The Construction of Alienation in Richard Ford’s *Canada*

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Abstract

Richard Ford’s *Canada*, published in 2012, seems to have evaded literary studies. This essay—which is an early contribution to the undoubtedly growing range of studies on *Canada* that will be published in the future—is concerned with how alienation is constructed in the novel. I refer to alienation as a sense of being out of place and becoming estranged, both to others as well as to one’s self. The essay focuses mainly but not exclusively on the point of view of the fifteen-year-old protagonist Dell, who is thrown out into a world that has ceased to be adapted to his needs and which seems to threaten his very existence. To speak with Lukács, the protagonist steps out from an unproblematic world into a problematic one and is divided in the process as his ideas are no longer attainable. But this very process of division or alienation also creates room for agency, in the sense of independent action or the will to act independently. In *Canada*—particularly in the second part of the novel—alienation is constructed in the meetings between Dell and fragmented and morose characters. Dell is required to adapt to these people and the circumstances in which they meet, but in those same processes of adaptation he manages to find small ways out. This makes it possible for Dell to keep himself whole despite his deteriorating circumstances. Equally important for how alienation is constructed in the novel is the meeting between Dell and the landscape of the prairie. While the landscape at first seems to be a source of further alienation, it ultimately proves to be the only place where Dell experience communion.

**Key words:** Richard Ford, *Canada*, Lukács, Alienation, Agency, Adolescence, Saskatchewan, Prairie, Prairie literature.
Canada tells the story of fifteen-year-old Dell, who travels to Canada from the United States after his parents are incarcerated for a crime they committed. The story is told from the point of view of an aged Dell thinking back on events that took place in 1960, but the narration is intimate with the experiences of young Dell. Part one of Canada tells the story of events that lead up to a crisis that shatters Dell’s family. After the collapse of his family, Dell is left on his own. Part two then begins, in which Dell is moved to Canada by an acquaintance of his now incarcerated mother. This essay will focus on the second part of Canada. In the period just before the crisis that shatters his family, Dell imagines like never before a life for himself as a participant in social life. But events outside of his control and insight—events pertaining to the adult world—accumulate into a crisis that overnight makes all his imaginings impossible.

My main claim is that alienation runs like an undercurrent throughout the novel. This is especially the case in the second part of the novel, which deals with Dell’s crossing into Canada and his experiences there. We might recall, in passing, that one meaning of the word “alien” is immigrant. I will show how alienation is constructed in key places in the story. While my main focus will be Dell’s own experiences, I will not limit myself entirely to Dell’s point of view. My basic definition of alienation is that it is a sense of not belonging or being out of place, such as the feeling of not belonging to oneself or feeling out of place in relation to one’s circumstances. Alienation is connected to social isolation but is more complex, as it is tied up with the feeling of estrangement. However, in the novel there is also a force that counteracts alienation, a force that I will refer to as agency. My basic definition of agency is some form of enactment, be it psychological or physical, of an instinct or a deeply held interest. Agency is connected to action, but it is more complex as it can be asserted without any apparent or physical action.

Countless essays could be written about Canada, but there seems to be close to none written so far. The specific focus of this essay—to show how alienation is constructed in the novel—has been necessitated by the limited scope of the type of text, but it will nevertheless contribute a small piece to the puzzle of the novel as a whole.
Introductory theoretical considerations

A number of studies have been done on the causes and effects of alienation of young people in the United States. Calabrese discusses how “an increase in mobility among American families causes adolescent to become separated from significant others, especially an accepting peer group”, something which “may be traumatic for young people in general and adolescents in particular” (41). However, social sciences (note that Calabrese is writing out of the late eighties) have traditionally emphasized “that alienation emanates from the adolescent’s environment” (41). While there are also models that suggest “that alienation may be a personal phenomena”, Calabrese argues that the most realistic approach is one that “conceptualizes alienation as influenced by the environment” while still allowing “for personal freedom to make decisions regarding that environment” (41). It is in a vein similar to what Calabrese is writing about the tension between outer events and personal adaptation, that I suggest reading the processes of alienation that Dell experiences.

Other theoretical concepts that have been important for my understanding of what Dell is going through, comes from Georg Lukács’s discussion on the “problematic individual”, whose interior life becomes threatened “when the outside world is no longer adapted to the individual’s ideas” (78). The unproblematic individual experiences his aims with a sense of “immediate obviousness”, and while his “aims may involve hindrances or difficulties” they never lead to “any serious threat to his interior life” (Lukács 78). What happens to Dell, then, is that he goes from the unproblematic into the problematic personhood, via the crisis that shatters his family.

The problematic individual, who lives in a world that has ceased to be adapted to his ideas, experiences that his ideas—that is, his thoughts about what he wants to do and achieve—have become unrealizable, even unreal. After this, his ideas are transformed into “ideals”, and “the immediate problem-free organic nature of the individual” is destroyed, whereupon individuality “becomes an aim unto itself” (Lukács 78).

I have understood Lukács to be describing a process wherein one becomes alienated from oneself, but that this form of alienation is inseparable from an instinct to push back the threats to one’s interior life. In other words, Lukács, similar to Calabrese, is describing some kind of tension between circumstances and individual adaptation – but for Lukács the drive to realize those ideas which have become unreal springs from the process of alienation itself. The fact that we know about the aged Dell, the narrator of the story, means that we know from the
beginning that young Dell’s alienation will eventually dissipate. Lukács reminds us that without alienation—that is, without the entrance into the problematic—there would be no tension, no story, and no possibility of change. In other words, what Lukács brings to my analysis is a level of positive appraisement—for lack of a better term—of the processes of alienation. To summarize, I view alienation as an underlying structure of subjectivity that threatens individual agency and therefore necessitates it. This is not say that alienation necessarily leads to agency, or that agency necessarily leads to the disappearance of alienation. The problematic existence has no certain outcome, only the ultimatum that alienation presents is certain—live or be lived upon—and the tension of this ultimatum in the novel is what makes the story of Dell so lifelike.

Wolfgang Iser writes that “in each articulated reading moment, only segments of textual perspectives are present to the readers wandering viewpoint”, and that narrative text “is composed of a variety of perspectives, which outline the author’s view and also provide access to what the reader is meant to visualize” (1528). The perspectives in a narrative text, Iser continues, “may differ in order of importance”, but none of them are on their own “identical to the meaning of the text, which is to be brought about by their constant intertwining through the reader in the reading process” (1528). Leaning on Iser’s argument that the meaning of a narrative text lies in a synthesis of its different perspectives, I have employed a method of slow reading in which philosophical, sociological and aesthetic reflections intertwine.

Going out

After their parents inevitable arrest following their robbery, Dell and his twin sister Berner are left on their own in their family’s house. Their social insignificance becomes clear, as no one comes to pick them up or to take care of them. With the loss of their parents they also lose their place in Great Falls, the semi-rural town in Montana where the first part of the novel takes place. On the other hand, their connection to the place was always weak, given their family’s precarious lifestyle. As they followed their father’s employment on various Air Force Bases, the family remained on the outside of social community. Before Dell has the time to move into the community of Great Falls—they move there shortly before school start—his family unexpectedly collapses.

Nevertheless, one would perhaps expect that a small town such as Great Falls would notice and take care of two adolescents left on their own, but instead a kind of collective
unnoticing seems to be the result (246). Bronfenbrenner, writing out of the early 70’s about the increased social and geographical mobility in American society, comments that it is “not only parents of whom the children are deprived but also people in general” (55). “The fragmentation of the extended family”, he continues, “the separation of residential and business areas, the breakdown of neighborhoods”, and many other things; in short, the “erosion of the social fabric isolates not only the child but also his family” (Bronfenbrenner 55). While the erosion of the social fabric in post-war U.S.A. might explain the collective unnoticing, it is interesting to reflect on whether the same would happen if Dell’s parents had tragically died instead of committing a crime. Perhaps, more than being a result of their family’s social isolation, the collective unnoticing that Dell and Berner experience is a way of social punishment. Whatever the cause of the collective unnoticing, its result is that Dell and Berner become isolated in their home before leaving it. If they had been integrated into some other social community, this could have been prevented. But since that does not happen, Dell and Berner almost immediately cross a border from being within the small confines of the social belonging that their family provided, to being outside of social belonging altogether. In other words, they have started on a psychological journey in which they are already completely alienated from the place they still physically inhabit. This sort of inhabited rift between place and identification is a recurring theme in the novel.

Eventually, after Berner has left and Dell is alone, Mildred, his mother’s acquaintance, shows up to fulfill the mother’s wishes to take Dell to Canada in order to avoid the juvenile authorities. Dell experiences the journey toward Canada as a drifting away into unreachability, going farther north than he has ever been and with each mile becoming more separated from his twin sister. Dell describes this experience of being alone in the car with Mildred as feeling “barren and isolated” (256), as though he is not only becoming spatially removed from his sister (isolated) but also losing some vital capacity to create (becoming barren). Dell dreads asking Mildred where they are going, because he knows that the answer might put him in a state of no longer knowing “what to say or do” about his life (256). The feeling of barrenness that he experiences is a fear of no longer being able to recreate himself, that is, a fear of being subject to forces outside of his control. While his fear of asking where they are going could be interpreted as a way of naively ignoring the facts, it could also be seen as a protest, on some level, against not having a say in his future, a protest against not being in the knowing.

Even though Dell can see their trajectory in the landscape from the window of the car, a view that combines with his internal image of the globe in his room, he still lacks a concept of them going to Canada, as this would simply be “improbable” (257). Dell’s horizon of
expectation is not congruent with the actual horizon in front of him. He seems directionless, but at the same time he knows—he sees—where they are going, so his lack of direction equals a sense of not belonging to the direction that he is entangled with. It is as if he has been tied to a rope that is being pulled by someone else. Dell is becoming increasingly spatially removed from his past, but at the same time his future remains obscure, so that he is caught in the situation, a situation which is itself barren; barren of past and barren of future – and, ultimately, barren of Dell himself. He is frozen, to speak, in a situation that is quite literally moved by forces (Mildred, the car) that are outside of his control.

As Dell becomes aware of his inability to act, he gets desperate and momentarily entertains the idea of throwing himself out of the moving car unto the road, which seems to be his “life shooting away” from him “at a terrible speed, with no one to stop it” (258). But since this is not a suicidal inclination, as he imagines he might be able to “pick” himself up, walking back and eventually finding Berner, he remains sitting. He feels “tricked and abandoned”, thinking that his mother told Mildred everything and himself nothing, and that his “loyalty wasn’t respected” (259). The loyalty that he refers to is the loyalty to his mother, and since his mother’s plan for him to go with Mildred have become a proxy for the mother herself, being loyal to the plan means being loyal to his mother.

Yet he feels disrespected because he is kept in the unknowing about what the plan will mean for him. But the reason for why the supposedly responsible adults (Mildred, his mother) have been unclear with Dell regarding what their plan entails for him is that they do not really know themselves. So while we experience, together with Dell, the asymmetry of power over circumstances, and while we are sympathetic to Dell’s conclusion that “being young was the worst thing” (259), it is clear that the adults and Dell are sitting in the same boat, albeit with the adults at the rudder.

What is really illuminated here is a forced constriction of action for all the people concerned, a constriction that was manufactured—unintentionally, unthinkingly—but has since become irreversible and therefore necessary, and which has ultimately served to muddle all concept of the future. Naturally, the constriction on Dell’s freedom is necessary only for the time being, but to Dell “time being” is experienced precisely as time being, which is an oppressive condition unless things are going well, in which case we rarely notice time to begin with. Of course, nothing of this changes the fact that it is the adults who are responsible for the constriction on Dell’s freedom, as they could have acted differently, not robbing a bank, for example, or choosing to take care of Dell instead of handing him over to people who are essentially strangers (which is what Mildred will do). What it does mean, however, is that
everyone within this asymmetry of power are entangled by the same processes of alienation, but that the adults have a greater level of mobility within the entanglement.

When they do cross into Canada, it is an event that barely stands out. The only things that mark out the border are “two dark low bumps” in the highway, which otherwise looks like “a pencil line into the distance” (260). Beyond the bumps, which Dell would not even have noticed had he not looked where Mildred was looking, a blue and cloudless sky stretches toward the horizon. There lies Canada. “Indistinguishable. Same sky. Same daylight. Same air. But different” (260). Dell’s thoughts on crossing the border are characterized by a sort of tranquil perplexity. He asks himself how it is possible that he is going there, that is, after having just concluded that it is indistinguishable from where he already is (260). If Dell had not known about the border, he would not have thought about crossing it. In other words, it is the preexisting meaning of the border that imparts on him a sense of improbability, rather than the place itself.

Dell has difficulties reconciling his concept of the border with the uneventful look of the place, and he resists identifying with the act of crossing the border. But within the contradiction between the supposed meaning of the place and the unfolding events, which Dell knows he is partaking in, there is a space of unclarity that not only allows for new thoughts to be articulated, but that demands it. As they are crossing the border, Dell articulates himself on the spot by connecting to his existing notion of the meaning of crossing a border:

A border was two things at once. Going in and going out. I was going out, which felt significant. [...] For some reason I couldn’t have explained, I wanted us to get across, and felt exhilarated and afraid we might be prevented. (261)

Dell is connecting to one particular aspect of the meaning of crossing a border, “going out”, because this meaning in turn connects to his entire situation of leaving his old life behind without knowing what he is venturing into. But here we notice an important shift in Dell’s emotions, as his concept of the life he is moving away from—life as he knew it—has already started to wither away in his mind, so that something new might assume its place. Or perhaps it has started to wither away only in order to give room for necessary adaptations to the new and unknown world that he is headed towards. What drives this plasticity of personality remains unclear, only the incipient change is visible. It is a process in which alienation unexpectedly morphs into agency. What is invisible is the ultimatum that is posed to Dell by the situation—overcome or be overcome—but if we assume that there is an ultimatum, Dell’s emotional shift becomes less confusing.
Whatever the reasons, some part of Dell seems to know that life as he knew it has become impossible, which causes him to feel exhilarated by the same thing which he only a few moments ago deemed improbable and could not identify with. In fact, upon crossing the border, Dell feels relief, “as if a crisis had passed or been escaped” (264). While he earlier felt “barren”, an emotion that connected to his fear of no longer being able to recreate himself, Dell manages to recreate himself in response to the confusing act of crossing the border. When he does that—that is, when he identifies with the act of “going out”—Dell becomes more whole, in the sense that he belongs more to himself. He has begun to align himself with the objective development—that is, the trajectory of the car—but he does this without relinquishing his own interests, which is evident from the fact he feels exhilarated rather than depressed. In other words, we have to acknowledge that Dell is not only passively going along, but that he is choosing to become a culprit. This situation shows us that there is room for agency even in circumstances that seem to do nothing but deny it. The effect of this is that we experience hope.

However, Dell still experience division, as he wishes that Berner “had stayed to see it with him” (264). Dell thinks about his feeling of relief as something that might be seen. What he himself sees from the window of the car are people that do not “look like strangers” and towns that look like “ordinary towns in Montana” (263), but with strange names—like Saskatchewan—that he suspects will always make one feel strange. It is not completely clear what Dell wishes that Berner could see. Perhaps it is a supposed strangeness fading away so as to show an underlying familiarity that slowly diminishes the cause of anxiety. Or maybe it is himself that Dell wishes that Berner could see, as if his new perspective could be seen on his face, which means that he has started to view himself differently.

Entering the land without a middle

After they exit the Cypress Hills, which Mildred points out are anomalies from the time of the glaciers (263), they enter into a landscape without landmarks such as mountains or rivers, the only landmarks are “whatever you personally knew about: a road, a fence line, the regular direction the wind came from” (265). In Dell’s words:

There was no feeling, once the hills disappeared behind us, of a findable middle point from which other points could draw a reference. A person could easily get lost or go crazy here, since the middle was everywhere and everything at once. (265)
After having crossed the border into a place that seemed to be strange only nominally, Dell eventually enters into a landscape that defies ordering; that is, a landscape that is not easily ordered by the mind but instead dominates over the mind. Harrison, while discussing the origins of Canadian prairie fiction, claims that it is

rooted in that first settlement process in which the pioneer faces two main obstacles: the new land and the old culture. The land was a challenge not only physically but psychologically; like all unsettled territory it had no human associations, no ghosts, none of the significance imagination gives to the expressionless face of the earth after men have lived and died there. The prairie, in effect, lacked the fictions which make a place entirely real. (ix)

Harrison is discussing the roots of Canadian prairie literature, but he is also describing the reaction that the first settlers had when arriving at the prairie. Dell ought to be experiencing something similar, as for him the new land has no human associations, and no fictions that would make it “entirely real”. Writing in 1961 about the causes and effects of alienation and social isolation in the United States, Dean discusses various factors that seem to affect the mental health of the population. “Residential areas with the highest schizophrenic rates”, he says, citing studies on the topic, “are those characterized by anonymity and spatial mobility” (Dean 755). In other words, if the image of this landscape of a perpetual middle causes you to be nervous, your reaction is not unwarranted.

If the familiar towns and people that they first encountered upon entering Canada were located in the “anomalies” of the Cypress Hills, then this vast “middle” is the norm, which begs the question if the people who live there are the “anomalies”; that is, if this place without a middle where one “could easily get lost or go crazy”, imparts on its inhabitants a sense of being somehow out of place, and if these are the kinds of people that Dell will come to live with. Dell himself is certainly out of place. If he first entered into somewhere that was relatively familiar, a place where he could potentially have fit in given its reference to his old life, he is lost anew upon arriving at the prairie, which literally lacks references, except to those who have become highly versed in the landscape, a quality which we in turn associate with some kind of departure from the comforts—and possibly the norms—of civilization.

Already, we suspect that Dell will have to struggle to not get lost or go crazy—that he will have to create his own references, his own landmarks—and that he will have to somehow recreate himself in response to this land of the perpetual middle. We know that he has done something similar at least once, when he rearticulated himself in response to the crossing of the border. But while he could then attach himself to the existing meaning of the border, the
prairie appears to have done away with such symbols, which is to say that people have been indifferent to attaching such symbols to the landscape, as they have been overcome by its sheer unwieldiness and left in a state of perplexity. Dell touches on this perplexity when he has difficulties connecting the border station with the place itself, which seems to defy borders.

This kind of perplexity would be alleviated quite quickly after a return to the village or town—which are, of course, things that people have managed to attach to the landscape—but even then the sheerness of the landscape makes it impossible to completely get rid of the feeling that human communities exist inside the landscape, rather than on top of it or outside of it, which is the impression one gets when living in big cities or densely populated areas. The realization that one lives not on top of or side by side to nature, but within it, is potentially frightful, akin to knowing in the back of the head that one is surrounded by a diffuse entity who is possibly hostile. This realization demands particular attention to what it means to be different from that diffuse entity, that is, what it means to be. And unless one can find some fruitful means of distraction, which at some point has to be sought after in social communities, thoughts of what it is to be invariably lead to an excessive and potentially harmful inwardness. We are, together with Dell, held in unknowing about which of these directions he is headed towards.

**Travelling through space**

Wishing that he could “climb back in the car” (271), but ultimately staying loyal to his mother’s plan—although at this point he does not seem to have much of a choice—Dell turns himself into the care of the enigmatic Charley Quarters, who works for Mildred’s brother Arthur Remlinger:

We passed an empty school bus rocking along. Our headlights swept its rows of empty student seats. Far away in the fields, cutting was going on after dark. Dim moving truck lights, the swirl-up of dust. Stars completely filled the sky. [...] A lever-action rifle was barrel-down on the seat between us, close to his leg. His truck stank of beer and gasoline and the same strong sour-sweet stinging odor I didn’t recognize. There was an animal carcass in the bed of the truck, but I couldn’t tell what it was. (272)

Once again Dell finds himself sitting in the passenger seat of a car, driven by a strange adult towards somewhere unknown. The headlights sweeping the “rows of empty student seats” highlights Dell’s lonely position, as the bus seems to warn us that Dell is completely without his likes here. But things have gotten stranger, darker as it were. It is now night, the landscape
is illuminated only by the stars covering the sky, the agricultural vehicles out on the fields, and the “dim moving truck lights” – it is as though they are travelling through space. The image of space, and “the imposing aspect of the sky”, has, according to Harrison (6), been a feature of Canadian prairie literature since its early days. Here, in the scene with Dell and Charley Quarters, the light has been turned off and space has turned into outer space, their car transformed into a spaceship. The image of space brings attention to the strangeness of the place. The word strange is, of course, related to the word alien, which is again connected to the word space. In Science Fiction, space is the home of aliens, but it is also a place where human beings themselves become aliens, as all supposedly natural connection to place has been severed with the departure from the home planet.

But there is also something animalistic going on in the meeting with Charley Quarters. He has a strange odor about him, he is armed, and he seems to have made a kill. Continuing on their journey in the prairie-space, a deer suddenly emerges in the crops close to the road, “its green eyes gleaming into the headlights” (273). Charley tries to drive it over, but the deer effortlessly moves away, and Charley curses. At this point, Charley is as enigmatic as the deer, as though they are both part of the same world and yet separated through some kind of animosity – an animosity on behalf of Charley, not the deer, whose “effortless” backward step into disappearance seems to indicate that it neither cares nor is surprised by Charley’s attempted killing. The encounter between Charley and the deer reflects some kind of bitterness on the part of Charley, which he is acting out on the representatives of nature, so to speak, as if nature has done something to him to deserve his contempt.

Continuing on their ride, Charley suddenly makes a fast break and steps out of the car. There he stands in front of the car lights, “spraddling his legs”, “pissing a hard stream down onto the dirt, concentrating fiercely”, and “bringing the lemony piss odor” back into the car (274). As Charley is emptying his bladder in this fashion, he remarks that “up here’s a good place to hide” (275). In the same moment, a bird of prey swoops down and makes Dell’s heart jump, neither of which Charley even notices. Charley Quarters seems to be a mixed breed of prairie animal and human, as if he has lived so close to the prairie that it has molded him into something either less or more than human. At this point, Charley seems to be an example of a person who has gone “lost or crazy” in this land without references where “the middle was everywhere and everything at once” (265). If we are to believe Harrison

the prairie with its openness and isolation does make its own peculiar assault on the civilized mind. Because of the strange topography, the experience of
pioneering on the plains made unpredictable demands upon man's sense of order.
(2)

Charley certainly seems like he has experienced some peculiar assaults on his mind, but if he was ever “civilized” we can not say. In fact, we do not know if Charley has created his own references, his own sense of order, his own borders, or if what has happened to him is a diffusion of the borders between nature and man. Or, indeed, if such a diffusion of borders has amounted to some strange system on its own. Charley’s animosity towards the deer seems to indicate that he is alienated from nature, which perplexes us as he seems to be part of it himself, and we are left with the impression that he is fragmented on some fundamental level.

It is telling that Charley Quarters is the first person apart from Mildred that Dell encounters in Canada. Charley Quarters brings attention to the wildness of the new land in which Dell finds himself, a wildness that is simultaneously obscured and highlighted by the darkness of the night and the headlights of Charley’s car. But he also serves as a warning. What he warns us about is not entirely clear except that it is something that might potentially affect Dell. Charley’s reference to “up here” being “a good place to hide” makes us nervous, in part because we wonder what Charley is hiding from (and the thought on whether he is hiding from outer or inner figures is itself eerie). But we are also nervous because we suspect that this—the figure of Charley Quarters—is what happens to those, like Dell in his forced escape from the juvenile authorities, who goes “up here” to hide.

Marooned

When Dell wakes up in the morning, he finds himself in a scrap yard looking place, where Charley has scattered what appears to be pieces of attempted art, made out of household articles and odd metal and vehicle parts, and “set off in the weeds by themselves” (280). As Dell proceeds to investigate his surroundings, he sees a “few gray wooden houses” “scattered along the remains of several town streets”, as well as “evidence of where other houses had been”, and beyond this “the land stretched away not flat but rolling” with only the horizon breaking “the line of sight a great ways off” (282). It is as though Dell wakes up on some small island, isolated in a sea that is rolling away toward the horizon. According to Harrison, the metaphor of the sea has been frequently used in Canadian prairie fiction (12). Interestingly, Harrison comments on the writings of Wallace Stegner, who (in Wolf Willow) revisits southern Saskatchewan in 1955:
the prairie remains essentially unchanged by settlement; it is still an "ocean" responsive only to the will of the elements; and within the ocean metaphor the farms are not even islands, but "ships", with all the fragility and impermanence, the transient quality, implied by the image. (12)

Such is the place where Dell finds himself, marooned in an ocean which at night turns into outer space. It is interesting to note, in passing, that the image of outer space, perhaps more natural to a contemporary visitor of the prairie, builds on the image of the sea and expands on its sense of isolation and alienation. The prairie, however, is land, and we should experience it as our proper element. This duality, of the land providing firm ground under us while reminding us of the ocean, adds to our sense of foreignness, as we remain undecided on whether or not we are in our right element. What are we to expect of a place that has not decided whether it is land or sea? More importantly, we experience this question the other way around, as “What does this place expect of me?”, and as we are only having a conversation with ourselves, this quickly leads to the question “What do I expect of myself here?” Our natural response to this question is to try to become part of the place we are confined to. But how does one become part of a place that lacks an “inside” and an “outside”, where there is nothing to step into and out from? The vast middle, which stretches away on both a horizontal and a vertical level, is, of course, mute.

There on the prairie “island”, in the ghost town where Dell finds himself, remnants of a lost civilization have been taken over by the semi-animal figure of Charley Quarters, who has refashioned these remnants in a childlike and therefore suspicious way, as he is not a child. It is impossible not to see these works of art as expressing both creativity as well as decline and stagnation. But this very ambiguity hints at important traits in the personality of Charley Quarters. He is apparently capable of creating something we might call art, feeble as it may be, which means that he is not completely alienated and therefore not an entirely destructive figure. In other words, we are implicitly made to question a supposed simplicity of Charley Quarters, and to recall that previous events in the story teach us that things might not be what they seem to be; the arrest of Dell’s parents and the subsequent upending of his old life being the prime example of this.

But Dell is only fifteen years old, and this kind of analysis may not be what comes to his mind. What comes to Dell’s mind is the figure of Charley himself, who, with his “unnatural” proportions, is a “disturbing sight out in the open” (283). Dell perceives Charley as a kind of Frankenstein figure, as someone whose originator is unknown but might be the place itself, just like a foreign planet may give rise to foreign species. In contrast to Charley, Arthur Remlinger,
Mildred’s brother and Dell’s seemingly philanthropic caretaker, will inevitably come across as a normal person, a concept which is ultimately of relative meaning.

**Meeting Arthur Remlinger**

With the monster Charley being “out in the open”, the scene is prepared for the entrance of Arthur Remlinger, who has come to the ghost town, Partreau, to talk with Charley and pay a quick visit to Dell:

> He cast his gaze all around where we were – the hot weeds, the Quonset, the broken-down house trailer, the remnants of the town nobody lived in. “They’d definitely burn what’s left of this place down where I’m from,” he said. “Why?” I said. This seemed to almost make him laugh, because the dent suddenly appeared in his smooth chin. But he didn’t. “Oh, it would horrify them,” he said. Then he smiled. “No more possibilities for success. Americans all fear that. They have an improper fit with history down below.” (288)

Not much more is said between Arthur Remlinger and Dell in their first encounter, and Remlinger quickly leaves in his car. Remlinger’s claim that “they” would burn Partreau down where he is from is rather stark and peculiar, as it is given to a young person who has just been uprooted from this down below to live in the very place that Remlinger suggests would have been burned. His remark about Partreau has an intellectual meaning that is unattainable for most fifteen year olds, and he seems entertained rather than understanding when Dell expresses his perplexity about the remark. Remlinger does not seem concerned that Partreau’s newest inhabitant might be depressed by his point that the place symbolizes “no more possibilities for success”. In short, Remlinger seems unfit to communicate properly with Dell. Even his facial expressions do not seem to fit together as they should, as he does not laugh when looks like he is about to.

Even though Remlinger comes across as an unclear individual, he has a style of civilization, in complete contrast to Charley Quarters. But more than that, he is an American, the American that Dell knows has agreed, as it were, to give him a new start. Even though Remlinger does not exactly give a good impression, and while his enigmatic character will never be resolved and he will prove to be a morose and dangerous individual who eventually involves Dell in a murder, the overall context of Remlinger’s appearance works in his favor, so that his peculiar way works to draw Dell’s interest rather than to repulse it.
Their future encounters will continue to be sporadic and equally enigmatic. But when his mother’s plan, which served as a proxy for the mother herself, has been fulfilled, Dell has no adult role models that can provide him with guidance. Like all adolescents, standing as they do on the threshold of adulthood, Dell is in need of such guidance, especially as he lacks a community of peers that could have filled some compensatory role. All of these things, together with his highly unpredictable and contradicting behavior—alternating between seeming interested in Dell and ignoring him—combine to make Arthur Remlinger someone who Dell is “extremely eager” to move close to (377). Dell’s interest in Arthur Remlinger might also be animated by their supposedly shared Americanness. Writing about national identity in American novels from 1960 to 1973, Zetterberg Pettersson comments on the role of nationalism in a world that “is understood as ruled by contingency” (19). Nationalism, Pettersson writes, works as “meaning-endowing ideology” that serves to strengthen the self-confidence of individuals and their sense of belonging to a “nurturing community” (20). In other words, the thought of a shared identity with Arthur Remlinger might provide Dell with a sense of belonging, which ultimately makes him overlook that Remlinger is an unstable figure.

Keeping himself

However, Dell will never get close to Arthur Remlinger. Moreover, it is not completely clear if it is Arthur Remlinger that primarily interests Dell, or if he is interested in the context with which he associates Remlinger. That is, the town of Fort Royal and the Leonard Hotel, the establishment that Remlinger operates:

It was a strange sight to see from out on the prairie. But I liked seeing it as I came and went. It referred to a world away from where it was, and I was, and yet was there in front of me every day, like a mirage or a dream. (296)

At this point, some months after his arrival, Dell has started to work at the Leonard, sweeping floors and cleaning rooms, while in the evenings taking himself back to Partreau. He refers to the Leonard as a mirage, as though the prairie is a desert and the Leonard a hallucination that plays on some desire. What the Leonard symbolizes for Dell is “a world away from where it was” and where Dell himself is. But this means that it also symbolizes the very possibility of being “a world away” while staying right where one is. If Dell associates Remlinger with Fort Royal and the Leonard, he in turn associates the Leonard with the existence of a world outside
of the one he inhabits, as well as the ability to fantasize and remove himself from the confines of the present. The fact that the Leonard does not seem to belong where it is—its “alienation”—ultimately helps Dell to deal with his own alienation. In other words, alienation and the ability to fantasize are, in some way, connected. We might recall Lukács’s discussion on the problematic individual, who, after having lost access to a world adapted to his needs, experiences individuality as an aim unto itself. Here, the Leonard becomes a symbol of individuality, which is perceived as something that connects to a different world outside the confines of the present.

But while Dell enjoys working at the Leonard, as it enables him to get his mind off the depressing facts of his situation (313), the Leonard in turn “endured the blight of disapproval in Fort Royal, which had at one time been a temperance town” (296). The Leonard is populated by American hunters, gamblers, prostitutes, and people who are passing through. Dell has indeed come to live with people who are out of place, and the effect it has on him is that his loneliness is perpetuated. Mrunalini Sasanka suggests that “cultural alienation” is the result of a sense of “not-belonging in an alien land”, and that in order for the individual to no longer feel alienated, he or she has to adjust on three levels: on the social, the cultural, and the psychological (18). Dell can not adjust to the alien land of the Leonard on any of these levels, as the place serves to fulfil needs that are completely different than Dell’s own. His needs, unclear as they may be, are not the same as those of the hunters, gamblers, and prostitutes. It is only the building of the Leonard—the mirage—that helps him deal with his own alienation, and it does this by referring away from itself.

But rather than succumbing to the depressing realization that he is trapped, Dell decides that “the way to not be forlorn and plagued by morbid thoughts” is “to investigate and take an interest in things the way someone would whose job it was to write about it for the World Book” (297). In this fashion, he walks around Fort Royal and Partreau, purposefully recording in his mind whatever he sees. In “Alienation and existentialism in relation to literature and youth”, Winthrop uses the term “commitment”, echoing Sartre, to refer to the “individual's ability to develop a philosophy of life and a set of ideals by which to guide his own destiny” (293). Winthrop argues that one precondition for succeeding with this is to create an identity that does not “consist of incompatible fragments”, which means that “some old roles are abandoned” and “new ones entered into” (293). Dell’s reimagining of himself as an author who takes “an interest in things”, can perhaps be understood in the light of “commitment”; that is, as a way of developing a personal philosophy of life and of stepping into a role that he perceives as something whole.
Another possible explanation for why Dell’s decision to step into the role of an investigator helps him deal with his alienation (his “morbid thoughts”), is that it gives him a sense of purpose. Concerning the effects of ascribing oneself purpose, Dean discusses the example of a group of Jewish doctors who, during the defeat of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, managed to counter “utter hopelessness and resignation by carrying on medical research on their starving compatriots until the very end” (755). One of these men attributed his “survival as a sane being” to a determination that he was going to “preserve his personality by forcing his experiences to yield insights into behavior under extreme conditions” (Dean 755).

Moreover, “choosing to be an investigator”, Dell says, “conferred a small freedom I’d never known up to then” (297). What one might initially see as a mark of passivity (watching), is experienced by Dell as an act that brings freedom. But whether he experiences this as freedom to do something or freedom away from something is not entirely clear. Perhaps the freedom that Dell experiences lies in the very act of stepping out of oneself, of becoming an investigator, rather than in the investigations themselves. In other words, what Dell is experiencing is his own agency. He is expressing this agency in an apparently negative way (investigating rather than intervening, stepping out of himself rather than acting out of himself) – but it is nevertheless a kind of agency, and as such it is a protest against his hitherto situation of having next to nothing to say about his own life. Greenblatt reminds us that “agency is virtually inescapable”; “every form of behavior”, he writes, “is a strategy” (2153). Whether one takes up arms or takes flight does not matter from the point of view of agency, as both are “significant social actions” (Greenblatt 2153).

Even though Dell attempts to move himself closer to people, he largely remains on the outside of social community. A striking feature of Dell's narration is its vivid portrayals of landscape and nature. Even prior to the crisis that projected him unto a path of loneliness and solitude, Dell was an observer and given to a sense of feeling out of place. In his solitary existence in Canada, bereft of a meaningful social life and denied any possibility of a life of his choosing, Dell's tendency to observe is heightened, so that he becomes almost a sentient part of the landscape:

The occurrence that substituted for the passage of time, day to day, was the weather. Weather means more than time on the prairie, and it measures the changes in oneself that are invisibly occurring. The summer days, which had been hot and dry and windy … disappeared, and autumn clouds bore in […] There were few warm days left. Woolly worms appeared in the grass. Yellow and brown spiders built nests and webs for flies in the rotted window casements of my shack. Box elder bugs were in my sheets. Harmless black and green snakes
flattened out in the sun on the sidewalk chunks. [...] Inside the heavy school bus that passed me each day, the children had on their coats and caps and gloves. Geese and ducks and cranes had begun to fill the skies... (323)

For Dell at this point, time has stopped making sense and it has been substituted with a larger force that not only governs the life of the prairie but also ”measures” the changes that are occurring within him. In other words, Dell identifies with the weather, a force that he feels both subjected to and mirrored by, a dynamic which reminds of that of a couple. He watches the movements of the animals around him, including the children inside the passing school bus. He does not seem to identify with the children, as he mentions them only in passing before he moves on to describe the movements of geese and ducks.

While there are many forms of social alienation, there is also alienation from nature. This type of alienation, writes Winthrop, may refer to “Western man’s loss of a sense of kinship with Nature”, an inability to experience “communion” with the natural surroundings, and a loss of a sense of dependence on nature (292). Nature, in fact, is the only place where Dell experiences communion rather than alienation. Possibly, Dell’s intimate relationship with the vast landscape enables him to better deal with his traumatic family experience—at least in the immediate perspective—as the proportions of his trauma are diminished in comparison with the strong impression from the forces of nature. Moreover, while the prairie reduces Dell in size and importance, it also, conversely, enlarges him. As he is swallowed up by the vast landscape of the perpetual middle, he becomes part of it.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analyzed how alienation is constructed in the second part of the novel Canada. I have traced the construction of alienation in a chronological way, mainly through the experiences of the protagonist Dell.

After his family's collapse and the disappearance of his parents, Dell and his sister are subjected to a sort of collective unnoticing, which may be a way of social punishment or the result of their family’s outside position in relation to the social community. The result of the collective unnoticing is that the scene is prepared for Dell to go along with Mildred, who, as the executor of his mother’s plan, serves as a representative for the mother herself.

While he feels increasingly isolated and becomes aware of his lack of participation in deciding his own future, Dell’s anxiety eventually leaves room for a sense of excitement, as he
suddenly identifies with the supposed meaning of crossing the border into Canada, which he understands as an act of “going out”; a parallel event to his experience of having been cast out of family life. In other words, Dell, while experiencing his lack of agency, choose to become an accomplice, so to speak, in the plan. But he does this by adopting motives of his own, which, unclear as they may be, show that he is not completely following along. After Dell’s psychological shift, what appeared to be the crisis (crossing the border), causes him to feel relief as if a crisis had been avoided. This incident is significant as it shows that there is room for agency even in situations where this seems to not be the case at all.

After entering the prairie, the landscape itself becomes a potential cause of alienation, as there are no references or landmarks with which to orientate oneself. The character of Charley Quarters seems to confirm that this land of the perpetual middle can cause one to become fragmented and alienated. Charley Quarters comes across as someone who has lived so close to the land that the border between nature and human has been diffused, so that he is both prairie animal and human. This split in personality seems to make him embittered and strange.

The alienated character of Charley Quarters prepares the scene for the entrance of Arthur Remlinger, whose contrasting way in comparison with the monster-figure of Charley Quarters, makes him into someone that Dell wants to identify with. Dell’s need to identify with Arthur Remlinger might also be connected to his need of an adult leader, and possibly also with their supposedly shared Americanness. Moreover, Arthur Remlinger’s contradictory way, that leads him to alternately approach and distance himself from Dell, becomes an enigma that exacerbate Dell’s fascination. In Dell’s meetings with Charley Quarters and Arthur Remlinger, alienation is constructed as encounters with fragmented individuals. These encounters contribute to Dell’s estrangement, but as he learns how to adapt he also moves closer to himself.

But it is unclear if Dell is primarily drawn to Arthur Remlinger, who he never gets close to, or if he is drawn to the social context that he associates him with. For Dell, the Leonard, Arthur Remlinger’s establishment, becomes a symbol for a world outside of the present one, as it seems to not belong in the surroundings of the prairie. This reminds Dell of the existence of an outside world. In other words, this rift in reality, so to speak, enables Dell to feel better about himself in spite of the circumstances. Here, the possibility to fantasize is connected to alienation.

The Leonard itself hosts a crowd with whom Dell can have next to nothing in common, and this, together with the social stigma that the place endures, combines to perpetuate Dell’s social isolation and alienation. Dell copes with his predicament by assigning himself an interest
in things and by reimagining himself as a writer. By stepping into a role that he has made up, Dell can shift the attention away from his sense of alienation. By apparently stepping out of himself, as if he is resigning his agency for the position of the observer, Dell is in fact acknowledging his own agency, albeit in a negative way. He recognizes that he can do little to change his predicament, but he realizes that he can still assign himself a purpose, which undermines his sense of alienation. Moreover, by stepping into the role of an investigator, Dell is protecting himself from the forces that seem to be pulling him apart.

The landscape that at first seems to pose a threat to Dell’s mind—exacerbating his alienation by lacking human references and diffusing his sense of order—ultimately proves to be a force that counteracts his alienation and the one place where he experiences communion. While his decision to take an interest in Fort Royal and Partreau means that he will remain something like a journalist, that is, someone who is on the outside, his observations of nature lead him to feel as though he is a part of it. Eventually, he grows into the very vastness of the prairie which has reduced him in size and swallowed him whole, so that he becomes almost a sentient part of the landscape. In other words, the isolating force of the landscape also proves to be an enlarging force, one that at least for a time counters—or, rather, overwhelms—Dell’s social isolation and alienation.
Works Cited


