Vance, 198). Here, the dead awaken to walk as ghosts of the past who still haunt the memory of the present, threatening any who might "break faith" with the memory of the war constructed by the poem. The poem, which Vance refers to as "a tract for the times," was used by the Canadian government in advertisements and propaganda, and the theme

it illustrates is common in post-war nationalism (200). For Benjamin, such attempts to suppress difference and dissent reveal the illegitimacy of the state's claims to authority, exposing a deep instability at the foundation of the political state. This instability is controlled only by acts of "preserving violence"—such as police, law, or even social conventions—that rely upon and repeat the authorizing violence of the originary act. Benjamin argues that the nation's authorizing violence thus haunts and ultimately destroys the state, founding yet another illegitimate state in its place. According to Benjamin, then, it is this process of "perpetual decay" that the state is attempting to defer when it stifles dissent through threats of violence that recall the nation's founding acts ("Critique" 300).⁷ Some critics, such as Werner Hamacher, see in Benjamin's argument a dialectical progression in the Hegelian sense—founding violence as thesis, preserving violence as antithesis, revolution as synthesis. However, while there is certainly a dialectic of sorts occurring for Benjamin, he neither approves of the process nor places any hope in its progression, and thus avoids Hegel's teleological conclusions. Nonetheless, Hegel's philosophy of history is worth exploring further, for his theory, in which violence plays a central role, has been widely influential, and MacLennan's novel presents a remarkably Hegelian arrival of the Canadian nation.

For Hegel, world history is a teleological process of dialectical conflict by which the "Spirit" progresses towards its ultimate fulfillment through the rise and fall of nations.

⁷ While MacLennan seems to be using a similar process in establishing Canada's authority by way of the Great War, his novel also reveals the hollowness of the state's internal logic. In the drama over Neil's alleged cowardice, the nation's willingness to murder a citizen for disobeying a representative of its authority—regardless of the incoherence of the order, or of the space of complete lawlessness in which the event took place—exposes the absurdity of the nation's claim to absolute authority via the moment of founding violence. Benjamin's suggestion that capital punishment represents "law itself in origin" (286) reminds us that a government that retains the right to execute its own citizens demonstrates in the most literal sense the way in which the structure of law repeats the violence of its originary act—and in this it may be worth noting that the Canadian government, though formally abolishing capital punishment three decades earlier, would retain it for military traitors until 1998.

Hegel sees the violence of warfare as a necessary characteristic of this process, purifying and refining the Spirit as nations struggle toward the future: one nation (thesis) is confronted by another nation (antithesis), and, through a violent conflict, the two give way into a new nation (synthesis), which then becomes a thesis itself, and will, in turn, be confronted by yet another nation, as antithesis. In *Barometer Rising*, there is a dialectic at play which presents the British and the American clash in a thesis / counter-thesis relationship, one in which Canada becomes the synthesis by which the Spirit moves forward. The following passage is perhaps exceptional for its clarity, but it is representative of the overall tone of MacLennan's novel. Here, Angus Murray—the philosopher-character that Cockburn reads as a stand-in for the authorial voice (44)—ruminates on Canada's emerging role as synthesis between Europe and America:

There were Penny and Neil Macrae [...] who had inherited as a matter of course and in their own country the urbane and technical heritage of both Europe and the eastern United States. And there was himself, caught somewhere between the two extremes, intellectually gripped by the new and emotionally held by the old [...] We're the ones who make Canada what she is today, Murray thought, neither one thing nor the other, neither a colony nor an independent nation, neither English nor American. And yet, clearly, the future is obvious, for England and America can't continue to live without each other much longer. Canada must therefore remain as she is, noncommittal, until the day she becomes the keystone to hold the world together. (266-267)

Out of the violence of war, the initial British thesis and American antithesis give way to a Canadian synthesis. Numerous similar passages throughout the book confirm this dialectic, including one in which Neil positions himself as a Canadian synthesis in his response to the suggestion he leave Canada: "I intend to live in Canada, Murray. I haven't the slightest intention of emigrating to the States or stewing in my own juice in England" (155). Complaining that Canada has been slow to accept its destiny, Neil explains that "as a Canadian who had lived both in the United States and England," he is

uniquely suited to see the Canadian future (278). Angus is just as clear in stating Canada's position in the post-war world, writing that, "if there were enough Canadians like himself, half-American and half-English, then the day was inevitable when the halves would join and his country would become the central arch which united the new order" (279). In one sense, at least, MacLennan's novel presents Canada's emergence from the Great War as a classic Hegelian dialectic.

Moreover, just as Hegel regards culture as a fruit that ripens, then goes rancid (*Philosophy* 78), MacLennan's novel suggests that the war has forged a new culture—*Canadian*—and that other "rotten" cultures must be left behind. In this, the novel is once again working within an established tradition in the Canadian memory of the war: "The myth of the war was to become a substitute for cultural diversity," writes Vance. "It would give ethnic minorities the opportunity to surrender their own identities in exchange for membership in an imagined community that was homogeneous in belief and outlook" (260-1). The multicultural ideal so treasured in later versions of the Canadian mythos is not only absent but actively resisted in MacLennan's construction of the nation. As Marlene Goldman notes, the novel's use of the explosion to suppress marginalized voices is upsettingly clear: "The class and racial biases of *Barometer Rising* are especially troubling for contemporary readers, who notice that the fires unleashed by the explosion raze the slums where recent immigrants and lower classes reside and that the new society poised to emerge at the end of *Barometer Rising* is composed of individuals of British and Scottish descent" (7). Indeed, while Halifax harbour brings together a global village well before such a community is thought worth celebrating—it includes, for example, sailors from Stockholm, Haugesund, Rotterdam, Antwerp, Genoa, Marseilles, Cape

Town, Calcutta, Bombay, Rio and Montevideo (166)—the prophecy of English and Scottish dominance stands in stark contrast to the futures provided for other cultures that arise in the novel. There are no similar promises made to Halifax's Jamaican housekeepers, nor its slip-shod "Eyetalians" (82); Penny refers to the foreign ships and their multicultural sailors as "mongrel vessels" (22); when Neil judges merchantmen "representing half a dozen countries," he "condemn[s] them all" (111). Although the "foreigners" are visible in MacLennan's version of the country, the mythos of Canada-as-multicultural nation will have to wait. The progression from "British" and "American" to "Canadian" appears to be both a national *and* a cultural dialectic.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel argues for the importance of violence in the life of the nation: "in order not to let [citizens] get rooted and settled in this isolation and thus break up the whole into fragments and let the common spirit evaporate, government has from time to time to shake them to the very centre by War [...] to [make them] feel the power of their lord and master, death" (266-7). For Hegel, the nation—the bastion of the "Spirit"—harnesses death as a corrective to the divisive heterogeneity of its citizens. In much the same way, then, Canadian authors presented World War One as a dialectical struggle which provided the new Canadian nation with the violence necessary to confront individualism in its citizens, to "shake them to the very centre by war" and not let them "break up the whole into fragments." Consider, for example, the way in which William Lighthall describes the nation-forming power of Canada's war poetry: "No other verse is more bathed in blood and agony of bitter struggle [...] and none proceeds specifically from our Canadian point of view, and so to speak courses directly in our national veins" (qtd in Vance, 227). Like other war literature, then, the lesson in national mythology

offered in *Barometer Rising* is effective primarily because it is “bathed in blood and agony,” appealing to the violence of sacrifices in the past while threatening any dissenters with a promise of that same violence in the future.

A Hegelian reading of *Barometer Rising*'s violence is not fully satisfying, however. The central family, for example, does not fulfil its Hegelian role; it is crossed and entangled by the (nearly) incestuous desire between cousins Neil and Penny, and while a Hegelian reading explains the significance of the war for the founding of the nation, it does not adequately clarify the way in which MacLennan understands that violence to be an opportunity for writing a new national consciousness. By Hegel's logic, the Great War should result in Canada standing as the synthesis of the Axis and the Allies, but, if anything, *Barometer Rising* presents the nation as a synthesis of Britain and America. Moreover, MacLennan steadfastly avoids the sort of historical continuance implied by Hegel's dialectic; as we saw earlier, *Barometer Rising* takes pains to establish a clean break with the past. In order to fully understand the process by which the novel uses violence to write the national mythos, then, we will need to leave Hegel and return to Derrida's “Force of Law.” Even before this, however, we will need to more closely examine the forms of violence exhibited in the novel.

VIOLENCE AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

For a war novel, *Barometer Rising* tells us remarkably little about the war. Apart from the occasional flashback to assure us of Neil's innocence, the novel is conspicuously empty of details from the frontlines. If the war is relegated to the background, however, we should not misunderstand this as lowering its centrality to the

work. While the entirety of *Barometer Rising* takes place in Nova Scotia, the war remains the novel's raison d'être: the war separates Neil and Penny; it creates and breaks the career of Geoffrey Wain; it destroys Neil's reputation; it gives Penny the opportunity to work as an engineer; and it invigorates the Halifax economy. And, of course, it is the war that is responsible for the explosion that marks the climax of the novel. Indeed, MacLennan makes clear the centrality of this "side story" when he wrote in a later interview that in *Barometer Rising*, "the background is the most essential part of the book" (*Thirty* 53).

If MacLennan's novel conspicuously avoids describing the horrors of the war, it certainly does not shy away from establishing its violence. In what proves to be a most effective literary move, MacLennan (re)writes the Halifax explosion as the war's arrival on Canadian soil, thus allowing him to emphasise the awesome violence of the war (which his project of Canadian nationalism requires), without glorifying the events of the war itself (which he reads as a distinctly European event and evidence of the British Empire's decay). MacLennan's nationalism requires a violence so vast that it will suggest the most significant battle of the war occurs in Canada, shattering the nation's mythological connection to the British Empire. Fittingly, the explosion allows MacLennan to portray Canada as a part of the war but as remaining innocent of its cause, for the "war" arrives in Halifax as an accident. An extension of the war's violence but not its logic, the explosion in *Barometer Rising* obliterates the nation's colonial history and presents MacLennan with a blank slate upon which to write the nation.

MacLennan's diction makes it clear that the explosion is to be understood not merely as a direct result of the war, but as the war itself. Alternately described as "a

floating bomb” (190) and “a gigantic bomb” (195) that has been “brought to Halifax by the war” (181), the *Mont Blanc* brings the war to Halifax; when it explodes, the city becomes a battlefield: “Halifax had come to look like a city caught in the fulcrum of a battle” (227). Indeed, MacLennan consistently describes the post-explosion city in military terms: the citizens are described as “soldiers crawling out of shelters into the smoking, heaving earth after a bombardment has passed” (208); a cruiser that had been in the Dockyard at the time of the blast looks like it “might just have come out of heavy action” (211). There are so many injured citizens that “an artillery brigade would not have had the transport necessary to evacuate them” (211), and the tents of the Army Service Corps make the Commons “look like a military camp” (232). And, in fact, the city is not merely *described* as a battleground; with the declaration of martial law (232) and the military’s commandeering of civilian property (214), the city *is* in a war zone. As if it were a point of pride, MacLennan presents the explosion as *worse* than the Great War, writing that the explosion caused “devastation more appalling than anything [Neil] had witnessed in France” (207). Incidentally, there is some truth to the claim, for in an era before Hiroshima, the explosion of the *Mont Blanc* was the largest man-made explosion in the history of the world.

Importantly, in *Barometer Rising*, the violence of the explosion is not merely vast, it is apocalyptic—critics have often noted that the language MacLennan employs has a distinctly religious tone, implicitly comparing the explosion to the Biblical apocalypse. When Marlene Goldman notes that “the mid-twentieth century saw the appearance of some relatively straightforward apocalyptic narratives,” for example, *Barometer Rising* is the first title she mentions (7). Indeed, the suddenness of the explosion, coupled with its

magnitude, invites comparisons to the apocalypse. Though “no warning of danger was given” (195), MacLennan writes, there is a flash of bright light in the heavens, followed by the tearing open of the world in fire: “A needle of flaming gas, thin as the mast and of a brilliance unbelievably intense, shot through the deck of the *Mont Blanc* near the funnel and flashed more than two hundred feet toward the sky [...] There were a few helpless shouts. Then all movement and life about the ship were encompassed in a sound beyond hearing as the *Mont Blanc* opened up” (196). The scene after the explosion is post-apocalyptic, as well. Roddie’s bike is destroyed by a loose milk wagon that has no driver, and the boy explores a city in which people have simply disappeared: “The street was empty of traffic and the sidewalks still had no pedestrians [...] He saw a tram half-way down the block, stalled and windowless, with no one attending it. He shivered, and continued walking” (204). Just as the Biblical rapture removes people from their daily lives, leaving the world conspicuously empty of their presence, so too does the explosion.

It is the description of the explosion itself, however, which contains the most obvious apocalyptic references. Consider this description of the blast, which comes complete with the Biblical rending of the curtain: “More than two thousand tons of red hot steel [...] fell like meteors from the sky [...] The tormented air was laced with tongues of flame which roared and exploded out of the atmosphere, lashing downward like myriad blow-torches as millions of cubic feet of gas took fire and exploded. The atmosphere went white-hot. It grew mottled, then fell to the streets like a crimson curtain” (198). And elsewhere: “The flames—they had come from the sky, sharp torches spouting downward out of the atmosphere” (207). Lest we miss the connection, MacLennan has Neil drive his truck to the top of the Citadel and make the following

summary: “From this height the catastrophe took on a cosmic aspect. [...] The sky was a rolling mountain of smoke, shot through with flashes of fire” (218).

MacLennan’s use of the Biblical narrative to interpret the war is fully in keeping with other Canadian memories of the First World War. Vance devotes an entire chapter entitled “Christ in Flanders” to document the persistent use of Christian imagery to justify and legitimate the war effort; the Halifax *Morning Chronicle*’s review of John Daniel Logan’s Biblical interpretation of the war entitled *The New Apocalypse: And Other Poems of Days and Deeds in France* serves as a summary for the chapter: “If the nation as a whole can glimpse the war in the perspective in which Logan views it, our future is safe” (50). If Vance can argue that Christ “became the spiritual centerpiece of Canada’s memory of the war” (36), MacLennan seems to argue that the explosion marks the apocalypse, or the *return* of Christ, along with its attendant promise of a new heaven and—importantly—a new earth. As Goldman writes, the novel “dramatizes the Halifax explosion as a momentous, apocalyptic event necessary if Canada was to leave behind its past as a British colony and move into the future as an autonomous nation” (7). That is, the theme of apocalypse is important in *Barometer Rising* because its logic renders the political passage from colonial Europe into the “New World” as a spiritual progression; Halifax, rebuilt, will not merely be Canada—it will be the New Jerusalem.

In its magnitude and force, the violence of the explosion is described as being both the result of an immoral war and yet full of spiritual significance. More than a war, it arrives as divine judgement upon the follies of Europe, portrayed as a manifestation of God’s just anger at the sins of the British Empire. In this way, *Barometer Rising* partakes in the rhetoric of “divine violence” as presented in Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” in

which the Great War becomes a devastating manifestation of God that simply erases the sins of humanity in a horrible but completely just act of violence.⁸ But where Benjamin suggests that the divine violence cannot be seen as a means to any political end, MacLennan's divine violence is precisely that: a violent means that is meant to establish a particular political mythos. More importantly, perhaps, is that, according to Benedict Anderson's understanding of nationalism, MacLennan's appeal to the divine is a fatal flaw in his national mythos; Anderson, following Benjamin, argues that people were able to think or consider the idea of nations only after printed texts enabled a shift in understanding from a god-centered vertical, messianic time, to a secular homogenous, empty time (*Imagined* 25). By this understanding, a nation founded by god is a contradiction in terms—which does not mean the claim cannot be made, of course, but only that it will prove fragile.

NATURAL VIOLENCE AND THE ORGANIC NATION

For MacLennan, as we have seen, it is not enough for Canadian troops to succeed on the front in Europe; his mythos requires that the war arrive on Canadian soil, and that it arrive in spectacular fashion. Indeed, the blast is the clear climax of the novel; the whole work strains towards it, the dates and times offered as section headings building tension in what Cockburn describes as a ticking "time-bomb technique" (32). Critics have long been smitten with this section of the novel: George Woodcock calls it "a most

⁸ For more on Benjamin's "divine violence," see his "Critique of Violence," pages 293-300. While Derrida's reading of Benjamin's essay in "Force of Law" is largely sympathetic, he expresses grave concerns regarding Benjamin's appeal to the divine violence, writing that "it is at this point that this text, in all its polysemic mobility and all its resources for reversal, seems to me finally to resemble too closely, to the point of specular fascination and vertigo, the very thing against which one must act and think, do and speak. This text, like many others by Benjamin, is still too Heideggerian, too messianico-Marxist or archeo-eschatological for me" (298).

vivid expression of a catastrophic event” (12); Cockburn calls it “by far the most powerfully written section of the book” (32); and William H. New deems it “the most vivid writing in the whole book” (77). Indeed, MacLennan’s prose slows to a crawl as he lovingly details every inch of the explosion’s impact on the city, taking thirty-three pages to render the passage of three hours and twenty minutes.

In its role of expiating the past, the explosion is an act of God in that it arrives without warning as a judgement on Europe’s past. In its role as establishing the future, however, MacLennan suggests that the explosion is an act of God that arrives as a violent but organic event that marks the birth of the nation, to be understood as parallel to the origins of the Canadian landscape. This early passage, in which the city is presented as the product of an epic act of geological violence, foreshadows the impact of the explosion on the Nova Scotian landscape in a manner that conflates the two events:

The details of Halifax were dim in the fading light but the contours were clear and he had forgotten how good they were. The Great Glacier had once packed, scraped, and riven this whole land; it had gouged out the harbours and left as a legacy three drumlins... the hill on which he stood and two islands in the harbour itself. [...] The harbour is the reason for the town’s existence; it is all that matters in Halifax. (4)

When Robert Cockburn cites this passage as an example of MacLennan’s artistic “clumsiness,” arguing that “one expects characters to move through a credible and atmospheric setting; however, one does not want, or need to be told [this]” (30), he has misread its effect. For in his description of its aftermath, the explosion—an act of the “Great War”—is later paralleled to this description of the “Great Glacier”: its power will have similarly “packed, scraped, and riven th[e] whole land.” Consider how these two brief descriptions of the post-explosion landscape connect the blast to the act of geological formation: “When the shock struck the earth the rigid ironstone and granite

base of Halifax peninsula rocked and reverberated” (197); “The immediate landscape, wildly distorted and irregular, looked like floating wreckage seen from the porthole of a heaving ship” (206). The section dismissed by Cockburn is of the utmost importance to the thesis of the novel, for it describes the physical construction of the country’s geological foundations with the same language of violence that will later describe the effects of the explosion, and which, of course, marks the mythological construction of the country’s nationhood. In connecting the formation of the landscape with the formation of the political nation, Canada’s violent transition from colony to nation is represented as an act of God. For MacLennan, then, the message is clear: just as the landscape of the Canadian wilderness is organic and natural, so too is the Canadian nation; both are acts of God, bathed in violence right down to the bedrock. And, importantly, if Canada is authorized by the Almighty, its scriptures are holy, and its critics are hell-bound.

In addition to wounding the landscape, of course, the violence affects thousands of bodies in the novel. Physical injuries become a source of pride in the work, as wounds are presented as a form of patriotism. Angus Murray, for example, wounded his arm in the war, and Neil returns home with a marked limp. Regardless of whether they are proud of their wounds or not—in fact, both men downplay their handicaps—the citizens of Halifax seem determined to discuss them. “Major Murray’s right arm is in a sling,” points out Penny to her dinner guests. “You should adore him... he nearly lost his arm in the service of his country” (31). Like Penny, the younger characters in the work understand the importance of violence. In the following exchanges, Roddie and Willie compete for proximity to the blood and wounds of the war and the explosion. Note how the first of these scenes, in which the boys compare their connections to the violence of

the war, is echoed by the later passage in the novel in which the boys brag about their experiences in the explosion; their parallel serves once again to equate the violence of the war with the violence of the explosion:

“The man *I* was talking to is a major,” Roddie said. “He was wounded, too. He’s a friend of my sister.”

“That’s nothing. My cousin got gassed at Vimy Ridge and he was killed.”

“I had a cousin that was killed too.”

“The first Canadian soldier that was killed lived on our street.”

- 70-71

“Where have you been to?” he said. “You missed something.”

“I’ve been around.”

“Bet you haven’t been up to the North End.”

“I bet I have.”

“I bet I saw more dead people than you did.”

“Go on. I saw the explosion and that’s more than you did.”

- 236

Similar scenes occur throughout the text. Willie, for example, brags about the abuse his father suffered in a German prisoner of war camp—“‘My father was taken prisoner,’ Willie said with satisfaction. ‘The Germans treat him something terrible’” (239)—and he is bitterly disappointed that he and Roddie do not see more carnage: “‘Gosh,’ Willie said, ‘you should’ve gone into that place. I bet it was full of dead bodies and corpses and things. I’d like to see a corpse. Gee, we only saw one all day!’” (241). If the boys’ enthusiasm for violence wanes when Roddie is told that his uncle and aunt have been killed, this is not to be understood as a sudden rejection of the novel’s violence. Rather, Roddie’s momentary recognition of violence’s true significance illustrates, by contrast, the speed and ease with which the reality of the violence slips into an enticing and invigorating violent mythos. And, lest we forget, these boys, with all their bloodlust, represent the first generation of new Canadians. The message is clear: the nation is to be respected because it has come at high cost to both our landscape and our

forefathers. Our awe for the magnitude of the explosion is to be transposed into awe for the soldiers and the nation they have formed—with more than a little help from God.

EXPLOSION AS TIME-LAG

If we have charted the surplus of violence in novel, we still need to take a closer look at the way in which that violence comes to function as the authority behind the national mythos. Turning briefly to Derrida's essay "Force of Law," I want to suggest that, in mythological terms, the violence of the war opens a rupture in the Hegelian teleology that MacLennan sees as an opportunity to imagine a new community.

As we saw in the introduction, Derrida's essay on the instability of law follows Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" in pointing to the illegitimacy of the state's founding acts of violence. Just as Benjamin traces the authority of the law to an aporia at its origin, Derrida writes that "this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of non-law... the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss" (270). According to Derrida, these revolutionary moments are frightening because, having suspended all the categories of judgment and legality, we are left with no means to process or understand them: "These moments [...] are terrifying moments because of the sufferings, the crimes, the tortures that rarely fail to accompany them, no doubt, but just as much because they are in themselves, and in their very violence, uninterpretable or undecipherable" ("Force" 269). However, in spite of—or perhaps because of—this terror, it is also a location of great opportunity for both Derrida and Benjamin. In the demise of one nation and the corresponding rise of another, there is a moment of lawlessness where the old law no longer applies, and the new law is not yet

established. Derrida lingers over this period of suspended law, suggesting that its uncertainty is the very promise of justice; he reads this (re)turn to the moment *prior* to law, before the establishment of a national mythos, as something resembling absolute opportunity. And it is this moment of emptiness, I think, this vacuum of national consciousness, that MacLennan wants to locate in the Halifax explosion, for it provides him with the opportunity he is seeking: a blank slate onto which he might write a new mythos for the nation. In order to get there, however, MacLennan requires an act of violence so vast that it will erase the nation's colonial past and destroy the foundations already written by the tradition of Canadian Great War literature.

Although Benjamin and Derrida are referring primarily to the origin of the legal state, Homi Bhabha describes a similar process by which any of the nation's key moments can be revisited and explored in the present for political reasons. "[Benjamin's] work has led me to speculate on differential temporal movements within the process of dialectical thinking and the supplementary or interstitial 'conditionality' that opens up alongside the transcendent tendency of dialectical contradiction," explains Bhabha. "I have called this a 'third space,' or a 'time lag' ('Translator')." Elsewhere, Bhabha explains it this way: "[There is a] *time-lag* between the Great Event and its circulation as a historical sign of the 'people' or an 'epoch', that constitutes the memory and the moral of the event *as a narrative*, a disposition to cultural communality, a form of social and psychic identification" (*Location* 348-9). In his afterword to the 1989 *New Canadian Library* edition of *Barometer Rising*, Alistair MacLeod speaks of the novel in terms that resonate with Bhabha's theories: "A major event often freezes us in time," he writes. "It makes us look more closely at where we are in our temporal and spatial journey at the

moment of its occurrence” (283). This experience of a “frozen time” that allows for introspection is precisely what Bhabha refers to as a time-lag: the moment in which an event is open to interpretation prior to its being incorporated into and appropriated by the cultural memory of a nation and re-written to support the mythos. Just as Bhabha says the time-lag “keeps alive the making of the past” (*Location 364*), *Barometer Rising* returns to the Great War and the Halifax explosion as an opportunity to write a new national mythos into the time-lag that follows such a “Great Event” in the nation’s history. In this sense, at least, the novel can be read as an illustration of Bhabha’s time-lag in action, and the violence it entails can be understood through Benjamin and Derrida’s suggestion that the state requires a violent authorizing act.

MacLennan describes the moments immediately following the blast in terms of a profound silence, which, as we will see, is the blank space into which he will speak the new national mythos. Note how he draws open the time of the blast to locate a space of absolute emptiness even within the first contact between the wayward ships: “With a violent shock, the bow of the *Imo* struck the plates of the *Mont Blanc* and went grinding a third of the way through the deck and the forward hold. [...] For a fraction of a second there was intense silence. Then smoke appeared out of the shattered deck of the *Mont Blanc*” (194). Indeed, MacLennan repeatedly employs the language of the time-lag to describe the characters’ experience of the blast, evoking temporal, kinaesthetic, and aural pauses to illustrate the magnitude of the great event. “The *Mont Blanc* had become the centre of a static tableau” (195), we are told. “All normal activity along the waterfront had been suspended,” and “everything else for miles around seemed motionless and silent” (196). In the train station after the explosion, Jim experiences the blast as an

absence of sound: "Silence, except for the panting of the engine, except for a queer sound somewhere in his own chest. Silence, the sort of silence that is all a man's own when he is falling asleep" (200). Similarly, Neil, whose "mouth was opening and closing without making any sound," "could see nothing but a blazing light" and "could hear nothing but the thunders of explosion in his own head" (205). Roddie experiences the post-blast pause, as well: "Everything was utterly silent. Now that the great wind had passed, there was no movement except for a pendulum-like waver in the leafless branches of trees as they swayed slowly back and forth through shorter arcs to equilibrium" (201). As he explores Halifax after the blast, Roddie sees the entire city is stuck in the lag: "The street was empty of traffic and the sidewalks still had no pedestrians [...] He reached an intersection and saw a tram half-way down the block, stalled and windowless, with no one attending it" (204); he is dismayed by what we are told is a "paradox of silence and sudden death" (205). Indeed, the blast appears to momentarily stun the entire city, and it is this moment, where the city sways in uncertainty, dazed by the force of the explosion, that MacLennan seizes as an opportunity. Accordingly, he elongates the moment of the blast but does not fill it with action; rather, he stretches it into a time-lag that, in its emptiness, becomes the blank slate for the narrative of the nation.

As Frank Birbalsingh writes, the novel's "over-all picture is of a society caught in a state of limbo" (58). Along with the impact of the war on the Canadian consciousness, the suddenness of the Halifax explosion makes a clean break between the country's colonial past and its national future, instituting a moment of uncertainty that is pregnant with possibilities. The novel's violence has had a similar effect on all of the characters: "The war had altered the vision of them all, breaking some and healing the gashes it had

made in others by enlarging their consciousness,” the narrator explains. “They could never be the same again, nor could the land they had returned to inhabit” (166). Or, as Murray explains the blast: “he knew quite simply that the remainder of his life was going to be different from his past” (263). Penny Wain, the novel’s ingenious heroine, announces that the explosion is “a revolution in the nature of things” (220), and that “Halifax, and with it the rigid, automatic life of her family’s hierarchy, had been blown wide apart” (246). Neil, representing the young Canadian nation, literally loses his past in the war; the shell shock he experiences is so extreme that he forgets his personal history, including his name (150). Surprisingly, however, it is Geoffrey Wain who most fully understands the function of the time-lag instituted by the war, he who “was pervaded by a quiet and unquestioned confidence that the present had pulled adrift from the past and that his future held unlimited possibilities” (84). This state of limbo, this space of suspension in which the nation dangles over the abyss, where the present is “pulled adrift from the past” and in which “the future held unlimited possibilities” is, without doubt, a Bhabhian time-lag, a space ripe for cultural revision and resistance.

Here, however, is where Bhabha and MacLennan part ways. While Bhabha encourages elongating this time-lag to allow for cultural heterogeneity, MacLennan has no desire to leave the historical event open to any multiplicity of responses and interpretation. Just as quickly as the explosion has opened the time-lag, MacLennan snaps it shut. After the fraction of a second of profound silence preceding the blast, the roar of the explosion arrives. From a state where “everything else for miles around seemed motionless and silence,” MacLennan quickly moves to the action: “Then all movement and life about the ship were encompassed in a sound beyond hearing as the

Mont Blanc opened up” (196). Similarly, the realities of post-explosion Halifax pour into Roddie’s silent world: “Then suddenly the empty street became crowded with people [...] a confused shouting, wild and exciting and dangerous, began to rise about him” (205). Neil is shaken out of his stupor as Angus slaps him into consciousness: “He felt something sting his cheek and heard, as from a great distance, Angus Murray’s voice. ‘Snap out of it!’” (205). In the same way, and with the same sense of urgency, MacLennan shouts the nationalist mythos into the silence of the time-lag.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

There is little beyond the novel’s sales to gauge the impression that *Barometer Rising* itself has had on the national consciousness, for while the novel sold well upon its release, it arrived without critical attention. In his brief survey of its critical reception, George Woodcock explains the lack of response generated by the book by writing that “in 1941, criticism was still a neglected genre in Canada” (21). It seems there was a second vacuum on the Canadian literary scene. Apart from a favourable review in the *Windsor Daily Star*—which received it with something like relief, stating “finally... a great Canadian novel” (qtd in Woodcock, 21)—the text was enjoyed but not criticized academically until the mid-sixties, when it was referenced in larger studies by Woodcock and William H. New. It was not until the early seventies that the novel garnered sustained attention, when critics such as Robert Cockburn, Paul Goetsch and Alec Lucas initiated what was to become an enduring focus on the novel’s nationalist rhetoric.

Indeed, there is something of a critical consensus on the work, and one that I have no intention of challenging: the novel is a strong first novel, but one whose aesthetic

value is hampered by its relentlessly didactic nationalism. Hermann Boeschstein notes that *Barometer Rising* is widely considered “the great attempt at portraying the awakening self-awareness of Canadians and their national and cultural character” (36), but, as Paul Goetsch writes, “the majority of critics have time and time again voiced reservations [...] against his unashamed didacticism [and] the obtrusive nationalism” (2). Critics as varied as Alec Lucas, David Arnason, George Woodcock, Dorothy Farmiloe, and R.D. MacLulich all lament the prominence of nationalist rhetoric in the novel. George Woodcock, for example, dismisses MacLennan’s aggressive nationalism as “blatant,” “unassimilated and crude” (“MacLennan” 16); Boeschstein calls the novel “ruinously didactic”, and finds its lessons in Canadian exceptionalism to be “somewhat presumptuous” (37). Cockburn, somewhat more dramatically, writes that “the omnipresence of this theme shatters what artistic merits the novel has just as effectively as the explosion had leveled Halifax.” Continuing, he laments that “the reader is bludgeoned into scowling semi-passivity by pages full of heavily italicized lectures on the Meaning of Canada,” before concluding that “the essayist, the non-fiction man, has shoved the novelist aside” (41). If Cockburn is the most extreme in his critique of MacLennan’s efforts at mythos-making, his argument is typical of criticism on the novel.

The aim of this chapter, then, has not to be challenge, nor simply to repeat this critical consensus on MacLennan’s attempts at the construction of a Canadian mythos. Rather, I have aimed to examine how the mythos of nation-founding is inherently violent and self-contradictory. If MacLennan’s novel works within a well-established tradition of viewing the Great War as the seminal event in the formation of a Canadian consciousness, it provides a powerful glance inside the literary construction of the

national mythos, revealing the absolute importance of violence to that process, as well as the consequences that violent mythos has for those outside the dominant culture. Years later, as the nation experiences a surge in demand for historical fiction, the great events in Canadian history are being re-visited by contemporary authors. In the following chapters, I will examine two works of contemporary historical fiction, arguing that they return to these events not in order to establish a Canadian mythos, as MacLennan has done, but to re-write that mythos, and ultimately to question the very notion of the mythos itself. The next chapter follows Jane Urquhart as she retraces MacLennan's footsteps, returning to the Great War in a Bhabhaian time-lag to examine the war's role in nation-building. Ignoring the threat established in *Barometer Rising*, however, *The Stone Carvers* braves the violence of the First World War in an attempt to read heterogeneity and self-consciousness back into the national mythos.

Chapter Two

Memory and Monument: Re-writing the Nation in The Stone Carvers

While in her interviews Jane Urquhart often cautions against placing too much cultural value on a specific historical event, her choice of World War One as the backdrop for her re-working of Canadian identity in *The Stone Carvers* (2001) suggests that she, like MacLennan, is well aware of the mythical significance that the Great War holds in the nation's cultural memory. Like *Barometer Rising*, *The Stone Carvers* returns to the First World War as an originary moment in the construction of the Canadian mythos; Urquhart uses the postwar construction of "The Canadian National Memorial to the Great War" to explore the process by which the nation's memory of the war has become the event initiating and authorizing our national mythos. While MacLennan, who sets his novel in 1917, is eager to appropriate the war itself, however, Urquhart turns to the decades following the violence, focusing instead on how the nation's understanding of itself changed as it "remembered" a very specific version of the war years. If it is the case, as Urquhart claims in an interview with Laura Ferri, that "before the First World War, Canada was remarkably naïve. It was a very, very unconscious country" (29), then *The Stone Carvers* explores the aftermath of the Great War to examine and re-consider the path by which the nation rose to consciousness.

VIMY RIDGE AND THE NATIONAL PEDAGOGY

If Canada's impressive military record in the First World War has become a well-established mythological origin for the nation, no single battle holds more authority in Canada's national mythos than the Battle of Vimy Ridge, fought in April of 1917.

Military historian Norm Christie, in his influential study *The Canadians at Vimy*, argues that “the capture of Vimy Ridge in April 1917 is considered one of the major building blocks of Canada,” calling it “one of the few battles of the First World War which has a place in Canada’s consciousness” (1). Pierre Burton goes further, claiming that “the Canadian nationality was born on that chilly Monday in 1917,” offering as evidence the fact that “it has become commonplace to say that Canada came of age at Vimy Ridge” (293). In a passage that supports Benedict Anderson’s argument that printed texts enable a people to “think the nation” (25), Burton goes on to offer a full catalogue of print sources that have posited and affirmed this particular version of history: “For seventy years it has been said so often—in Parliament, at hundreds of Vimy dinners and in thousands of Remembrance Day addresses, in newspaper editorials, school texts, magazines articles, and more than a score of books about Vimy and Canada’s role in the Great War—that it is almost an article of faith” (294-295).

There are a number of reasons for the battle’s enduring place in the nation’s memory. As it was the “first time in the war [that] the Allies had won something tangible” (Christie 1), there can be no doubt that the battle of Vimy Ridge represented an important psychological victory. More significant than its value for Allied morale, however, was that it represented a particularly *Canadian* victory. Jonathan Vance explains that “it was the image of provincial unity that gave the Battle of Vimy Ridge such import. The four divisions of the Canadian Corps, operating as a unit for the first time, brought together battalions from across the country” (233). A German stronghold deep in French territory, the ridge was a highly visible and dangerous enemy presence; the French and British armies’ repeated attempts to take the ridge had all ended in

devastating failure. When the freshly united Canadian Corps managed to win the ridge, it became a watershed moment for the nation, representing an achievement far beyond the battlefield. According to Burton, the prevailing sentiment of the Canadian soldier was a mixture of national pride and utter bewilderment: “For the first time he and his fellows had punched a hole in the four-hundred-mile line of the German trenches. The British hadn’t done it; the French hadn’t done it; *they* had done it—the Canadians” (291). By accomplishing a feat that its two founding nations could not, the Canadian victory at Vimy represented as much a victory over its colonial parents as it did over the Germans.

Coming as it did in the midst of the “Allies’ bleakest year,” the Canadians’ success offered the British, French, and Canadian public some badly-needed positive news from the front lines. In fact, while the battle was clearly a military success, contemporary historians argue that the public desire for positive news meant that “the victories of the Canadians at Vimy [...] assumed significant proportions well beyond the realities of the gains” (Christie 1). As such, Christie writes that “the capture of Vimy Ridge in 1917 was as much a propaganda victory as a military one” (1). While Christie reminds us that the victory was short-lived—writing that in the weeks following the gains, “these successes turned into costly failures and the great promise of a breakthrough was buried in the bloody mud of Artois” (Christie 23)—this has been largely forgotten by Canadians. That part of history, it seems, is unimportant—at least in Canada, where the battle would become central to its cultural memory. Elsewhere, the battle has received a historical welcome more befitting its actual gain. Burton notes that, “after the first burst of publicity, the impact of the battle was blunted everywhere but in Canada” (296). Regardless of its historical importance to the war itself, however, the battle retained its

place at the heart of the Canadian mythos. Seventy-five years after the event, a Canadian government pamphlet published to commemorate the anniversary of Vimy Ridge battle attests to the enduring power of its place in the national mythos: "The victory at Vimy, won by Canadians from every part of the country, united the nation in pride and affirmed its separate nationhood in the minds of many."

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the symbolic importance the battle has gained in Canada's national memory better than the process by which the government officially commemorated the nation's war effort. In 1920, a competition sponsored by the Canadian Battlefield Memorials Commission (CBMC) proposed that there be eight separate monuments to mark "the most famous battlefields of the Canadian Corps" (Vance 67). The proposals poured in, but Walter Allward's design for the Vimy Ridge monument so completely dwarfed all other entries in both ambition and scale that the CBMC decided it should be built as the country's National Memorial and represent the entire war effort. The decision was not particularly controversial; after all, Allward's entry had been for Vimy Ridge, a battle which, more than any other, had come to represent the Canadians' wartime success and sacrifice. Since the battle had been understood to constitute the origin of Canadian nationalism, the monument to be built upon Vimy Ridge would commemorate much more than a single battle—it would mark the birth of the nation. This perspective explains why, "to mark this briefest of all battles, the Canadian government commissioned the most massive of all monuments" (Burton 302). Allward's plans were indeed epic in scale; unveiled sixteen years after the competition was announced, the monument consists of well over 6,000 tonnes of limestone, rises well over 80 meters above the field, and cost (1936) \$1.5 million to

build. The enormity of the structure, so disproportionate to the military significance of the battle it commemorates, indicates both the mythological importance that the battle held for the war generation, as well as the Canadian government's determination that it would retain its mythic power for generations to come. "Canada was intent on erecting a shrine that would stand, not for a thousand years, but as its architect, Walter Allward, declared, *for all time*" (Burton 302).

I have recounted this history at some length to help us understand the significance that the Battle of Vimy Ridge holds for the national mythos. When Jane Urquhart questions the construction of the national narrative by re-telling the story of the Vimy Ridge Monument, she has returned to the very heart—the origin—of the Canadian mythos. In returning to Vimy, the novel returns to what might be considered, in Derridean terms, the transcendental signified of the national narrative; Urquhart has located the animating and authorizing act of violence at the origin of the nation, and, there, has found the aporia that at lies at the heart of every nation. By questioning the origin of the nation, Urquhart troubles the source, unveiling an uncertainty at the foundation of the national mythos: here is an act of violence that authorizes the sovereignty of the nation, its mythos, and its government, but which is neither *illegal* nor *legal* but entirely *beyond the law*. As with every national mythos, the Canadian national narrative will deny and conceal all but a small, controlled version of this origin, even as it recognizes it as the source of its authority. In *The Stone Carvers*, then, Urquhart examines, interrogates, and begins a re-writing of the foundation of Canada's national narrative.

AWAKE! ORIGIN AS HISTORY

Midway through *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin writes that “every presentation of history must begin with an awakening; in fact it actually must not deal with anything else” (N 4,3). If this is so, then the real beginning of Urquhart’s historical novel arrives some seventy pages in, when one of the young protagonists awakes to find himself chained to a post next to his bed. Recalling Urquhart’s comment that “before the First World War, Canada was [...] a very, very unconscious country” (Ferri 29), the history of the Great War offered in *The Stone Carvers* can be read as Canada’s passage from unconsciousness naivety into self-conscious nationhood. As an exploration of the construction of the Canadian consciousness, *The Stone Carvers* becomes an example of Benjaminian history similar to Bhabha’s time-lag, opening and pausing the past in an effort to bring a measure of understanding, and perhaps even opportunity, to the present. “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition,” Benjamin insists, “but in which time stands still and has come to a stop” (“Thesis” 262).

Early in her remarkable study *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*, Carol Jacobs traces Benjamin’s thoughts on origins and argues that, for him, origins have nothing to do with *the* beginning, as such. As Benjamin writes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, “Origin stands in the flow of becoming as a whirlpool and rips the material of genesis into its rhythmic” (qtd in Jacobs, 8). Exploring this enigmatic suggestion, Jacobs explains that, for Benjamin, “the ‘origin’ is no path of progressive becoming. It has nothing in common with our common concept of origin. Within it, as the etymology

of the term all too readily suggests, is an originary fissure, as *Ursprung*. Thus, it tears any sense of genesis or its materiality down into its eddy” (8). This conception of the “origin” will prove important for us not simply because it helps us understand how a novel can begin seventy pages into its narrative, but, more importantly, because it offers a counterpoint to traditional understandings of political origin narratives that cater to our desire for stable ground, ones that offer simplistic *explanations* rather than difficult *explorations* of our history. If the nation’s traditional *origin* is inherently violent, as Derrida and Benjamin argue, then perhaps Benjamin’s circuitous notion of origin gestures towards a less violent way to think the nation. By recognizing the impossibility of truly “starting from scratch,” it confesses to the violence required to approximate a clean and untainted originary moment. The question of tainted origins is crucial here, for if it is anything, *The Stone Carvers* is a story about our origin stories.

Terrified of their son’s wanderlust, Tilman’s parents would rather imprison him than accept the nightmare of his unannounced absences. In a strangely tender scene, Urquhart tells the story of how Dieter, Tilman’s father, carefully fits his sleeping son with a harness and chain, familial love twisting into torture. The depth of this betrayal will shatter the family, ultimately sending Tilman across the Atlantic into the chaos of a world war. If this can be considered the beginning of a Benjaminian history in *The Stone Carvers*, it is because Tilman’s fate can be understood as the human condition for Benjamin: desperate for the stability of stasis, we would rather be chained to a stake than accept the risk of the unknown. And, should we manage to brave an awakening, it is not into some idealized, utopian freedom; rather, it is only part of a process by which we come to see that we are imprisoned within a series of inorganic structures—be they

historical, social, or national. Attempting to offer comfort, Dieter confirms his son's worst fear: "'You see,' he said to the boy, 'we are all tied to a place.' He coughed into his hand. 'We're stuck to it'" (68).

Tilman's awakening spreads quickly throughout the land: "The next morning [...] everyone in the house was *hurled into consciousness* by the terrible sound of Tilman's howls as he flung himself to the end of his chain again and again" (my emphasis 67). The great awakening continues; five mornings later, the boy's cries shock the entire county into consciousness of their own confinement, as his howls are "taken up by dogs all over the county—a kind of relay of despair—so that sleepers ten and fifteen miles away were unknowingly disturbed by the boy's anguish, their last dreams of the morning being those of confinement or attempted escape" (69). Tilman's awakening—by which the protagonists of the novel are "hurled into consciousness" (67)—becomes a supplemental start to the novel, an origin that is, paradoxically, defined by its recognition that it is *not* an origin, by its admission that we begin by reacting to what precedes us.

The novel's concern with origins is announced, appropriately, at its very outset. The first words of its first chapter read as follows: "There was a story, a true if slightly embellished story, about how the Ontario village was given its name, its church, its brewery, its tavern, its gardens, its grottoes, its splendid indoor and outdoor altars. How it acquired its hotel, its blacksmith's shop, its streets and roads, its tannery, its cemetery, its general store" (5). *There was a story*, Urquhart may as well have written, *about how it all began*. At the time in which the novel begins, however, economic and political struggles have forced the community to lose faith in its own genesis story: "This was a legend that appealed to fewer and fewer people in the depression of the early 1930s," the

narrator tell us. “Times being what they were, not many people had the energy for the present, never mind the past” (5). Although it is not mentioned at this point, we later come to realize that Urquhart portrays Canadians beginning to lose faith in their origin story at the very same time that their government is working hard to reword that narrative with a monument across the Atlantic. The Vimy Ridge Monument would be unveiled at the height of the depression, marking the battleground as the new official origin to the nation and reminding the populace of a story they were beginning to forget.

Just as the novel itself has several beginnings, the nation in *The Stone Carvers* also has multiple origins. Chronologically, the novel begins with Father Gstir’s arrival in Upper Canada in the late 1860s and concludes with the unveiling of Allward’s monument in France in 1936. Father Gstir’s story hovers around—though it never mentions—1867, that all-important date in Canadian history. Urquhart is comparing two very different originary moments, and, by conspicuously neglecting to mention Confederation, highlighting and privileging the spectral doubling of the nation’s birth that occurs on the fields of France. It is no surprise, then, that the *Ottawa Citizen* reviewed the book as “The Great Canadian Novel [...] An epic portrait of a nation’s birth” (back cover). By situating her novel in the time between Confederation and the battle of Vimy Ridge, Urquhart’s novel hovers between the nation’s two “official” beginnings, if the nation was conceived in 1867 but was not really born until 1917, the novel exists, self-consciously, in the half-century of gestation between these two dates.

The violence of the nation’s mythical origin is anticipated by the violence of a third origin that predates even Confederation: the process by which the pioneers break the land for lumber and agriculture. In *The Stone Carvers*, the act of clearing the woodlands

is alternately described as a “massacre,” “murder” (17) and “mutilation” (34) of the Canadian wilderness landscape, the settlers having “battled armies of trees and insects” to break the land (137). The violence of this, the beginning of the European presence in the “New World,” anticipates and parallels the connection between origins and violence that becomes obvious, almost assumed, in the novel. As Neta Gordon notes, “the nation’s part in rendering massacre necessary, even mundane, is suggested repeatedly” in the novel, from the “massacre” (17) of the ancient trees to the “slaughter” (233) of Vimy Ridge (63). Of course, the historically “authorized” origins are Confederation and Vimy, but Urquhart subtly reminds us that there are other places where the story can begin, and that these places, too, are violent.

SELF-CONSCIOUS NATIONALISM AND THE UNITY OF VIOLENCE

Building on Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community—an idea central to my own study—Justin D. Edward argues that “if a nation is imaginary, a precarious fabrication that is built upon questionable cultural narratives, then a nation is also haunted by the spectral figure of its own fabrication” (xix). *The Stone Carvers* might well be considered evidence of this claim, exemplifying how the nation is “haunted” by the process of its own construction. In fact, Urquhart’s novel can be read as a portrait of a nation coming to terms with this haunting. As Anna Branach-Kallas points out, “the issue of Canadian national identity is central in Jane Urquhart’s writings. Her fiction makes us aware of the construction of culture and nation, and the constant (re)invention of tradition” (14). Just as we began our reading of Urquhart with a Benjaminian awakening, then, it must be stressed that *The Stone Carvers* is less a novel

about being awake than it is about the process of awakening, less about a clarity of consciousness than about the shaping of that consciousness. If Tilman's howl of consciousness awakens the entire countryside, we might well ask what it is to which they have awakened. For Benjamin, however, and Urquhart—at least initially—it seems that the destination is less important than the act of awakening: the difficult *passage* from unconsciousness to consciousness is what is stressed in the novel, both for the protagonists and for the nation.

Construction—the transition from *one* to *an other*—is a motif that runs throughout *The Stone Carvers*, be it a piece of cloth, basswood, or stone, or even a landscape, a relationship, or a country. As Urquhart makes clear early on, the novel's extended metaphor stresses the *process* of construction, not the statues or monuments left behind: "Everyone was necessarily engaged in the act of turning one thing into another," her narrator declares. "The carver transformed barley into flour and wood into statues; the seamstress made bedsheets into altar cloths; the men in the sawmill helped turn forests into wastelands, while farmers attempted to turn wastelands into fields. The priest was hoping to turn a barren hilltop into the site of a pilgrimage church" (24-25). All these acts of construction culminate in the building of the Vimy Ridge Monument, an enduring symbol of the national mythos. *The Stone Carvers* can be read as an extended metaphor for the process of constructing the national mythos upon the "official" memory of the Great War, as Urquhart expands and extends the process of memory-building in order to more closely examine the problems with its signification. Just as she has expanded the moment of the nation's origin over fifty years (from Confederation to Vimy), Urquhart

expands the creation of the national memory of the Great War by examining its literal manifestation, viewing it as Allward intended it: memory made solid (*Carvers* 381).

In an essay considering Urquhart's consistent interest in the past, Anna Branach-Kallas claims that "Urquhart liberates history from closure [...] showing that it can be reimagined and rewritten" (167). "Liberating history from closure," *The Stone Carves* can also be seen as an example of Homi Bhabha's time-lag, which "slow[s] down the linear, progressive time of modernity to reveal its 'gesture,' [...] revealing 'everything that is involved in the act of staging *per se*'" (*Location* 364). Just as MacLennan uses a novel on the Halifax explosion as a "time-lag [that] keeps alive the *making* of the past" (my emphasis, Bhabha *Location* 364), Urquhart's work emphasizes the constructed-ness of the national memory, foregrounding the inorganic *process* in which a government attempts to build a static, mythical, and allegorical version of the past that is meant to preserve a specific version of the present.

Urquhart describes her own philosophy of art in language that resonates strongly with Bhabha's notion of the time-lag. "There is a certain desire to freeze experience, to make it static and solid, and that desire can enter the early moments of creation of the work of art," she explains. "That was certainly true of Allward, who was obsessed with permanence" (qtd in Ferri, "Conversation" 18-9). It is fitting, then, that Urquhart begins her novel *in medias res*, with a two-page description of men surveying an unfinished monument, before racing back nearly a century to work her way forward again. By framing her novel in this way, she "opens" the process of building the monument to include the history of the village, and three generations of its residents. This is not to say the novel celebrates the permanence of time; if the monument is complete by the end of

the novel, it is certainly is not secure—less that three years after it was completed, this memorial to the horrors of a world war was threatened with destruction at the outbreak of the Second World War. There are no illusions of permanence in this novel, and this is of great importance, for the national mythos would have us believe the nation to be eternal. If MacLennan used World War One to obliterate the country's colonial history and its ideological dependence on Great Britain, wiping the historical slate clean before proceeding to write the Canadian mythos in its place, Urquhart uses the same war to challenge the narrative line of MacLennan's mythos. Rather than annihilating the dominant ideology with an act of violence, however, *The Stone Carvers* destabilizes the reigning mythos by questioning its construction, countering the dominant narrative of the nation with competing stories.

Like *Barometer Rising*, *The Stone Carvers* is a war novel that makes almost no mention of the war itself. The very fact that this is possible—to write a novel about what the Great War and Vimy Ridge mean to Canada with little discussion of the war itself—should give us pause over the way the war has been represented in the past, and the role it has come to assume. Herb Wyile argues that in *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart appears “less concerned with revisiting these events in fiction than in marking the terrain around them” (60)—a point Urquhart concedes: “I’m not really interested in the battles themselves,” she explains. “I’m interested in the after effects” (Richards). Nonetheless, she does address the war, if only obliquely. As an anti-war novel, *The Stone Carvers* is devastatingly critical of the naivety with which the Canadian soldiers responded to the call of war. Just as Eamon was seduced by the wonder of the airplane, Urquhart has Allward lament that the soldiers “all believed, every one of them believed there would be

something romantic about it, some notion of adventure. They all wanted it to be beautiful in some way, noble, I suppose. What they got instead was a living hell with nothing resembling beauty or nobility in it" (339). If the soldiers could look forward to France as an opportunity to embark on an adventure, they looked back on it—if they were alive to do so—as “a place of carnage, claustrophobia, and continuous bad weather” (249). “You have no idea how awful it was,” Tilman complains to Klara. “Nobody has any idea” (243). Even as he complains that “towns all over Ontario are still carrying on about the war as if they knew something about it, naming streets and memorial halls after battles they couldn’t even begin to imagine” (253), Tilman insists that “no one over here wants to know anything about it” (243). In Urquhart’s rendition of the war, the soldiers were not creating a nation, but being betrayed by it.

Although traditional history would have us believe that such pre-war optimism was uniform throughout Canada, Urquhart’s novel suggests otherwise, never giving us any reason to believe that the settlers were eager to send their young men back to the killing fields of Europe. If the young men of Canada embraced the official line, their parents, grandparents, and lovers did not. Indeed, Urquhart’s presentation of the settlers’ response to Britain’s call for aid is a long way from Wilfred Laurier’s famous “ready, aye, ready”: “They had not abandoned ancestral homelands, endured the misery of a pitching ship, battled armies of trees and insects, watched their spouses and children die wretchedly and far too soon only to see their grandchildren return to the battlegrounds from which they had fled” (137). Far from a heroic battle for which the Empire accepts aid freely offered by its willing subjects, Urquhart describes the war as “an act of revenge” in which “Europe had demanded that the grandsons of the impoverished hordes

that had left her shores a few generations before now cross the ocean to mingle their flesh with the dust of their ancestors” (153). If she recognizes that “all over Ontario boys were being worshipped and wept over as they covered themselves in khaki and marched toward a collection of similar brick train stations” (153), Urquhart counters this official optimism in her (somewhat heavy-handed) description of Klara imagining Eamon leaving for the war: “Perhaps someone going to market would have given him a lift and he would have shared the straw for the space of several miles with a calf bound for slaughter” (154). This image is used repeatedly in the novel, returning, for example, in Tilman’s memory of the soldier’s journey to the front lines: “I was on my way to slaughter with a bunch of other fellows all dressed the same” (229). If this war is to mark the start of the nation, this does not appear to be anything of which we should be proud.

Urquhart steadfastly refuses to repeat the narrative of the war provided by the national mythos; rather than remember the battle of Vimy Ridge as uniting the nation in a glorious birth, *The Stone Carvers* portrays the war as uniting the nation in victimization, with sons from every province and every township “dressed all the same” as victims of Europe’s “revenge.” When Tilman’s friend Giorgio reads the 11,000 names of lost Canadians that he will inscribe on the monument’s base, Urquhart makes explicit this unity in suffering: “By the time he came to the final name, every crossroad, every city, every rural township, each Indian reserve, and almost all the concession roads in Canada had been present in his mind” (369). Here is the most sorrowful of imagined communities; it is a record of violence, loss, and sorrow, rather than glory, which brings the nation together. Perhaps we have understood this already for some time; after all, the first popular assessment of Canada’s literary heritage—Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*—

concludes that the unifying trait of Canadian literature is that we understand ourselves as victims. "Every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core" (31), Atwood suggests, positing that "Canada as a whole is a victim" (35).

By questioning the nation's memory of Vimy Ridge—the ideological center of the Canadian mythos—Urquhart has, if only by extension, begun a profound destabilization of the mythos. And though she spends little time in the details, Urquhart's representation of the battle is certainly far from the glorious victory of the mythos. Tilman, who fought and was "wounded out" of Canada's glorious birth battle, recalls the battle in terms of "days and nights in the underground tunnels, the chaos of the battle, the grenade, the shattered leg and subsequent hurried and sloppy amputation" (231). The battle at Vimy is referred to as "the craziest thing," an act of "pure bedlam" in which "the casualties were huge, overwhelming," and after which "hardly anyone who had participated and survived could remember anything about it, except chaos" (230). Indeed, every direct discussion of the War presents the battles as senseless, chaotic, and ultimately futile, as the "meaningless slaughter of confused boys" (233). Consider how Tilman's description of his experience fighting at Vimy can be read as a direct challenge to the mythic memory of the battle, as he is "trying to explain the situation as it had been in April of 1917":

"A mess," he kept saying. "It was all a disaster."

"I thought Vimy was our great victory," Giorgio looked at Tilman, who was squinting in the face of the wind.

"That may be," Tilman said, turning to climb out of one of the craters, "but I don't think a single one of us who was there knew whether or not there was a victory. We barely understood where we were when it was all over. [...] I didn't even hear about the grandness of the victory until the war was finished, and then I thought the fellow telling me had things all wrong." (306)

Throughout the text, then, Urquhart is consistent: she largely ignores the war, but when she presents it at all, she does so as a series of devastatingly violent, chaotic and futile events that are only given meaning *post hoc* in desperate attempts to either justify the sacrifice or appropriate the slaughter for the sake of the national mythos. When she raises the mythic version of the war, as she has Giorgio do in the passage above, it is only to disagree with it.

MONUMENT AND MEMORY

While *The Stone Carvers* is certainly an anti-war novel, then, what it questions most heavily is not World War One itself—Urquhart dismisses the war out of hand, from the outset—but the manner in which the sacrifice and trauma of the war were officially remembered and appropriated by the Canadian government. The novel interrogates the implications of this “official memory” of the war, and, by offering an alternative memory of the Great War, it questions the authority of the traditional Canadian mythos. As Neta Gordon writes, “Urquhart approaches this national myth not as a sort of ahistorical repository of innate beliefs, but as a form of reproduction, or art, that is also *potentially a form of erasure*” (my emphasis). Gordon’s astute comment proves a useful guide for Urquhart’s political project, which, by re-writing and altering the authorizing narrative of Canada’s national mythos, implies that the nation itself is open to artistic reconsiderations—that, although it is powerful enough to demand the sacrifice of 60,000 Canadian lives, it is, at its base, as fragile as a work of art.

Although we are told nothing of the government’s actions during the war, and little of its plans in the months leading up to the war, Urquhart weighs in on the

government's performance when the soldiers return home. "Thousands of wounded veterans were returning, many missing limbs," the narrator explains, and "the government was in a mild state of panic" (231). The novel caustically dismisses the government's attempts at re-integrating the soldiers into Canadian society, writing that after it set up some nominal assistance programs, "the same government that had called these young men so earnestly to arms now cast them unceremoniously out into the streets" (235). The narrator refers to these programs as a "pathetic attempt to patch up afterwards" (233) that "was closer to hell" than the war itself (234). Far from celebrating and compensating its soldiers, Urquhart's Canada considers them a nuisance. The effort and money subsequently poured into a monument that is ostensibly built to honour their efforts dwarfs the nation's commitment to the soldiers who fought—but this should not surprise us, as the memorial is much more about the construction of a nation than it is about remembering an event. When Giorgio asks if "the government is really going to pay for all this?" the response of his veteran friend is telling: "'So I've heard,' said the pencil seller and then added under his breath, 'the bastards'" (279). It is against this backdrop of indifference to the country's veterans that the novel presents the nation's costly and lengthy construction of Allward's massive monument.

In contrast to the government's miniscule aid package to its soldiers, the sheer size and scale of the Canadian monument at Vimy Ridge has a note of absurdity about it. *The Stone Carvers* compares the monument's construction to Mad King Ludwig's infamous projects of building grand castles where no one could travel, concluding simply that "the impossible happens as a result of whims that turn into obsessions" (390). "Nothing about the memorial," says the narrator, "was probable, even possible" (267).

“There was nothing modest about this monument,” agrees Burton (302). Indeed, Urquhart repeatedly emphasizes the size of the memorial. Tilman first mentions the monument as “some Jesus huge Canadian war memorial that’s going to be built at Vimy” (240), and we are told that Allward’s plan was to construct the memorial to be “so monumental that, forty miles away [...] people would be moved by it, large enough that the strong winds would be put off course by it, and perfect enough that it would seem to have been built by a vanished race of brilliant giants” (269). When Klara and Tilman first set eyes on it, the narrator reports that, even in the process of construction, “the structure had begun to dominate the entire landscape [...] as if a construction of this magnitude could not be ignored, even by the surrounding disarray, even by nature” (301). Even if the monument is to memorialize the *entire* Canadian war effort, the scale was unprecedented: no other nation erected war memorials that approached its size. The magnitude of the Canadian monument at Vimy, so clearly inappropriate for the size and military significance of the battle it ostensibly commemorates, reveals the disproportionate weight the event was to take in the nation’s memory. This is, as Christie has stated, a “propaganda victory” (1).

The aesthetic alterations made to the landscape surrounding the monument illustrate the way that the memory of Vimy has been shaped and polished for consumption by the Canadian public. The narrator comments on the “altered, manicured battlefield” (379); when Tilman returns to the battlefield he is completely disoriented by the “grass, and saplings, roads, and tidy graveyards” that now stand where the battle took place. “He could never really believe that he was in the same place,” the narrator writes, adding the passing but poignant note that “Allward [had] changed the shape and contour

of the ridge itself, had rebuilt the ridge itself to enhance the shape of the memorial” (321). The implication is clear: the monument, Canada’s national memory of the event, changes, alters, and moulds the actual landscape of the past to suit the role the event will assume in its pedagogical future. This process, however, is a difficult one. The violence of the war memory is emphasized by the dangers associated with the alterations of the landscape undertaken for the monument, demonstrating how the mythos-making process must first disarm and mitigate the chaos and violence of the event that will itself form the foundation of a nation: “They had to build a road, clear the site,” Tilman tells Klara. ““That would have been a real treat,’ he said bitterly, ‘sort of like a clearing a charnel house” (242), noting that “it took five years to remove enough mines from the ground so that it was safe to begin construction” (242-243). Similarly, Tilman complains how the “ditches lined with concrete renditions of sandbags [...] look nothing like the real thing,” calling them “toy trenches for tourists,” and Giorgio agrees: “Tilman’s right. If it’s authenticity they’re after, they should fill them up with mud and rats, pus and blood” (359). According to *The Stone Carvers*, the national memory has sterilized the war.

As if to ensure that we understand what is at stake in the construction of the monument, Urquhart stresses that the memorial is to constitute an *origin* in the most traditional of senses. In a passage that recalls Hugh MacLennan’s attempt to equate Canada’s birth with the geological formation of the earth, Allward demands that the memorial stone contain no indication of its past, explaining that a monument to the nation’s birth must have no evidence of a prior history; it must be a clean slate:

The stone he chose must carry within it no previous history of organic life, that no fossil could have been trapped in it, no record of the earth’s hot centre or the long periods of cold retreat that had crept across its surfaces in the form of ice ages or floods. An undisturbed constituent, innocent since its own birth,

of any transient event, so that the touch of the chisel cutting out the names would be its first caress. (269)

Thus the monument paradoxically attempts to commemorate and to conceal history, appropriating a past that it desperately tries to deny.

The tension between the monument's simultaneous presentation and suppression of history will be evident in every official memory, as the mythos's *pedagogy* of the nation-in-theory—which Bhabha says represents the “traditional culturist demand for a model [and] a stable system of reference”—runs counter and against the *performative* present of the nation-in-practice—which, he suggests, offers a “negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance” (51). Bhabha's axiom that “being obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation” (231) recalls Benedict Anderson's call for citizens to “remember/forget” the atrocities in a nation's past. Like repressed memories that work their way to the surface, the construction of the monument uncovers massive amounts of war detritus: “body parts and clothing, bibles, family snapshots, letters, buttons, bones, and belt buckles were unearthed daily” as space is cleared for the monument's foundation (271). In another of the novel's strangely tender scenes, Tilman's lover, a large French chef named Recouvrir, reveals the way that the detritus of war surfaces from within the body, as well: “Recouvrir took a paring knife and, wincing, extracted a flat, bloody sliver of wet metal that he dropped with a clang onto a plate on the table between them. ‘Shrapnel,’ he said [...] The Canadian understood then that this kind man carried in his body fragments of the catastrophe of Verdun, fragments that now and then, like Tilman's own memories, worked themselves to the surface” (325).

Our ability to repress, normalize and pacify our violent past through the mythos is illustrated by the passage in which Giorgio unthinkingly sings the lullaby *Rock-a-bye baby*. The response of his Italian co-workers is telling: “He eventually sang and then translated into Italian the whole nursery song for the two other carvers in the studio, who were horrified by this English verse they believed must be about infanticide. Giorgio was pestered for the rest of the story: Who put that cradle up in the tree? Was the mother dead? Perhaps the child was the result of some passionate and forbidden union, or a princeling whose existence would upset the order of royal succession? A complete narrative developed” (289-290). The Italians are right to be horrified, as the estrangement that comes from the collision of cultures allows them to hear all that has become naturalized and forgotten in the song, revealing the violence that lies latent in the myth—the very same gesture Urquhart undertakes in her novel.

If the monument serves to appropriate the authorizing sacrifice of the event while erasing the horrors of its violence, the nation, as Derrida notes, can never fully conceal its reliance upon violence. “There [is] nothing at all one can do about something one can’t forget,” we are told early in the novel. “The more it is pushed away, the more it stays stubbornly planted in the rich soil of a life’s narrative. Dormant, perhaps, but ready with the smallest provocation to burst into full flower” (32). The truth of this passage is borne out by the attempt to erase the chaos and violence from the memorial site: despite all the efforts to disarm the landscape on which the monument is to be built, “someone is blown up every few months” from unexploded artillery strewn about the scene (242-3). The tourists who were arriving at the monument “were never aware that merely by strolling across grass they could activate a mine from the past,” Klara tells us. “Just last week a

horse had been killed by simply grazing in what appeared to be a benign field” (361). Tellingly, when two young workers are killed by “mines hidden in mud,” the narrator describes “the noise of the fatal explosion [as] an insistent letter of *reminder from the past*” (my emphasis 271). Benjamin argues that every law and claim of the nation constitutes an act of law-preserving violence, appealing to and repeating the act of law-making violence latent at its heart; every monument or treasure within the nation’s mythological contract recalls and repeats that violence in miniature. “Cultural treasures [...] have an origin which [the historical materialist] cannot contemplate without horror,” he writes, because “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (“Thesis” 256). Here, at Vimy, we see a clear illustration of these claims; the monument creating and commemorating Canada’s national narrative contains a very literal violence just beneath its surface—a violence that is repeated, even as it is recalled: “Almost a century later there would still be territorial restriction on this land as active mines and grenades would occasionally ignite,” explains the narrator, before adding, with what sounds like a reference to the repression of violence to a national unconscious, “and in the tunnels below, helmets and entrenching tools would continue to smoulder in the slow, relentless fire of rust” (268).

MULTICULTURALISM AND / AS MYTHOS

The originary violence that Anderson suggests we are all busy remembering to forget authorizes *all* the manifestations of the national mythos, including those of which many of us may approve, such as official Multiculturalism. This is significant, for although *The Stone Carvers* has not yet garnered substantial critical attention, the

criticism it has attracted tends to focus on the novel's presentation of the nation's multicultural heritage. While critics such as T.F. Rigelhof (52), James Skidmore (327), Gordon Bölling (315), and Laura Ferri ("Conversation" 30) all locate and celebrate a multicultural message in *The Stone Carvers*, the ultimately coercive force of this multicultural ideology is demonstrated nicely in David Staines' reduction of the novel to "the story of the German immigrants, their attempts to settle the land of western Ontario, and their future generations" (43). This is significant, for, as discussed in the preceding chapters, the mythos offered by the First World War stressed a homogenizing unity under the banner of the nation that aims to stifle difference and encourage the assimilation of minority cultures. Urquhart seems to be intentionally challenging this process, highlighting its gesture before re-inserting cultural difference into Canada's Great War narrative. The narrator, for example, observes how the war pushes the young men to "the verge of forgetting their individual names," subsuming the individuals and their cultures under the banner of Canada (153). Urquhart takes this idea to its logical extreme, having even opposing nations become indistinguishable under the deadly homogenization of the war; Tilman recalls that they "found some [bodies]—but only parts—nobody could tell if they were Brits or Germans or even what colour their hair had been" (243).

Importantly, the process of cultural homogenization does not end with the conclusion of the war; Urquhart's novel suggests that the violent assimilation continues in the post-war years, as well. Perhaps the clearest example of this process is Refuto, the Italian immigrant who always speaks in the negative, whom Tilman meets on the road. Although Neta Gordon suggests that Refuto's "habit of refusing everything derives from his fear of being refused by those he thinks he has injured," it seems more clearly to be a

result of his foreignness and Canadians' refusal to recognize him or his immigrant family as fully human. Speaking of his brother's death at a large steel mill, Refuto explains that "they were going to pay him, but instead of his name they had the word 'foreigner' listed on the payroll. When no one came, they buried him in the potter's field. They threw him out like trash" (210). Furious, Refuto's complaints become a commentary on the state of the immigrant worker in post-war Canada: "'Foreigner,' he said, on the payroll he was listed as foreigner. He didn't even have a name. At the stoveworks I didn't have a name either. I was, he was, a not-person" (210-211). It is because the nation relegates him to a "not-person" that he refutes everything, becoming a "not-person" in the most literal of senses, representing the plight of the cultural minority under the burden of the dominant mythos.

In place of the English (and, to a lesser degree, the French) men who hold sway in the nation's official memory of the Great War, Urquhart's novel contains a broad collection of cultures. Indeed, Urquhart seems almost *too* eager to emphasize the multicultural heritage that was undermined by the homogenizing force of the national mythos: the novel itself begins in Bavaria, where a German king sends a priest into a community of German settlers in Ontario before shifting back across the ocean to France, where a Canadian artist accepts only Italian sculptors on a monument made of Yugoslavian limestone. The monument, meant to unify the nation, is built by Chinese labourers, (271), English stonecutters, Italian carvers, and French labourers (286). Tilman, who joins the Canadian forces to fight the Germans, is himself the product of a small town of German immigrants, and Eamon, who is Irish, infuriates his father by fighting for an Empire that has done its best to annex his homeland. It is, indeed, a

dizzying array of cultures. The novel also stresses that the young men involved in the war were often the grandchildren of the very emigrants forced *out* of the European theatre only a generation or two earlier—a process Urquhart refers to in the novel as “a massive reverse migration” (152). As she explains in an interview with Herb Wyile, “[World War One] was interesting for me from the point of view of immigration; essentially it was a reverse migration, because the very people who had come over a couple of generations before, to escape, in many cases, wars of their own... those very people were sending their children’s children back into the European fray, on the same turf” (73).

Of course, there are other *Others* represented in the novel as well. In returning to Vimy Ridge, opening and suspending the construction of the national mythos, Urquhart’s novel offers a variety of competing narratives, telling the stories that have been suppressed by the dominant mythos. Klara must disguise her gender to work on the monument, for example, and Tilman’s homosexuality similarly interrupts the conventions of the traditional narrative. Confused and disillusioned soldiers who are wounded out of battles with amputated limbs and scarred bodies take the place of the conquering heroes. Urquhart consistently confronts the generalized nation with the complexities of the private individual; Klara’s carving the portrait of her dead lover into the otherwise strictly allegorical monument is but the clearest example of this challenge to the homogenizing gesture of the national mythos through the fragmentation of the individual narrative. Klara transforms what was meant to be an allegorical representation of sacrifice into a portrait of her dead lover, confronting the abstract universal mythos with the specific reality of the individual. While Allward complains that “he had wanted this stone youth to remain allegorical, universal, wanted him to represent everyone’s lost friend,

everyone's lost child. He had want the stone figure to be the 66,000 dead young men" (337), Urquhart's novel warns that this desire to reach every person can result in a homogenization by which the individual lives, cultures, and stories of some 66,000 men are completely erased, united as victims in the anonymity of war.

The multicultural gesture of *The Stone Carvers* is not without its problems, however, illustrating a larger shortcoming of Urquhart's text: the novel's use of the Great War mythos to authorize the mythos of Canada as a multicultural nation does nothing to address the problematic origin of the nation's authority. If, as we said earlier, *The Stone Carvers* is a portrait of a country in which the old story about how things came to be is losing its force, the novel nonetheless retains its faith in ordinary narratives. As Anna Branach-Kallas writes, "Urquhart interrogates unequivocal versions of official historical discourse [by rewriting] the Canadian past from the perspective of history's silenced 'Others'" (119). Bhabha warns against this desire to confront the dominant culture with a specific Other, arguing that "the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One nor the Other, but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both*" (my emphasis, *Location* 41). Rather than offering Bhabha's "something else besides," Tilman and Klara's stories offer narratives of "the Other"—an act that is necessary and valuable, but one that, due to its re-inscription of conventional rules of narrating the nation, cannot be considered the final destination of Canada's historical meta-fiction.

In a more positive reading of Urquhart's project, Branach-Kallas offers the redeeming suggestion that "what makes Jane Urquhart's fiction unique is the fact that her dialogue with master narratives of the past does not result in mere nihilistic

deconstruction of national traditions, but in a creative ‘alternative’ reconstruction of the past’ (172). This is undoubtedly true, but, at the same time, we need to recognize that in offering an “‘alternative’ reconstruction of the past,” *The Stone Carvers* also re-inscribes the basic foundation of the mythos it aims to criticize. Where Branach-Kallas claims that Urquhart “rejects the fixed concepts of nationality supported by the nationalist discourses of history and literary criticism” (173), I would argue that in *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart fails to reject the concept that authorizes the fixity of that national narrative. That is, by setting her critique of Canadian nationalism within the context of the same originary act of violence that authorizes the dominant mythos, Urquhart’s novel re-inscribes the necessity and value of violence even as it criticizes its implications. The novel has challenged the traditional narrative, adding, amending, and even correcting the story—but it never questions the very act of *narrating the nation*.

It is in this sense that *The Stone Carvers* falls well short of constituting a full example of Benjaminian history. While Urquhart may offer an alternative narrative of history, Benjamin’s fragmented and interruptive version of “history” can be understood as an effort to refuse narration itself. Just as Hayden White notes that all narrative—both historical and literary—forces disjunctive events into a moral narrative in an attempt to “endow life with meaning” (181), Benjamin argues that narratives are themselves attempts at “establishing a causal connection between various moments in history” (“Thesis” 263). Benjamin interrogates the involvement of the present in our interpretation of the past, noting that this narrative process always reveals our bias; the narration of the past is always tainted by our ideological position in the present. “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns

threatens to disappear irretrievably,” he writes (255). Making the same point somewhat more poetically, he adds: “As the flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history” (255). For both White and Benjamin, then, our understanding of the past tells us as much about ourselves as it does about the past; what we understand to be our history is irredeemably marked and shaped by our presence / present. The alternative story Urquhart offers of the construction of the Vimy Ridge memorial is important, but limited: although it begins to interrogate the construction of the national mythos, it ends up telling us more about the political concerns of the present (multiculturalism, phallogentrism, the problems with heteronormativity) than it does about the foundational issues surrounding the construction of a national mythos on a violent act in the past. That is, while its broadest gesture is towards an important process of awakening from our unconscious acceptance of the national mythos, *The Stone Carvers* falls into the trap of creating yet another mythos.

The alternate history offered by *The Stone Carvers* is thus authorized by the same violence as the dominant mythos, suggesting that, while we may be prepared to embrace alternate origin narratives, we may not yet be comfortable with letting go of national narratives altogether. Consider how Urquhart’s novel coincides with the national narration even as it appears to challenge it: while it is true that the national mythos stifled the country’s multicultural heritage in the decades immediately following the war (as Vance has suggested [242 – 261]), multiculturalism has since become a central component to the Canadian mythos. While a major shift has taken place in the expression of the national mythos, the act of violence authorizing the mythos remains the

same; the power that drives the mythos of official Multiculturalism is the same power that sought to stifle minority cultures during and after the Great War. Perhaps this is part of what bothered Lisa Allardice, who, in her review of the novel for *The Guardian*, complains without explaining herself that “underneath its epic stature, *The Stone Carvers* is shamefully conventional.”

Bhabha, at least, suggests that there are ways in which fiction can offer a challenge to the nation without re-affirming its foundations, claiming that “the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention” (160). Urquhart’s novel undertakes an important questioning of the national mythos, then, expanding and elongating the process of myth-construction and calling us to awake to the consciousness of our own constructedness, but it stops considerably short of the open-ended ambiguity we might expect from postmodern history. Earlier, I quoted Branach-Kallas as complimenting Urquhart on the fact that “her dialogue with master narratives of the past does not result in mere nihilistic deconstruction of national traditions” (172)—a compliment that seems to imply that a “deconstruction of national traditions” is necessarily “nihilistic” (172). Neta Gordon makes a similar implication when she celebrates *The Stone Carvers* for its refusal to give in to what she calls postmodern fiction’s use of history as “mere fodder for endless undertakings in scepticism” (63). Perhaps this is the fear that keeps Urquhart along the traditional lines of historical narrative, but I would argue strongly against this understanding of postmodernism or deconstruction as nihilistic or endlessly relativistic. As we will see in our discussion of Bhabha’s theories and Wayne Johnston’s *Colony of*

Unrequited Dreams in our next chapter, there is, at the very least, plenty of room for a more radical deconstruction of national traditions than Urquhart undertakes before we risk descending into anything resembling a paralyzing uncertainty.

TIME AND MEMORY

It is worth noting that just as the historical record of Canada's military achievement at Vimy has been questioned, the story told by the nation's most prominent war memorial has itself been challenged. Allward insisted that the names of every last Canadian soldier whose body had been lost in France be etched in the monument's base. While over 11,000 names were included, more than one hundred Canadian soldiers were deemed missing *after* the names of the fallen had been engraved, rendering the monument incomplete. There is even one man listed on the monument who was later found to have survived the battle, dying peacefully in British Columbia some forty years after the war (Christie 92-95). Of course, such problems are not unusual for war monuments, and do not diminish Allward's artistic achievement. Nonetheless, they should remind us that the official memory of a war offered by a nation's government is always partial, always over-reaching itself on some fronts, under-representing itself on others. After all, though Allward claimed he was "making memory solid, indestructible" (*Carvers* 381), even he recognized that the monument, like all memories, would be subject to decay (272, 305, 316, 380). While the sheer scale of the structure seemed to promise it would last for eternity, there is a way in which it also ensured its demise. "The larger, the more impressive the monument, the more miraculous its construction, the more it seems to predict its own fall from grace," muses Urquhart's narrator. "Who

among us does not imagine the stone crushed, the altars taken away to museums, the receding past vandalized. The day arrives when there is no one left to climb the tower, pull the rope, ring the bell of the magnificent, improbable church. Names carved in stone become soft and unrecognizable under the assault of acid rain. No one knows any more what the allegorical figures represent. No one cares” (378).

Indeed, time has taken its toll on the Canadian mythos. A large output of recent historical fiction—of which *The Stone Carvers* is a part—has undertaken the project of revisiting key moments in the Canadian mythos, questioning its construction and challenging its conclusions. It seems altogether appropriate, then, that as Urquhart’s novel participates in a larger reconsideration of the process of national myth-making, the physical manifestation of the Canadian mythos standing on Vimy Ridge is also in the process of reconsideration: a massive restoration project that was begun in 1984 continues to this day.

Chapter Three

"The old abiding limbo":

The Colony of Unrequited Dreams as the Canadian Condition

"It is a strength and not a weakness that we are a permanently incomplete experiment..."
- Adrienne Clarkson, October 7, 1999

If *Barometer Rising* explicitly appropriates the First World War to authorize its national narrative, and if *The Stone Carvers* identifies and questions the process of constructing a national mythos upon a violent origin but nonetheless repeats and reaffirms that act, then Wayne Johnston's *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) marks something of a new direction in the nation's evolving consciousness. Rather than initiating or re-inscribing the national mythos, Johnston's novel questions the act of narrating the nation itself; Urquhart may chronicle the nation's rising to self-consciousness, but Johnston presents the nation in a state of self-doubt. Using Homi K. Bhabha's provocative cultural theories of liminality and the Third Space, we can understand Johnston's novel as a cultural enunciation that functions as a site of cultural resistance, offering what Bhabha calls a performative challenge to the homogenizing force of the nation's pedagogical mythos.

LITERARY POLITICS / POLITICAL LITERATURE

After more than five hundred and fifty pages with little discussion of minority cultures or racial tension, *Colony* concludes with a touching eulogy for Shawnawdithit, the last Beothuk Indian in Newfoundland. Some critics, such as Danielle Fuller, worry

that Johnston's belated and brief mention of the Beothuk's plight tokenizes an important issue: "Because *Colony* only mentions Newfoundland's Aboriginal history in passing prior to Fielding's final column, Johnston's inclusion of 'Nancy April's' story is sudden, unexpected, decontextualized, and, because Fielding speculates on the parallels with her own life story, problematically naïve and romantic" (44). Fuller's concerns here are legitimate, since by invoking the Beothuk history in the novel's final pages, Johnston does run the risk of addressing the issue of race and minority culture in a perfunctory sense. However, *Colony's* conclusion can also be read as an invitation to reconsider the novel as an examination and exploration of multi-culturalism, colonial history, and their mutual implications for Canadian nationhood.⁹ We have already seen how the Great War instituted a homogenizing mythos that suppresses cultural difference, and how that very mythos can be re-written to authorize a Multiculturalism that nonetheless retains the originary violence it seeks to oppose. In the conclusion to *Colony*, the politics of this relationship between minority cultures and the Canadian mythos is explicitly evoked, inviting a reconsideration of the text in terms of a narrative thread that has become a central theme in the nation's mythos: Multiculturalism.

We have touched on Multiculturalism already in regards to MacLennan and Urquhart's work, but it is worth taking a closer look at it here, for with Johnston's text the focus shifts off of the Great War narrative and, I will suggest, onto the Canadian mythos of Multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has been the official policy of the Canadian government since the early 1970s, and an abiding concern of the nation since its inception. With a legislative framework such as the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*

⁹ In an effort to distinguish between the idealism of Canada's official policy of Multiculturalism and the realities of the imperfect co-existence of multiple cultures within Canada, I will capitalize the pedagogical governmental policy (Multiculturalism) and separate the performative "reality" (multi-culturalism).

(1985), Canada has attempted to institute cultural diversity as a national trait, enshrining the “cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society” in law, and vowing to “preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians” (preamble, *Multiculturalism Act*). However, as an attempt to unite an imagined community through its cultural diversity, Canadian Multiculturalism contains a strong tension between national unity and cultural differences. On the one hand, the homogenizing influence of nationhood seeks to assimilate all inhabitants of Canada under the totalizing category of “Canadians.” The policy of Multiculturalism, on the other hand, seeks to ensure that “all citizens can keep their identities” (canadianheritage.gc.ca). This tension marks a split in the national consciousness which corresponds to Bhabha’s distinction between the pedagogical and the performative; here, the split is between the *pedagogical policy* of Multicultural *diversity*, which fulfills the “traditional culturist demand for a model [and] a stable system of reference”, and the *performative reality* of cultural *differences*, in which there is a “negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance” (Bhabha 51).

The policymakers’ refusal to acknowledge the tensions that exist between Canada’s national mythos of Multiculturalism (Bhabha’s *pedagogical*) and the contemporary realities of Canada’s national multi-cultural life-in-progress (Bhabha’s *performative*) is a homogenizing tactic which naturalizes the differences between cultures and devalues individual experience in favour of the collective experience. As Smaro Kamboureli writes, “the unity of Canadian identity is a cultural myth, a myth that can be sustained only by eclipsing the identities of others” (10) – a sentiment echoed by Bhabha, who writes that “the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of

the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space” (213). Indeed, we might be reminded here of Ernest Renan’s claim that when it comes to nations, “unity is always effected by means of brutality” (45). Although Multiculturalism may be intended as a recognition of the multi-cultural reality of the Canadian nation and thus appears to challenge the homogenizing influence of the mythos, by institutionalizing *diversity* as a national trait which is shared by all citizens and which is integral to our identities as Canadians, the legislative framework serves to naturalize those differences under the larger and more encompassing heading of *Canada*, thus re-establishing the myth of a stable and homogenous Canadian identity produced by the Great War. As an ideal to strive towards, and as an on-going process, Canadian Multiculturalism is valuable, but should it ever become a static, rigid idea that we believe we have achieved, then we risk reinstituting a new homogenizing and totalizing term that tokenizes differences into stereotyped diversities and attempts to serve as a foundation for a new form of monoculturalism. In Bhabha’s terms, “it would make it so easy to inaugurate a new homogeneity—a homogeneity, moreover, that might appear pluralistic, with the added frisson of being by definition radical and marginal, but might in fact be merely celebratory. The essential transdisciplinary tension would be lost” (qtd in Mitchell). Without the “essential transdisciplinary tension”—in this case, without the tension produced by a multiplicity of cultural differences—Multiculturalism becomes nothing but “a new homogeneity” that only “appear(s) pluralistic.” As such, the primary value of Canadian multi-culturalism will always be the resistance it offers to the homogenizing forces of the nation and its pedagogical expressions, including, ironically, Multiculturalism.

The tension between Canada's national pedagogical mythos and its performative reality is, in some senses, inevitable. If the nation is itself always already an imaginary construct by which disparate elements (geography, cultures, languages, etc.) are temporally united, it will, by definition, always contain such tensions. However, the issue of multiple cultures co-existing within a nominally unified imaginary space is not simply one example of this tension among others. Rather, multi-cultural tensions are at the heart of the mythos, illustrating the struggle surrounding the nation's profound desire for stability: fearful of the uncertainty that comes with true multiplicity, we naturalize the ambiguity of multi-culturalism through an official policy of Multiculturalism. Thus, if it seems that we have strayed a long way from the violent origins and military history of *Barometer Rising* and *The Stone Carvers*, the difference is merely superficial. Like MacLennan and Urquhart, Johnston, whose text traces Newfoundland's transition from colony to confederation, has written a novel about a nation's origins, and, as such, it is intimately concerned with originary myths. And if the Great War is missing from this novel, we must remember that the origin of a political state, as we have seen, is always violent—regardless of whether that violence is explicit or implicit in any particular manifestation. As Benjamin writes, “what parliament achieves in vital affairs can only be those legal decrees that in their origin and outcome are attended by violence” (“Critique” 289). MacLennan utilized the violence of the Great War to authorize the national mythos, and Urquhart corralled that same violence to qualify the dominant mythos. *Colony*, however, represents a more radical turn in contemporary Canadian historical fiction, in which the origin of the nation is neither celebrated, nor contradicted, but questioned in a particularly postcolonial manner.

If we can isolate multi-culturalism as a central concern in the contemporary Canadian mythos, *Colony* becomes the logical continuation of our study, inasmuch as the novel complicates both the narrative of the nation's origin and its homogenizing influence. As we have seen, Canadian nationalism is in danger of falling prey to what Bhabha calls "a familiar manoeuvre of theoretical knowledge, where, having opened up the chasm of cultural difference, a mediator or metaphor of otherness must be found to contain the effects of difference" (*Location* 45). We must avoid the temptation to use the idea of Multiculturalism as a comforting but falsely "neutral" or "transparent" mediator between our cultural plurality and our nationhood. In fact, according to Bhabha, we should emphasize and explore the contested site, as the strain within such binaries offers a unique space for artistic and political expression, exploration, and resistance. Bhabha identifies this site as a liminal "Third Space" created in the tension between the pedagogical and performative acts of enunciation. It is because the Canadian novel is an act of cultural enunciation that we have been able to look to fiction to explore the tensions within the Canadian mythos and its Multicultural ideal—not simply by reading overtly "multicultural texts" (whatever that might mean), but by reading concerns such as multi-culturalism into and out of *any* Canadian text in our attempts to trace the ever-shifting locations of culture.

COLONY AS A SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION

In an interview with W.J.T. Mitchell for *Artforum Magazine*, Bhabha defines his Third Space as "something that will not be contained within [the dialectic], that cannot be returned to the two oppositional principles"—that is, as something *supplemental* to the original terms of discourse. Recalling research on Christian missionaries' attempts to

convert nineteenth-century Hindu peasants in northern India, Bhabha offers an illustration of how the Third Space can function to challenge a traditional narrative binary and offer a supplementary space for productive discussion and meaningful marginal discourse:

The way the peasants dealt with this colonial antagonism was continually to produce supplementary discourses as sites of resistance and negotiation. They would say, for instance: We would be happy to convert so long as you convinced us that these words of the Christian god do not come from the mouths of meat eaters... we cannot believe that anybody who eats meat can transmit the word of God.

By positing the supplemental question of the vegetarian testimony, the peasant challenges the Hindu / Christianity binary, complicating the terms of the original debate and opening up a Third Space for new dialogue and fresh resistance. As Bhabha puts it, “a phrase that was [...] doctrinally secure becomes retranslated in its colonial enunciation, and opens up another site for the negotiation of authority, both symbolic and social” (qtd in Mitchell). Elsewhere, he adds that “the supplementary strategy suggests that adding ‘to’ need not ‘add up’ but may disturb the calculation” (*Location* 222). The supplemental question is not a *destruction* of the debate but a *disruption* to the terms of the original debate.

In a similar way, Johnston’s *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* refuses to offer a straightforward or definitive answer to the political question that dominates the text: colony or nation? Returning to our discussion of the novel’s conclusion, one can argue that *Colony* asks us to re-consider the novel and its central debate in a new set of terms, positing a question supplementary to the novel’s principal concern.¹⁰ Like the peasant’s “vegetarian Bible”, *Colony*’s conclusion re-orientates the discussion, raising questions about the construction of the national pedagogy and its implications for marginalized

¹⁰ Although I read *Colony*’s conclusion as positing a supplemental question to a national mythology, I want to be clear that for Bhabha – as for me – authorial intent is only of secondary importance. Rather, it is a form of reading, as much as a type of text, which is being explored.

cultures, while suggesting a new perspective from which to view the novel. Just as *The Stone Carvers* really begins some seventy pages in, *Colony* begins, in this sense, at its final passage.

Colony concludes with an entry of “Field Day,” a newspaper column by the novel’s foil to Joe Smallwood, the sharp-witted journalist named Sheilagh Fielding. Fielding recounts how, in an act of blatant and unapologetic cultural appropriation, the last Beothuk Indian, Shawnawdithit, was renamed “Nancy April” “after the month she was captured” (557) by European settlers. The “capture” of Shawnawdithit’s sister and mother repeats this re-inscription of colonialism, as they, too, are given new Westernized names, becoming “Easter Eve” and “Betty Decker” (557). The project to assimilate the Beothuks into Newfoundland culture proves impossible, however, just as an attempt to reunite the Beothuks with their band ends in failure. Deflected from one culture but not into the desired other, the three Aboriginal women are left to haunt the streets of St. John’s wearing “deerskin shawls over the dresses they were given by the whites” (557), spectral presences that serve as constant reminders of the failure of the colonial project. Shawnawdithit’s burial in an unmarked grave among the Church of England dead offers a sombre assessment of the cost of “successful” assimilation. The treatment of Aboriginals by Western colonialists—an era that Canada’s mythos and its pedagogy of Multiculturalism requires us to “remember to forget”—becomes a touchstone in the novel for the homogenizing force of the nation.¹¹

Importantly, Johnston has Fielding explicitly parallel herself with Shawnawdithit, interweaving the Beothuks’ plight into a retrospective on her own life, thereby linking the

¹¹ The phrase “remember to forget” is David Williams’, from his reading of Benedict Anderson’s theory of nations as imagined communities (91).

oppressive force that destroys the Beothuk Indians to the homogenizing force of the national pedagogy exerted upon all those who live under its influence. “Nancy and I had a lot in common” (558), Fielding notes, cataloguing the parallels in their personal lives, including both their mental states—neither of them could “look into a mirror without grimacing”; and their physical bodies—both are “stout but shapely” (559). More importantly, Johnston makes a clear analogy in their afflictions, as well: the women “contracted tuberculosis at about the same age”, and were both abandoned on their deathbeds (559). If taken at face value, the comparison between the struggles of a doctor’s daughter and a cultural genocide is, as Fuller complains, “problematically naïve and romantic.” Taken as cultural commentary on the state of the nation, however, it serves to illustrate that the forces that oppressed the Beothuks have also oppressed others—and not merely those we are accustomed to think of as “victims.” It is fitting, then, that Fielding haunts the streets of St. John’s in a way that is meant to mimic the Beothuk women.

This is, of course, not to say that all cultures suffer from the mythos in the same way or to the same extent, but rather that the violence that authorizes the nation—the same violence inherent in the systematic destruction of the Beothuks—is a threat to all who live under its homogenizing influence. Accordingly, Johnston does not undertake a lengthy attack directly against the nation’s oppression of the Beothuks, choosing instead to shift the terms of the debate to question the very pedagogical structure that produced the violent nation. That is, instead of responding to Shawnawdithit’s demise with an inspirational rags-to-riches story about her lost children returning the Beothuks to national prominence, or chastising imperialism with a scathing indictment of

Newfoundland's treatment of the Beothuk, *Colony* is an all-out assault on the notion of an authoritative national pedagogy that has produced and sustained such oppression.

...AND EVERYONE ELSE: CULTURE AS ABSENCE

If Fielding's concluding "Field Day" on Shawnawdithit connects *Colony* to multi-cultural concerns in a somewhat belated fashion, the opening chapter of Fielding's "Condensed History of Newfoundland" makes an early gesture to the novel's conclusion. Once again emphasizing the "constructedness" of the national pedagogy, the first instalment of Fielding's "History" quietly introduces the supplementary question of multi-culturalism in Canada. Fielding leaps from the island's physical formation to its colonial inception:

We intend our history to be the story of the island of Newfoundland since the geological formation which bears that name first rose above the sea...

The earth's crust cools...

John Cabot discovers the island on June 24, 1497. He believes he has found Cathay, now known as China. (43).

The exaggerated silence that surrounds the history of the island prior to the arrival of the Europeans serves to indicate that there *is*, in fact, much that is left out, effaced by similarly pregnant ellipses in the official record of the colony.

While the sweeping statement is made ironically by Fielding, it is interesting to note that it directly echoes more earnest passages in both *Barometer Rising* and *The Stone Carvers*. In *The Stone Carvers*, we recall, Allward demands that the stone used in the construction of the Canadian monument contain no indication of its past; a monument to the nation's birth must have no evidence of a prior history: "The stone he chose must carry within it no previous history of organic life, that no fossil could have been trapped

in it, no record of the earth's hot centre or the long periods of cold retreat that had crept across its surfaces in the form of ice ages or floods" (269). Presumably, Allward is concerned that the national mythos should maintain a complete disconnect from its history. Similarly, in our discussion of *Barometer Rising*, we noted how MacLennan parallels two creation scenes, describing the landscape of post-explosion Halifax in terms that connect the event to the formation of the geological foundations of the land itself: just as the glaciers have "packed, scraped, and riven th[e] whole land" (4), we are told that "when the shock struck the earth the rigid ironstone and granite base of Halifax peninsula rocked and reverberated" (197) and that "the immediate landscape, wildly distorted and irregular, looked like floating wreckage seen from the porthole of a heaving ship" (206). The similarities of these passages from three separate novels is important, for in connecting the formation of the landscape with the formation of the nation, the birth of the political nation is portrayed as an act of God, implying that just as the landscape of the wilderness is organic and natural, so too is the Canadian nation. The difference, of course, is that Johnston's unrelenting satire undermines the message, becoming yet another challenge—not to Canada's particular form of nationalism, but to the idea of the mythos itself.

The violence that is locatable in every attempt to secure a pure origin is present within the concept of Multiculturalism, as well. Bart Moore-Gilbert writes that Multicultural policies "seek to minimize the challenges posed by cultural difference in order to preserve the 'organicist' mythology of the 'host' community or nation" (125). As Wylie is quick to point out, the nation in *Colony* certainly "is not a natural, organic formation" (134). This is more than a simple recognition that history is one-sided; rather,

Wyile notes that *Colony* suggests “more important than the recognition that history has been narrowly defined [is] the increasing recognition of history as a kind of *constructed consensus about the past*” (7, emphasis mine). Indeed, there is nothing organic about Newfoundland’s belated confederation; *Colony* reveals the backhandedness, the personal vendettas, and the backroom scheming that constituted the political process. Britain is looking to off-load “a sinkhole of a colony”; Newfoundland is simply unable to become a nation. Instead of the celebration of the fulfillment of Canada’s manifest destiny, Johnston’s confederation leaves us with nothing but “the guilt that accompanies the doing of a terrible but necessary thing” (495). Without the comforting myth of organic nationhood, and without the stability that comes from a secure pedagogical history, the novel invites introspection on what becomes an uncertain and self-conscious nation.

There are no pure origins in this text, either, much less ones that are forced onto ancient landscapes, as in *Barometer Rising*. In leaping directly from the island’s physical formation to its colonial inception, Fielding’s *Condensed History* brings attention to the positioning of the Aboriginal experience *outside* the authorized pedagogy—an exaggerated silence surrounding marginalized cultures that persists largely unbroken until the novel’s conclusion. Of the five brief occasions where the Aboriginal experience is gestured towards in the body of the text, three serve only to remind us of their absence: “The aboriginals were gone” (140); “No one, not even aboriginals, had ever lived on this part of the island” (137); and “I, like the Red Men, soon would be / Consigned unto eternity” (522). A fourth occasion reveals some postcolonial uneasiness surrounding the status of the Beothuks, as Lady Squires, the very British wife of the

political leader Sir Richard Squires, offers some “compliments” about the lost Aboriginal culture that belies the Empire’s anxiety:

Lady Squires [...] said she thought that we could learn a lot from Indians about ‘spiritualism’ and that the greatest disaster in Newfoundland history had been the extinction of the Beothuk Indians.

“I am convinced,” she said, “that there are people among us who are part Beothuk. There must have been some – er – intermingling between the Beothuks and the settlers, don’t you think? There may be people who don’t even know that they are one-thirty-second or one-sixty-fourth Beothuk, who knows? It’s not impossible.” (268)

With that oh-so-meaningful “er,” Johnston emphasizes her anxiety surrounding the violent colonial heritage that is directly responsible for her position of privilege, belying her obvious uneasiness with the possibility of inter-racial relationships. Smallwood makes the message clear, adding, “I wondered how she would take the news that she was part Beothuk” (268).

A fifth mention of Aboriginals in the body of the text—and only the second mention of the Beothuks prior to the novel’s conclusion—comes in an unexpected place: hanging above the desk of Tom Hines, the fundamentalist pastor Smallwood meets in New York (189). The coat of arms of Newfoundland, located on a plaque above Hines’ desk, consists of “an elk above a crossed shield emblazoned with lions and unicorns and flanked by two Beothuk Indians” (189). There are perhaps no more obvious symbols of a national mythos than a coat of arms, and this one is particularly telling: of the animals represented along with the Beothuks, one of the animals is mythical, and the other two—the elk and the lion—are not native to the country.¹² As the coat of arms was created in the seventeenth century, well before the extinction of the Beothuks, their inclusion among

¹² Neither the lion *nor* the elk is found in Newfoundland. While there is some debate as to the reason for its inclusion, the province’s heritage web site, “heritage.nf.ca,” claims that the elk is “meant to represent Newfoundland’s caribou herds.”

a collection of imaginary and absent animals seems a chilling prophesy of their subsequent demise. With its simultaneous celebration and renunciation of the Beothuks, the Newfoundland coat of arms is an apt symbol of the threat the national pedagogy poses to minority cultures.

Only in the novel's conclusion does the last of the Beothuk Indians enter the plot in any meaningful way, reminding us of what we have forgotten, inviting us to reconsider the novel in light of their absence. Once we accept this as an invitation to re-consider the novel with special consideration to marginalized minority cultures, the homogenizing influence of the national pedagogy can be found throughout the text. Smallwood becomes something of an archetypal minority, describing himself as a "chameleon" who can "pass for a lot of things I was not. I was not Jewish, but because of my nose and dark features I could pass for Jewish [...] I could pass for an Irishman, a Welshman, a Scot" (171). His story of oppression and humiliation at the hands of the colonial elite in St. John's is also representative of the island's larger history of colonial oppression. If his unlikely success seems to promise a great deal to minority cultures, it is more than offset by the fate of the rest of the novel's minorities.

Indeed, the minority cultures in *Colony* are given the unenviable role of propping up the English merchants and upholding the status quo. The Irish, for example, are represented as an "unskilled labour force" whose immigration to Newfoundland begins as a means to support the English merchant class. Fielding sarcastically notes how the suppression of the Irish begins even before they arrive: "five times as many as are needed are recruited, which creates a healthy atmosphere of competition among the workers and discourages the Irish from demanding higher wages than the honest English can afford to

pay” (222). It is in the same spirit that Reeves, the English school teacher, chides his students for their Irish heritage: “Think of it... many of you are descended from people who couldn’t even make the grade in Ireland, a country of bogborn barbarians” (38). Similarly, the poverty of the Welsh is evident in Fielding’s description of them as a “group of men whose position in English society and lot in life are such that to move to Newfoundland seems like a good idea” (68); indeed, so little value is placed upon their lives that they are sent as “guinea pigs” to see if anyone can survive the Newfoundland winter. No tears are shed when they are never heard from again (67). Together, we are told, the “Irishmen and Welshmen would find favour with the outporters and the urban poor, so many of whom were descended from Irish and Welsh settlers, whereas most of the ‘ruling’ families of St. John’s were English” (438). The separation between the upper-class English and the lower-class *everyone else* marks the heritage of a colonial past that has ominous implications for minority cultures. As Wylie notes, *Colony* unfolds against “a background of intense political conflict and economic and cultural deprivation” (*Speculative* 127), in which minorities are marginalized and condemned to the lower class, while the English are predominantly wealthy and upper class.

Perhaps the state of multi-culturalism in mid-century Newfoundland is best encapsulated in the teachings of Headmaster Reeves, who, as an image of colonial pedagogy in the novel, explains to his young students that “It’s not your fault that your so-called country has no culture” (37). Similarly, Fielding offers a nice summary of the colony’s attitude towards immigrants and their unusual customs, noting in her usual satirical tone that her “history would not be complete did we not denounce the pagan practices” of individual cultures, “to which people in this country have for so long clung

and which some seek to preserve in the name of ‘culture,’ ‘folklore,’ ‘custom,’ or ‘tradition’. No good can come of such things” (375). Fittingly, it is D. W. Prowse, the primary representative of a national pedagogy in the text, who undertakes the most explicit homogenizing effort in the novel, aiming to create, then celebrate, a “representative Newfoundlander.” Prowse’s failure—the best he can come up with is Cluney Aylward, a “stroke inspired fiction” (49)—suggests the impossibility of identifying an essential Newfoundlander. This, together with the biting satire with which Fielding reports on the English abuse of other cultures, coupled with the novel’s concluding image of Shawnaudithit, all serve to establish a multi-cultural trope within the text. Johnston’s critique of the national pedagogy is subtle, but certain. While *The Stone Carvers* reacts against the homogenizing historical mythos by offering a countering narrative of minority history, *Colony* challenges the very process of history-making itself. To offer a valuable commentary on the multiple cultures of Newfoundland—and, in turn, on Multiculturalism in Canada—Johnston finds it necessary to strike the first blow against the pedagogy which stands behind the culture of suppression.

The eradication of the Beothuks, along with the exploitation of poor migrant workers, establishes the continuing violence of Newfoundland’s origin. Interestingly, *Colony* is largely silent on the two World Wars, despite the fact that its timeline includes both wars. To be fair, we are reminded that Britain’s interest in Newfoundland’s independence has much to do with its weakened post-war finances, and that the island “became bankrupt in the first place by helping Britain win the *First* World War” (445). Moreover, Fielding sarcastically points to the high casualty rate of Newfoundlanders fighting in the Great War under British command as evidence of imperial “competence”

(341). More important for Johnson than either World War—neither of which led *directly* to Newfoundland’s confederation—is the fateful referendum itself. This is not to say that the novel does not contain a violent origin, however. We are told, for example, that “what had seemed like just another election now began to seem more *like civil war*” (my emphasis 477). Indeed, *Colony* demonstrates the moment of lawlessness at the origin of the nation, just as Benjamin and Derrida locate an aporia at the origin of law. Johnston describes the period of political limbo between colony and nation in language that illustrates what Derrida describes as a “moment of suspense [...] this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of nonlaw [...] the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss” (“Force” 269-70):

Throughout the second campaign there prevailed a kind of anarchic atavistic party, like a Mardi Gras or mummer’s festival without the masks. Under the exemption, the amnesty conferred by such occasions, anything was permitted. No one gave any mind to how things would be afterwards, when this exemption had been lifted, when the issue had been settled, for it seemed at the time that the fight, having become an end in itself, would last forever. (478)

Finally, when the results of the referendum are announced, the new province celebrates in a manner that confirms Derrida and Benjamin’s argument that the origins of the political state are always violent: “guns had fired almost constantly for hours, not so much in celebration, it seemed, as in symbolic execution of the losers” (484). When the novel protests the national pedagogy, it is against this history of violence that *Colony* reacts.

HISTORY RESISTED / RESISTANCE HISTORY

While there is evidence of an originary violence in the national mythos of *Colony*, Johnston’s novel is much less about *establishing* a national narrative than it is about *questioning* that mythos. It is not surprising, then, that it spends relatively little time with

the violence itself, focussing instead on destabilizing the pedagogical historical narrative it authorizes.¹³ *Colony*'s radical questioning of historical pedagogy begins early, with Johnston's satirical ripostes to D. W. Prowse's *A History of Newfoundland*. Johnston's treatment of Prowse in the novel is important, for, as we will see, Prowse's *History* is not merely one history text among others. Prowse's text is more than simply an important document for Newfoundland; as Bannister writes in Newfoundland's recent Royal Commission, "it is difficult to overestimate the influence of Prowse's work. Published in 1895, it has inspired generations of scholars and shaped the way Newfoundlanders see their past" (125). In ridiculing Prowse, Johnston challenges the "official" history of Newfoundland—a position supported by the full title of Prowse's text—*A History of Newfoundland, from the English, Colonial, and Foreign Records*, indicating that a subversion of this *History* will destabilize the island's entire colonial pedagogy.

The novel's opening epigraph, which is a quotation from Prowse's *History*, begins what will be an on-going theme throughout the text: a challenge to the authority of a history based upon questionable historical documents: "The history of the Colony is only very partially contained in printed books; it lies buried under great rubbish heaps of unpublished records, English, Municipal, Colonial and Foreign, in rare pamphlets, old Blue Books, forgotten manuscripts..." While the epigraph begins by suggesting that the colony's history can never be fully contained by history texts, Prowse immediately sets out to catalogue a variety of other printed sources which apparently *are* able to "contain" the nation's history. The claim is satirically mimicked by the structure of the novel, which is based upon a plethora of similar pedagogical texts—including tracts written by

¹³ While "pedagogy" and "mythos" are not synonymous, they are closely related for my study. "Pedagogy" might be best understood as the explicitly didactic *effect* of the mythos.

colonial landlords, songs and lyrics of early Newfoundlanders, newspapers and political leaflets, encyclopaedias and a collection of competing histories, all purporting to hold portions of Newfoundland's "true" history. The full irony of the epigraph becomes clear when Fielding proceeds to trot out a "great rubbish heap" of historical records that are dubious at best: David Williams points out that a number of the historical documents used by both Prowse and Fielding have been proven forgeries, including William Vaughan's *The Golden Fleece*, on which Prowse "grounds" his history (110 – 11), and that others, such as in the case of "the Planter's Plaint" (179), are altogether imaginary. That is, while Fielding's "Condensed History" is meant to reveal the factual inaccuracies of Prowse's text, it is so irony-laden that it is clearly not meant to take Prowse's place.

Though Wyle suggests that Johnston's critique of the "ideological filtering of history" is limited because "through Fielding's parody he implicitly asserts, unlike more postmodern historiographical novels, the 'real' history of Newfoundland" (*Speculative* 159), it is important to note that when Fielding condemns Prowse's official history as inaccurate because his sources are flawed, she is herself relying on nothing but other historical documents to correct him—documents which are just as open to future refutation as Prowse's sources. Rather than reading the novel's plethora of historical documents as an implicit re-affirmation of the authority of historicity, then, I read them as an endless deferral of authority that parallels Derridean *différance*. The multiplicity of historical sources in Johnston's work gestures towards an infinite regression of historical documents, a simulacrum of textual evidence, none of which could ever be legitimately original or acceptably authoritative. Indeed, Hans Bak writes that *Colony* presents "the writing of history [...] as a con-game between duplicitous and blatantly falsifying

documentalists, original versions waging war against amended, bowdlerized, suppressed or otherwise fictionalized or apocryphal accounts” (231). In a process that parallels the supplementary question posed by the novel itself which opened our discussion, Fielding offers her work not as a replacement of Prowse’s *History*, but as its supplement, challenging the accepted historicity without aiming to correct it. *Colony* thereby questions the construction both of “official” and “resistance” history.

Derrida’s theories can be used to further trace the undermining of historical authority in the novel. According to Bhabha, “the nation’s totality is confronted with, and crossed by, a supplementary movement of writing. The heterogeneous structure of Derridean supplementarity in *writing* closely follows the agonistic, ambivalent movement between the pedagogical and performative that informs the nation’s narrative address” (*Location* 221). Earlier, he notes that it is the “effect of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy” that “produces a continual slippage of categories” (201). Highlighting the ambivalence of the nation’s “narrative strategy,” then, Johnston’s undermining of Prowse’s *History* exemplifies this connection between the instability of language and the fragility of the nation. As Williams notes—and connects to Derrida—the agraphia of the historian Prowse is most significant here, for it undermines not only the legitimacy of the novel’s central historical authority, but of the very idea of *writing history* (109). Not only is Prowse’s dedication to Smallwood’s father completely illegible, the entirety of his *History* loses its ability to signify over the course of the novel. Water stains make both the front and back covers of Joe’s copy illegible (74), and as Joe reads and re-reads the book on his march across the nation, “it seemed... that the judge’s whole book was written in the cryptic scrawl of his inscription” (214). By destabilizing

the *History*, Johnston has struck at the very source of historical authenticity for the island; without this transcendental signified to anchor history, there can be no “objective history” on which any authoritative national pedagogy can be built. *Colony* launches an attack on the sign, then, and the demise of Prowse’s *History* becomes emblematic of the deep instability of the political structure. We recall Margaret Atwood’s claim that “if you’re after the truth, the whole and detailed truth, and nothing but the truth, you’re going to have a thin time of it if you trust to paper, but with the past, it’s almost all you’ve got” (33). To the characters in the novel, remember, Prowse’s *History*, so completely dismantled by Johnston, contains “not a record of the past, but the past itself” (46).

Interestingly, just as in Derrida’s own texts, *Colony*’s challenge to the sign takes on metaphysical significance, as Johnston compares the pedagogical authority of official history to the metaphysical authority of Scripture. Throughout the novel, Prowse’s *History* is repeatedly paralleled to the Christian Bible: in addition to the central role that the *History* plays in the lives of the characters, Johnston’s repeated reference to the text as “the Book”—capitalized and placed under quotation marks—marks the text as a parody of scripture (65). Indeed, both Smallwood (214) and Hines (201) implicitly parallel Prowse’s *History* with the Bible. Moreover, when we remember that the author of “the Book” is a judge, it becomes clear that Johnston intends a connection to be made between the pedagogy of written history and the prescriptions of religious scripture; as Jerry Bannister notes, “The Book transforms into a type of secular Bible” (138). There are other indications that Johnston is paralleling history and scripture in his work, as well. Smallwood’s claim that the *History* “justifies the ways of Newfoundland to the world” (46), for example, connects Prowse’s text to the Christian story by echoing the opening

lines of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which aims to "justify the ways of God to men" (Book 1. line 26). The penultimate chapter of *Colony*, entitled "Revelations," further invites a scriptural reading, by paralleling the construction of the novel with the construction of the Bible, which concludes with a chapter of the same name.

The novel's conflation of political and religious pedagogy is most fully realized in Tom Hines, who is at once the editor of a patriotic newspaper and a Pentecostal minister. In his ostensibly political newspaper, *The Backhomer*, Hines compares Newfoundlanders to "the Jews" (191), publishes his weekly sermon as an editorial, and concludes each week's printing with laments for "Lost Newfoundlanders" (192). His mantra—"Thou art a Newfoundlander and unto Newfoundland thou shalt return"—firmly connects church and state, and is echoed by the head of the Pentecostal church in Newfoundland, who declares "Newfoundlanders, you are all New Found" (81). Moreover, the altar in Hine's church contains a large wooden carving of Newfoundland (197), and Smallwood goes so far as to compare Hines to Christ at their first meeting (184). Finally, the Newfoundland coat of arms hangs above Hines' desk, and the motto inscribed on this emblem of political authority is, fittingly, *Quaerite Prime Regnum Dei* – Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God (189).¹⁴

Connecting the political narrative with religious rhetoric, Johnston emphasizes the mythological nature of the nation by appealing to what Derrida calls "the mystical foundation of authority" ("Force" 242). When *Colony* satirizes organized religion, it can be understood as an extension of the novel's questioning of the national mythos, indicating that history functions in the national pedagogy as a transcendental signified in

¹⁴ In this relationship between Newfoundland history and the Christian Scriptures, Newfoundland's nickname – *The Rock* – is a happy coincidence for Johnston, although he does not make use of it.

the same way that Holy Scripture, as God's word, functions as a transcendental signified in fundamental Christianity. According to *Colony*, neither history nor scripture is able to legitimately fill this role. Without any legitimate forms of authority, all established traditions and hierarchies—including the cultural sphere—enter into a profound uncertainty that can be seen as an opportunity for previously marginalized cultural groups to re-assert themselves. As Bhabha writes, “the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention” (160). This “ambivalence at the source” in *Colony*—located at the heart of historical documents, of writing, and of religion—enables “a form of subversion” of the national pedagogy.

I should note that not all critics are as enthusiastic as I am about Derrida's theories. Some, including Robert Young and Bart Gilbert-Moore, see in Bhabha's use of Derrida a paralyzing uncertainty, arguing that “Bhabha gives far too little weight to material forms of resistance” (Moore-Gilbert 148), and that his ideas of hybridity and ambivalence are relativistic, leaving no ground for direct political action. To the contrary, however, such political paralysis is exactly what Bhabha is attempting to escape in his idea of a liminal Third Space. Bhabha presents ambivalence as an extreme and ever-present form of self-consciousness that *encourages* political debate; a radical contingency which haunts every discussion, and places every conclusion under erasure—not to stop the discussion from occurring, but in order to stop the discussion from ending. Following Derrida, Bhabha is simply *revealing* an uncertainty that is latent within the text of the nation, rather than *producing* it. Other critics have noted that Bhabha's theories of instability and ambiguity as forms of performative resistance seem to rely upon the

existence of a firm pedagogy in order for them to be effective, and thus may actually reinscribe that structure. Bhabha “wants it both ways,” Williams claims, stating that in order for his theories to function, “Bhabha has first to produce the effect of uncertainty, then call it a cause” (40). However, while it is true that Bhabhian resistance seems to require a structure to rail against, this structure need not be static. In fact, it is this uncertainty and ambiguity within the structure—in this case, the national pedagogy—that offers the possibility of meaningful change.

QUESTIONING AUTHORITY / AUTHORITY QUESTIONS

In addition to its broad attack on historical pedagogy itself, *Colony* also contains a number of more targeted and subversive challenges to representatives of Newfoundland’s authoritative pedagogy. As Wylie notes, in its “challenging of various forms of authority [*Colony* is] a part of a larger postcolonial renegotiation of Canadian history, Canadian culture, and Canadian Identity” (*Speculative* 260). We have already noted how Fielding’s “Condensed History” is a clear attack on Prowse’s pedagogical text. Equally as important, however, is its *means* of attack. Fielding’s satirical subversion of the historical pedagogy is so successful that it earns her the title of “guerrilla historian” from Wylie (161). Hans Bak calls Fielding’s “Condensed History” a “postmodern ironic subversion of the ‘official’ public history of the colony as given in Judge Prowse’s *History*” (230), and David Williams notes how “Condensed History” is aimed at the *History* to “deflate it through parody” (109). Indeed, by using irony and satire to destabilize the notion of pedagogy rather than to offer a direct refutation of history,

Fielding creates what Bhabha calls a “dialectic without the emergence of a teleological or transcendent History” (*Location* 37).

In Bhabhian terms, Fielding’s history can be read as “performative pedagogy”, in which what is ostensibly pedagogical—her “history” of Newfoundland—is clearly meant to function performatively. Her historical correction of “Prowse, Reeve, Anspach, Harvey, Pedely *et al.*” in a single line, for example, is followed by her fantasy that she “so humiliates them in debate that they pledge to burn all existing copies of their books” (210)—a combination of scholarship and satire that is profoundly unsettling to the notion of traditional history. For, while Bak can deem Fielding’s history “blatantly fictional and refreshingly unreliable” (218), one cannot ignore the fact that, in many cases, her ironic history is *more accurate* than the other, “real” histories in the text. Indeed, Johnston himself admits, in a short essay titled “My Treatment of History in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*,” that he intended Fielding’s *Condensed History* as a way of providing the reader with “the mass of knowledge a reader would need about the history of Newfoundland.” This is what Wylie identifies as a relatively conservative treatment of history by Johnston, but I would suggest that it is, in fact, quite troubling; Johnston’s use of a fictionalized text that is “refreshingly unreliable” to provide his readers with the “true” historical background manages to offer history while simultaneously challenging it. This blurring of fiction and fact, of politics and literature, serves to open a Third Space in which “the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One nor the Other, but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both” (Bhabha *Location* 41). Fielding’s satirical “Condensed History,” which is strictly neither history nor fiction, but

something else besides, is itself a hybrid space that offers a new way of approaching the nation and its pedagogy.

Fielding's refusal to participate in the conventional political dialogue demonstrates how, in Bhabhian negotiation, "the minority does not simply confront the pedagogical, or powerful master-discourse with a contradictory or negating referent... [Instead,] it interrogates its object" (223). Rather than directly attack Sir Richard Squires, J.R. Smallwood, and other political leaders, Fielding's elusive combination of irony, satire, and literary allusion offers an unconventional critique that can not be countered by conventional political responses. For example, when Sir Richard Squires and Smallwood attempt to shame Fielding into silence by publishing embarrassing personal anecdotes about her in a local newspaper, Fielding's rebuttal is so heavily layered in literary allusions that it is nearly impossible to decipher her meaning. "What kind of answer is this to being called a liar and a cheat?" asks Sir Richard (290). The passage is representative of Fielding's Bhabhian resistance, which succeeds in frustrating Smallwood during his tumultuous reign as premier of Newfoundland. "It unsettled me that she [Fielding] seemed to have contrived a way to exist outside my world, not only beyond my influence, but also beyond my comprehension," writes Smallwood. "I had no idea if anything she said was true" (499). Indeed, both Sir Richard (290) and Smallwood (498) accuse her of "hiding behind her cleverness." Incapable of controlling her ambiguous resistance, Smallwood's only response is to "pretend... to be unable to 'get' her columns, knowing that most people did not 'get' them" (500).

At times, Fielding's use of irony to challenge the pedagogical structure illustrates another typically Bhabhian form of resistance, as well: mimicry. As Bhabha writes,

mimicry is “a mode of representation... that marginalizes the monumentality of history, [and] quite simply mocks its power to be a model” (125). Correspondingly, in her satirical coverage of the “Reign of Terror,” Fielding appropriates the voice of the wealthy merchant to mock that position and undermine its validity through exaggeration; it is an act of imitation that is meant to mock and destabilize the pedagogy. At the same time, her re-writing of events such as the “Nones” chase satirizes the process of journalism, illustrating how historical events can be appropriated and altered by the dominant culture in the service of political power. Indeed, even the very title of Fielding’s work—“A Condensed History of Newfoundland”—reveals it to be a parody of Prowse’s infamously lengthy and yet similarly titled *A History of Newfoundland*.

While Johnston’s use of mimicry as political resistance is most evident in Fielding’s “Condensed History,” it also occurs in the important section on the Beothuk Indians. Walking through the streets of St. John’s, Shawnawdithit turns against the gawking onlookers and retaliates in a Bhabhian manner: “Everywhere they went, people gathered round to gape [...] Nancy seemed unafraid. She sometimes went so far as to mimic the looks of wonderment on the faces of the people that they passed” (557). As the only other reaction Shawnawdithit makes to the onlookers is to pretend to chase them, it is clear that her mimicry is meant as an aggressive resistance to the dominant culture. In the same way, Shawnawdithit and her family wear dresses given to them by their European captors underneath their deerskin shawls, becoming walking mimics of their colonial oppressors, a threatening “difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, *Location* 122).

Finally, the role of fathers in *Colony* reveals yet another condemnation of traditional authority. Almost without exception, the fathers in *Colony* are either incompetent or malevolent: Smallwood's father, for example, is a raging drunk, and Fielding's father abandons her on her death bed (which she likens to William Cormak's betrayal of Shawnawdithit [558-59]). Smallwood himself is a negligent father—if not quite as absent a father-figure, perhaps, as the young Prowse. And, of course, the Judge, whom we have deemed representative of God *the Father*, proves to be a senile patriarch. This repeated trope of irresponsible or illegitimate fathers constitutes a rejection of paternal authority that serves as a fitting symbol for the novel's multifaceted destabilization of the national pedagogy.

However, this is not to say that the novel offers complete immunity to the victims of the national mythos. In the most moving passage of the novel, Johnston offers a damning portrayal of both unchallenged authority and its victims when a group of sealers is refused refuge in a blizzard by an arrogant captain, resulting in the needless death of nearly three-quarters of the crew. The seal-hunters, so completely programmed by the pedagogy of traditional authority that they would rather die than disobey, are a sombre reminder of the marginalized culture's complicity in the persistence of the colonial pedagogy of Newfoundland. Tellingly, Smallwood's exposé of the event is not published, and the captain goes unpunished. Smallwood revisits the incident numerous times throughout the text, finding it difficult to believe that the men of the ship preferred "to risk the blizzard [rather] than defy" the captain (113). Of course, the name of the ship—the *S. S. Newfoundland*—encourages us to understand the compliant crew as a commentary on the entire history of the colony. It is sadly ironic, then, that Smallwood

easily slides into the role of unaccountable authority himself, justifying his authoritarian rule as Premier by means of the colony's history: "I was already ruling with such an iron fist that most people were afraid to speak out against me... it was *legitimized by tradition* as far as I was concerned" (497, emphasis mine).

AUTHORSHIP AND AUTHOR-ITY

Johnston's work represents a cultural progression in the way that Canadian historical fiction relates to the national mythos; if *Barometer Rising* challenges the narrative of the British imperial mythos and *The Stone Carvers* challenges the narrative of the traditional Canadian mythos, *Colony* goes directly to the question of the narrating itself. Fittingly, Johnston's questioning of political author-ity is bound to questions of *authorship*. David Williams notes that in *Colony*, "what appears from the outset of Newfoundland 'history' is that historical 'authority' is a pleasant delusion and that the 'founding facts' are really a figment of somebody's imagination" (111). Importantly, Williams's comment notes the connection between "historical 'authority'" and the role of the author, or "somebody's imagination." For, while Fielding's "Condensed History" is the most overt of the challenges to the historical record and its pedagogy, other moments of resistance in the text are aimed more directly at the role of the author as an unreliable source of historical authority, presenting malevolent "authors" that use and abuse history for their own ends. Fielding's father, for example, literally cuts up the text of Prowse's *History* and reassembles it into a damning letter which drives Smallwood out of Bishop

Feild.¹⁵ Reeves, Smallwood, and the younger Prowse all attempt to find out who wrote the letter, but the truth is withheld until near the conclusion of the text.

This trope of the “unknown author,” exemplified most clearly in the anonymous letter sent to Bishop Feild, may appear to be partially answered when the authorship of the letter is revealed to be Fielding’s father. However, since the letters used in the note were written by Prowse and were merely rearranged by the doctor, the question of who actually “wrote” the letter remains. In fact, in much the same way as her father, Fielding herself cuts up and abuses Prowse’s history for her own purposes, using selections of the *History* to start the chapters of her “Condensed History.” In addition, Fielding’s authorship is further destabilized by the various pseudonyms under which she writes her newspaper columns. The propaganda battle she wages across party lines with herself as “Ray Joy” and “Harold Prowdy” undermines the notion of stable authorship even as it offers a strong critique of partisan politics (255). And, of course, we have already considered the ultimate incompetence of Prowse as an author, and noted the numerous other unqualified or fraudulent authors in the text—such as Vaughn and Reeves, both of whom wrote their histories of Newfoundland as part of financial schemes.

Finally, in a more structural sense, the author of the historical novel itself comes into question. The use of first-person narration hides the role of Johnston as author, suggesting that the fictional biography is, in fact, an autobiography. Moreover, David Williams has amassed a convincing amount of evidence, including chronological “missteps” and textual clues, which appear to suggest that the author of Smallwood’s passages

¹⁵ Prowse’s *History* is dangerous for other characters, as well. Smallwood’s mother uses it (inadvertently) to cause a deadly avalanche, and it drives numerous characters near insanity, as Fielding, Joe, and Charlie are all consumed by the text. As Herb Wyile writes, Prowse’s book “symbolizes the intrusive presence of the narrative of the past,” and that it “quite literally is accessory in complicating their lives” (*Speculative* 156).

is in question even within the fictive framework of the text; he argues that the author of Smallwood's "autobiography" is, in fact, Fielding (106-107). Of course, Fielding herself is a completely fictional character, leaving as the author of the autobiography of Newfoundland's first premier nobody but an invention of a fictional imagination. As Williams writes, Johnston's novel "literally empties the author position" (109), marking a deep ambivalence in the text at a formal level. And if, as Atwood tells us, the past is made of paper, there is no more devastating attack on a national mythos than to erase the originary role of the author.

SOMETHING ELSE BESIDES

Bhabha writes that "the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One nor the Other, but something else besides*" (41), and it is telling that Johnston sets his novel in a location that is neither country, nor colony, but *something else*. For a large section of Johnston's novel, Newfoundland is in an official state of political liminality; Johnston even names one of the six sections "Interregnum." Indeed, even the compromise of confederation seems itself to be a deferral of the original question—*colony or nation?*—that dominates the text. Under such conditions, the construction of a mythos by which Newfoundlanders see themselves as a part of the imagined community of Canada becomes impossible: describing his attempts to muster support for the referendum vote among the small rural communities, Smallwood explains that

I did not speak to them about Canada. What could they know about Canada, these people who had never seen St. John's? [...] Their homes were worlds unto themselves. The fishermen were not nationalists of any sort, defined themselves neither as Newfoundlanders nor colonials, but as residents of chthonic origin,

sprung from the earth of whatever little island or cove they had grown up in. Confederation would not make them think of themselves as Canadians. (453-4)

“Neither Newfoundlanders nor colonials,” the rural communities exist in “something else besides” the traditional political binary. The tension that exists in Newfoundland’s uncertain political status parallels the tension that exists in the contemporary Canadian myth of Multiculturalism; in both cases, unity and separateness struggle against each other. These tensions mark both Newfoundland and Canada as a potential Third Space, in which the uncertainty and liminality which troubles the mythos can be read as an opportunity for political change and multi-cultural progress.

In order for these political spheres to function as Third Spaces, however, their naturalized histories need to be revisited and destabilized. As Bhabha writes, “such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (11). It is in this sense that *Colony* functions as resistance art, for the novel reviews the past to destabilize its pedagogical message, to reveal its construction, to highlight its contingency. All these revelations become challenges to our national mythos, reminding us that “Canada” must always be spoken and written under erasure, that it must be considered incomplete and contingent, and that its origins are neither sacred nor organic. The potential for multi-culturalism within the nation has not yet been fully explored, and we must be careful that in our rush to complete the Multicultural project we do not re-establish essentialized versions of culture and resort to token recognition of stereotyped cultures. There is reason for optimism, I think, if only we can come to conceive of Canada as “a contingent ‘in-between’ space.”

Perhaps it is best to conclude by returning to Fielding, who is the real “hero” of Johnston’s novel. It is Fielding who transgresses the early line of authority between the all-boys Bishop Feild and the all-girls Bishop Spencer, where her wit instigates much of the story’s early plotline. It is Fielding who writes the primary example of “resistance literature,” her satirical *Condensed History*. She is also the primary source of political instability, as her devastating ironic newspaper columns confuse and expose politicians. Though *Colony* is unquestionably a novel about the political nation, Fielding’s ever-present irony represents the novel’s refusal to engage the national mythos within its own framework of history and origins, and this is where the novel constitutes a shift from the monumentalizing defiance of Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers*, where the battle is for the appropriate use of the power and steadfastness that comes with a national mythos built in granite. For, as Williams writes, “all of Fielding’s ironies reveal one great truth: no matter what has been ‘imprinted’ on the mind of a people, the idea of the nation cannot be fixed in stone” (131).

In *Colony*, then, resistance to the violence of the national mythos is not a matter of trading one stable narrative for another, but rather the destabilization of the narratives themselves. As Wylie notes, the novel “disrupts the notion of Canada as a national totality and serves as a vivid reminder of how nation is always subject to the flux of history – to political, social, economic, and cultural forces – and is not a natural, organic formation.” “*Colony*,” he continues, “emphasizes how nation, instead, is the product of an ongoing negotiation between its constituent parts” (*Speculative* 134). After the island limps into Confederation, Fielding writes a passage that could serve as an appropriate “conclusion” to this study: “We have been in limbo for the past nine months, neither

country nor province. Only a few would understand that this is just the old abiding limbo made manifest, that we have always been in limbo and perhaps always will" (493).

Postscript

Following suggestions by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, this study has argued that the national mythos, as a narrative that unites a populace in an imagined community by providing a framework for a homogenizing worldview, necessarily appeals to an originary moment of violence as a foundation for a pedagogical history. This pedagogical history uses the threat of violence to suppress difference and alternative narratives, consolidating support for those within the dominant culture by silencing those on the margins. This theory appears, at first blush, to be contradicted by Canadian history, inasmuch as the birth of Canada as a political state was achieved by a relatively peaceful act of parliament rather than an obvious act of war, and given the nation's adherence to official Multiculturalism. However, Jonathan Vance argues that Canadian nationalism did not originate with confederation, but with the country's successful participation in the First World War, thus securing a violent origin for the national mythos. Moreover, the Multicultural narrative that appears to support marginalized cultures has, at times, had the opposite effect of delimiting and narrowing their expression. The mythos, itself a narrative deeply intertwined with the national culture, is at once constructed through, reflected in, and challenged by the country's cultural production, including its literature. I have traced but three examples of the way in which Canadian historical literature can be seen to have evolved in its consideration of the national mythos, shifting from attempts to construct a homogenizing narrative out of the Great War, to attempts to re-write that narrative in more inclusive ways, to the project of exposing the illusions inherent in the process of writing any national mythos.

Construct, foundation, structure, framework—by way of conclusion, perhaps it is worth briefly considering the architectural overtones of this study, and their relationship to the theories I have employed. In *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*, Mark Wigley points to the centrality of architectural metaphors in all of Western philosophy, noting that thinkers as varied as Kant, Heidegger, and Derrida all accept Descartes' basic proposition that philosophy is a type of architectural construction in which arguments must be built upon a secure foundation. Quoting Heidegger, Wigley writes that "Metaphysics is the identification of the ground as 'supporting presence' for whatever stands like an edifice. It searches for 'that upon which everything rests, what is always there for every being as its support'" (8). In a passage worth quoting at length, Wigley outlines what he sees as a deep connection between architecture and philosophy:

More than just philosophy's figure of itself, [architecture] is the figure by which that institution effaces its own institutional condition, an effacement that paradoxically defines philosophy's particular institutional location and socio-political function. It is philosophy's claim on that which precedes or exceeds the social that gives it unique social authority—the authority, precisely, to define and regulate the social. From the beginning, philosophy has represented itself as a source, storehouse, and arbitrator of order. This representation would not be possible without the architectural figure [...] The figure is always operative in the discourse and actually exerts the greatest influence when in reserve. (8)

This is to say that architecture functions as more than as a mere metaphor for philosophy; "More than the metaphor of foundation," he adds, "it is the foundational metaphor" (19). In a philosophical discussion on the national mythos, then, we ought not to be surprised at the prevalence of architectural terms, nor should we ignore the way that this vocabulary attempts to "efface its own institutional condition." In critiquing the nation through its literature, this study attempts to posit itself as a supplemental question in the

Bhabhain sense; however, it has not been able to entirely separate itself from the philosophical vocabulary that is itself a part of a related power relationship.

Even if the architectural vocabulary employed in this study is not entirely unproblematic, its metaphorical framework is certainly appropriate: just as every individual component of a building is ultimately dependent upon its foundation, and in as much as each component not only points back to its foundation but also is an elaboration or celebration of that foundation, every reference to the nation—from the national anthem to a tank with a maple leaf emblazoned on its side—is a part of the construction of a narrative structure, and is ultimately dependent upon and celebratory of its (violent) foundation. As Wigley writes, “Every reference to structure, no matter how oblique, is a reference to an edifice erected on, and marked by, the ground, an edifice from which the ground cannot be removed” (10). To further explore the way that the origin serves as a foundation that tries to efface itself—that is, that requires our “remembering to forget” it as an origin—we turn once again to Derrida, who writes in “Structure, Sign, and Play”:

Structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. (278)

If the mythos attempts to centre the nation by harkening back to a fixed origin, there is, in some recent texts of Canadian historical literature, a movement of questioning that constitutes a dangerous play within the national structure. Works such as *Barometer Rising* attempt to build the structure, and works such as *The Stone Carvers* seek to reconstruct, or renovate, that structure; by contrast, texts like *The Colony of Unrequited*

Dreams function to destabilize that structure, identifying and emphasizing the moments of instability within the national narrative, exposing its violent assumptions. Such texts might be said to be exercising the *play* within the structure of the national myths.

All three of the novels I have chosen discuss the construction of the mythos in connection with the most literal of foundations: the (un)contested “Canadianness” of a geo-political landscape. As we might expect from a novel aiming to destabilize the national mythos, Wayne Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* is the most overt in this regard. *Colony* is set on a landscape that is both physically and legally separated from the rest of the nation; the island of Newfoundland is suspended in constitutional limbo throughout the novel, neither colony, nor nation, but something in between. The novel’s critique of nationalism remains relevant today, as Newfoundland’s place in the confederation continues to be as questionable now as it was in Smallwood’s time; just recently, Newfoundland’s premier caused a minor commotion when he ordered the removal of all Canadian flags from the province’s legislative building in St. John’s. The maple leaf has since returned, but Newfoundland remains a wonderfully ambivalent setting for a novel considering the status and structure of the Canadian nation.

Jane Urquhart’s political landscapes are no less interesting; her literary examination of Canadian nationalism concludes in Quebec—a province that has proven itself eager to put the nation’s sovereignty to a vote, and the setting for much of the novel’s interrogation of Canada is the killing fields of France. In *The Stone Carvers*, we find perhaps the clearest evidence of the architectural process of mythos-building in the Vimy Ridge Monument, which unites the origin and foundations of the nation in violence: the ground, the foundation, of this physical manifestation of the Canadian

mythos is, very literally, the site of the death of its citizens. The memorial epitomizes Canada's strange habit of constructing its mythos on questionable grounds: Walter Allward's monument is the most expensive, elaborate, and impressive memorial Canada has built to itself, commemorating what many historians argue is the birth of Canadian nationalism, but, paradoxically, it stands in a distant foreign land, and is seen by few Canadians.

Importantly, the questionable grounds of the nation are not confined to texts that question the national narrative. It is telling that even *Barometer Rising*, Hugh MacLennan's much-criticized exercise in nation-building, is set in a contested locale. Nova Scotia was one of the participating provinces in the Canadian confederation of 1867, and no doubt this makes it an appealing setting for a novel that aims, as MacLennan suggests, at establishing a "tradition of Canadian literature" (foreword). However, it is often forgotten—MacLennan, to be sure, does not remind us—that the very next year, in 1868, Nova Scotians elected an "Anti-Confederation Party" that promptly began a seven-year effort aimed at getting *out* of confederation. In fact, an 1868 motion passed by the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, formally refusing to recognize the legitimacy of confederation, has never been rescinded; Nova Scotian flags flew at half mast on Dominion Day for over fifty years. The nation was troubled from the start, then; as such, Nova Scotia is a doubly apt location as a literary birthplace of the Canadian mythos. I have suggested that the limbo accepted in *Colony* constitutes something of a logical progression in the evolution of Canadian literary nationalism, but perhaps it was there all along, just waiting to be read. After all, in the light of the last two chapters, the following passage from *Barometer Rising* holds something of a postcolonial

promise fulfilled—or at least re-committed—by *Colony*: “We’re the ones who make Canada what she is today, Murray thought, neither one thing nor the other” (266). Indeed, MacLennan sounds positively poststructural at times, and I will close with this, his description of Canada as something akin to a liminal Third Space: “This nation undiscovered by the rest of the world and unknown to itself, these people neither American nor English, nor even sure what they wanted to be, this unborn mightiness, this question mark, this future for himself, and for God knew how many millions of mankind!” (102).

* * *

Finally, I feel I must briefly address the fact that the idea of the nation comes off rather poorly in this study. Perhaps this is as good a point as any for me to reiterate my gratitude and indebtedness to the Canadian Federal Government for the SSHRC grant that has enabled me to focus on my studies and write this thesis. I do not intend to suggest that nations are intrinsically evil or so terrible that their destruction is always desirable. To the contrary, the nation has proven itself a remarkable structure for social change and political progress. Indeed, with the growing strength and independence of multi-national corporations that disregard both national and international laws, a strong argument could be made for the necessity of strengthening nations, rather than dismantling them. However, I insist that the power of the nation *as an idea* should not be underestimated, and we should never forget the implications and assumptions inherent in the nation’s mythical image of itself, for they have very real—often devastating—practical implications. The purpose of this study has been to take a closer look at the

narrative of the Canadian nation, to explore how it is constructed (as well as how it might be deconstructed), and to examine the place of literature in the production of a nation's image of itself. A national mythos is a powerful thing—much too powerful to be allowed to go unnoticed, to be forgotten, or, what is worse, remembered to be forgotten.

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