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## Nationalism, Community, Literature

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# The *Word Hoard*

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## Nationalism, Community, Literature by Christopher Langlois

It would be difficult to overstate the degree to which discourses of “identity politics,” particularly as they are inflected by the rhetoric of nationalism, have fallen out of philosophical favour in the humanities. Zied Khemakhem’s article, “Embracing Identity Politics,” assumes a critical though sympathetic approach to the difficult intersection of national and sexual identity in Edmund White’s *The Married Man*. Khemakhem explores the idea that the impulse to identity formation arises out of a more general and psychologically indistinct condition of anxiety that each individual must struggle in one way or another to negotiate. The present article, however, is less concerned with the psychological dimensions of group-formation, which in any case are dealt with quite effectively by Khemakhem; rather, it intends to look briefly at the intersection, as its title suggests, of nationalism, community, and literature. The concept of literature becomes a privileged term in the relationship between nationalism and community, and it does so on the basis that both nationalism and community, in order to emerge, grow, and develop, must take recourse to fiction. All nationalisms and communities are, after all, imaginative fictions that nevertheless shape the historical reality of our institutions and ideologies. Literature, accordingly, is ideally situated as a critical and transformative mode of thinking precisely because it revels in the analysis, experimentation, and mobilization of fiction.

The widespread dissemination of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, first published in

1983, is indicative of a consensus that the construction and maintenance of nation-based identities is as fragile as it is potent. Anderson, for instance, draws attention in his introduction to the methodological incongruity surrounding “the ‘political’ power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence” (5). To aid his own navigation through the conceptual and historical labyrinth of the “nation,” Anderson proposes a working definition that recalls the work’s title: the nation “is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6; italics in original). Already in his introduction, then, Anderson is careful to draw attention to the textual, narrative, and genealogical dimensions of how national identity is formed (fictionalized) and implemented as a compass for mapping and shaping the world in which we believe ourselves and others to inhabit. Anderson is as much aware of the power of the imagination in the context of forming a national community as he is in its ability to justify the sometimes violent acts of oppression that can emerge when a national identity perceives itself under assault.

The revival of Marxist-inspired conceptions of community, starting in the 60s and 70s, which were advertised on the basis of their post-nation and cosmopolitan consensus, reflected nevertheless the

growing unease, particularly in the West, with the style and politics of particular nationalisms and the economic and militaristic ideologies they opted to promote. Not only this, but the “nation-state” came under considerable scrutiny as an effective and relevant heuristic unit of historical analysis as well. To put it mildly, nationalisms and national communities, indeed the “nation-state” as such, have been in crisis (what hasn’t, as the cliché goes?) due in large part to both the globalization of capital and politics and the recent history of post-colonial activism and theory.

Nevertheless, the nation-state and nationalism continue to be relevant in the formation and understanding of the contemporary world. One of the paradoxes of globalization is that despite the apparent success of its implementation (which is a success only from the perspective of those benefitting from it) of trans-national and trans-regional free-trade (NAFTA) and military (NATO) agreements, the nation-state, precisely because of the malleability of its imagined constitution, has, in many instances, become increasingly entrenched as a locus of political and ideological protectionism. The breaking down of “real” national borders appears to have resulted in the solidification of “imaginary” borders, which is evident in the anti-immigration and politically conservative rhetoric sweeping much of the developed world. Communities and identities that congregate around their imagined cohesiveness are unpredictable. They can be dissolved, revised, or defended depending on any number of contingent forces: imposed austerity, internal corruption, military occupation, crises of capital, assaults on labour, etc.

The formation of a particular community, or rather the preservation of one’s sense of group-belonging, around nationalist ideology and shared images of cultural identity, it is true, can induce fee-

lings of unity, dignity, and political solidarity (pace the Palestinian resistance to Israeli neo-apartheid) just as much, however, as it is susceptible to inculcating xenophobia, anxiety, resentment, and exceptionalism. The difficulty of maintaining a continuous identity along nationalist lines consists in the fragility implicit in any imaginatively constructed picture of reality, and thus in the constant threat of its impending collapse. National identity is at perennial risk of dissolution, and depending on the historical moment of its elaboration it is either rapidly heading in this direction, or feebly postponing its arrival. What can literature contribute to the discourse on community? One possible entry point into this question is to consider the viability of the singular appearance of literary space. Is literature exclusive of the historical world from which it invariably originates? Does literature propose its own space of imaginative production, or is it dependent on external relations of production: the psychological, historical, political, economic, and of course national determinants of its creation? Is it possible to understand Kafka without appreciating his theological or political allegiances? Does Hölderlin make sense only as a German writer? Can we intelligently and responsibly discuss Dostoyevsky without Russia? Joyce without Ireland? These are all questions that point to the highly contested terrain of trying to decide on the benefits, limits, and interest of receiving literary texts as historical, political, and national documents. At first glance it might seem that the decision over whether literature is part of “our” world, the historical and politically mediated world, or if literature is responsible to the world that it singularly creates, the autonomous world of the imagination, is really a decision over whether literature is part of a democratic community or if it exists in solitude and

isolation, and thus as part of no community except itself—literature as tragically u-topic.

Let us assume that it is both, that it in addition to existing, undoubtedly, as part of the historical world that we all inhabit in one way or another, it also affirms the possibility of an alternate world, an ethical world that it causes to appear through the autonomously negative condemnation of what is unethical and colourless about this one. The model of literature's autonomy, then, should not be construed as one of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is perhaps a model reserved only for poetry as narrowly as it is possible to define it. The autonomy that literature practices, particularly in its modernist form, is an autonomy that is inscribed in the most intimate layers of society, history, and community. Flaubert and Balzac, Faulkner and Joyce, condense all that is opaque and obscured in our lived realities into the images and tones of its imagined re-appearance. To say that the autonomy of literature excludes it from participation in the formation of community is to mistakenly ascribe to it an ethics of disinterest—art for art's sake, as they say. There is no doubt that literature is born in real time and in real places, that it is created by writers who have opinions and tastes, yet what separates literature from, say, journalistic writing, which is to say nothing of propagandistic writing, is that literature does not simply “cover” or describe the events of its surroundings, nor does it relay the biographical accidents of its author. If literature is in relation to a community, to an imagined community, as indeed it must be, it is only as an artifact of a community in transition (real or imagined), and for this it must fashion a negative perspective on contemporary forms of community.

It is perhaps Walter Benjamin who best perceived literature's essential resistance to the autonomic reproduction of community from one minute

and age to the next. Benjamin's philosophical project is based largely on a desire to “brush history against the grain” (*Illuminations* 259), as he puts, in order to “blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history” (265). Writing on the Surrealists, Benjamin celebrates what is most “literary” in what they have succeeded in producing. Andre Breton, in particular,

can boast an extraordinary discovery: he was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’ —in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. [...] Breton and Nadja are lovers who convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys, on godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian neighborhoods of great cities, in the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience, if not action. They bring immense forces of ‘atmosphere’ concealed in these things to the point of explosion. What form do you suppose a life would take that was determined at a decisive moment precisely by the song last on everyone's lips? (*Selected Writings* 210).

Benjamin's critical and poetic sensitivity to literature's ability to translate all that is forgotten, discarded, and unused into the raw material of radical political re-invention touches on precisely what makes literature so dangerous yet so fruitful to the life-blood of community. Through the Surrealists' “little universe” of Paris they are able to re-imagine a new sensibility and, indeed, a new world for us all.

To understand the influence of literature on the formation of community it is necessary to perceive what is progressively anachronistic in literature's contemporaneity. If the question of literature's place in the world continues to turn on its accessibility and engagement (its "commitment") with the imagined communities of our historical realities, then it remains enthralled to the ideology of consolidation, which means that literature is confined to the belief that whatever else it does, its purpose is to conjoin its materials, its characters, and the climate of its worlds around centers of aesthetic coherence and the status quo of entertainment. The question of literature's relevance becomes, then, a question merely of how it goes about jockeying for acceptance in the marketplace of cultural value, and it is here that literature engenders its political and historical irrelevance. Literature in the more emphatic sense, on the other hand, resists floundering in the culture industry, as Adorno calls it, precisely insofar as it succeeds in converting what is meaning-less, the inchoate material it inherits from the ongoing catastrophe of historical realities, into an image that is in the ascendant process of its coming-together. Literature makes new images, new ideas, and new sensibilities; it does not reproduce them as yet another set of cultural commodities. "Literature is," writes Jacques Rancière, "both a science of society and the creation of a new mythology" (20), a secular vehicle of historical redemption waiting for us in a time that is, alas, tragically and perennially "out of joint". What literature, philosophy, and critical theory have in common is an unrelenting sympathy with the world as it is, as it has been, and as it has been forgotten, and the courage to envision and demand the impossibility of another world that is not yet. Literature is the demand of community, yet we should be careful on how we interpret this demand. It is not a demand

for what is possible under the ideological auspices of the "here and now", which would like to limit our imagination to more elections, more televisions, and more stock options. Literature's demand is infinite, to paraphrase Simon Critchley, it is the impossible demand for community at the historical juncture of its fictional appearance.

Literature exists as a space that disrupts the everyday use of the imagination as it is practiced in the formation of community. Contrary to the idea of literature's affinity with the consolidation of community, Rancière is once again helpful by insisting that literature, in concert with the aim of radical politics, "reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible. It introduces new objects and subjects onto the common stage. It makes visible what was invisible, it makes audible as speaking beings those who were previously heard only as noisy animals" (4). Literature does these things, in the name of community, through its resistance to familiar ways of seeing the world and of constructing community. Literature that unambitiously represents the world as it is already constituted ceases to be literature and becomes simply a cultural document, a document of barbarism, Benjamin would insist. Literature reveals to the imagination what it inherently knows but all too often disavows, namely that the imagination is the ethical antidote to what the imagination creates: community. For literature to be appreciated as a conduit of community it is, finally, necessary that we not shy away from the contradictions, paradoxes, and criticisms with which it confronts both the identity of community and all the imagined fictions by which our communities are sustained.

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