

## Jennifer LeJeune

### O CANADA!\*

Our country is large in extent, small in population, which accounts for our fear of empty spaces, and also our need for them. Much of it is covered in water, which accounts for our interest in reflections, sudden vanishings, the dissolution of one thing into another. Much of it is rock, however, which accounts for our belief in fate.

—Margaret Atwood

I've employed Gertrude Stein's quip about Oakland: "There's no there, there" a time or two. Out of context as Stein always claimed that quotation to be, I found it quite apt after moving to that particular city. And most Americans would probably apply Stein's "out of context" sentiments to Canada in a heartbeat. Visions of tundra, a polite but boring citizenry, strangely unintelligible French, and sentences punctuated with 'ay?' are about all the nonsense that comprise mainstream American images of our frozen northern neighbor. Yet, from this muted land come the literary talents of Margaret Atwood and Victor Lévy Beaulieu. The two authors were asked to interview each other for a publicly broadcasted series on Canadian public radio. These interviews have been collected and translated in a book entitled *Two Solitudes: Conversations*. The authors' presence on the pages of *Two Solitudes* is vibrant, enigmatic, visceral, a bit sad—like Canada with a twist—and provide for an instructive and impressive read.

The title of this work is a play on the title of Hugh MacLennan's novel about Quebec entitled *Two Solitudes*. MacLennan, however, actually lifted his title from Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet," out of the lines: "Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other." *Two Solitudes* as a title for the interviews was thought up by Victor Lévy, and it works to resonate on several levels of its evolution. Atwood is an Anglophone, Beaulieu a Francophone—fellow countrymen separated by language and a

---

\*Atwood, Margaret and Victor Lévy Beaulieu. Interviews. Translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott. *Two Solitudes: Conversations*. McClelland & Steward, Toronto: 1998.

cultural heritage. By their solicitudes, they work to bridge the chasm that seems to prevent Canadian culture from burgeoning, from filtering southward to its fellow North Americans. As Atwood says, "If there were more solicitude, on both sides of the great linguistic divide, we would be a great deal better off."

The conversations between Atwood and Beaulieu took place in March of 1995 for a two-week series (broadcasted in French) over Radio-Canada. Though they proved perfect complements for such a project, the two authors had never met. Both are prolific Canadian authors, had been connected with cultural nationalism in the sixties, had worked with small Canadian presses, and grew up in remote Canadian villages. Of course, these parallels alone could not be trusted to ensure good conversation and an exciting broadcast. As Atwood herself points out, when some unlucky soul paired Joyce and Proust for such a project, it made for a complete disaster. Joyce and Proust greeted each other politely, listeners strained in anticipation of their first words, and Proust began with, "I get horrible headaches." To which Joyce replied, "Oh, so do I, and my eyes are getting worse and worse." In this way they spoke of nothing but ailments for the entire time! Fortunately for the creator of this project, Doris Dumais, Atwood and Beaulieu find more to discuss. Their conversations center on writing and Canadian culture (they prove beyond a doubt that it does, in fact, exist), with informative excursions into the French/English divide, the native question in Canada, childhood, religion, politics, and quite openly discuss their own writing and artistic careers.

Beaulieu makes the argument that Canada's international invisibility may stem from its citizenry of French and English dissent whose culture was laid down by the French and English, and yet are not truly considered part of France or England, or even much respected by them. Beaulieu feels French-Canadian literature is considered secondary literature by the French, and that English-Canadian literature is thought second-rate by the British. On their own land, Canada is a nation split so deeply by language, that many Canadians, including many Quebecois, would prefer to divide Canada into separate, sovereign nations. Beaulieu and Atwood speak widely on their own experiences with this vast cultural bind, and even enact it at times—Atwood's French proves somewhat amusing to Beaulieu. And musing on the potential for Canadian separation, Atwood remarks, "Who knows? Maybe people [after voting for separation] will want to join the United States, and the United States will say, 'No, thanks. Newfoundland? No thanks.'"

*Two Solitudes* takes an affirmative step toward curing Canada's image problem with the authors' own dry, Canadian humor. Atwood has written: "Once it was fashionable to say how dull it was. First prize a week in Toronto, second prize two weeks in Toronto. Toronto was never dull for me. Dull isn't a word you'd use to describe such misery, and enchantment."

Beaulieu, whose style is less dark, more effusive, is quite deft at exposing the peculiarity and unknown charms of Canadian culture, most notably in his descriptions from childhood in rural Quebec. His words evoke a genuine sense of secure insularity, and the vibrant cultural life of his rural Quebecois village:

I spent my childhood and part of my teens in Trois-Pistoles, Saint-Paul-e-la-Croix, and Saint-Jean-de-Dieu. I must say that in those days rural society was not as disorganized as it later became, and as it still often is. In 1950, in rural society, there was a cultural life. In almost all the villages in Quebec, such as Trois-Pistoles [where he now lives], there was a local newspaper and there were local writers and people who published books, wrote songs, performed in shows. There was even a theatre in Trois-Pistoles. My father did theatre and so did my uncles.

Beaulieu, to the obvious delight of Atwood, shares a hilarious story of an early encounter with Planter's Mr. Peanut in his village. This was the first time in his young life that Beaulieu heard English spoken. He recalls, "So, this Mr. Peanut guy arrived in Trois-Pistoles and he did his little number on the food co-op—as I recall, he sang and handed out little bags of peanuts." Little Victor Lévy and his friends, enthralled by this puzzling anglophone, follow Mr. Peanut down to his dressing room in the co-op, and to their astonishment, not only was Mr. Peanut an anglophone, but a black man as well! In such descriptions and anecdotes, Beaulieu, often called the Victor Hugo of Quebec literature, creates a warmth on the page that rises up from his carefully examined life, his exhaustive knowledge of Western literature, and his ability to convey a sense of understanding and a love for Canada that shows itself as far more substantial than mere nostalgia.

Both Beaulieu and Atwood, in distinct ways, reveal an ability to furnish ordinary with the extraordinary. Their thoughts on writing demonstrate this nicely. Beaulieu conceives of the writer as "an architect." "Personally," he

says, explaining his writing style, “I prefer high buildings, baroque structures with a lot of inscriptions, crosses, and windows, like the church of my childhood.” Atwood, speaking far less romantically, suggests that being a poet is probably “very annoying to other people because [poets] do absolutely nothing. Everyone asks, ‘Why aren’t you doing anything?’ And the poet answers, ‘I’m writing.’” “You write a poem with a pen,” she explains, “but the first experience is an experience of the ear. You listen to the poem. Then you write.”

Writers, generally, don’t have a good reputation for graceful cooperation, but the conversations recorded in this text reveal huge talents and generosity of spirit. Witnessing the grace with which these two writers achieve their rapport is nearly reason alone to read the book.

In the first half of the book, Beaulieu reveals to Atwood that he first heard her read while attending the University of Michigan for a conference on North American Literature. “That was in 1984,” he says, “Your voice touched me. It spoke, as I recall, of grandmothers, dolls and—I think—a bus trip. After your reading, I would have liked to find myself near you . . . just to brush against your skin. I thought it must be as warm and resonant as your voice. It was magical.” And that is how both authors, their two solitudes presented with honesty and beauty, leave you feeling. It also leaves you with the feeling that certainly, there is a there there. Ay?