

Before Our Time: Radical English-Canadian Poetries Across the Post/Modern Divide

by Gregory Betts

The poet of today must give us the picture of the terrific hell that looms around himself. He must level himself with the masses and learn to understand them. His love must not be the ugly love in the ivory tower of self-glorification. His love must be deeply energetic, abrim with action and struggle. Poetry must become the inspiration of the masses; it must be a powerful weapon in the hands of the workers. The beginning of the movement towards this poetry may seem crude, incomplete, bombastic. But it is a thousandfold better than the abstract broodings of the sophisticated, geologisticated, or-thinologisticated and 'humanitarian' poet.

– Editorial. *Masses* 1.4-5 (July-August 1932): 6.

*And how shall I hear old music? This is the hour
Of new beginnings, concepts warring for power,
Decay of systems—the tissue of art is torn
With overtures of an era being born.*

– F.R. Scott “Overture.” *Overture*. 1945.

Though postmodernism has gained broad acceptance, at the least, as an influential movement in Canadian letters, the theorization of the difference between postmodernism and previous literatures remains decidedly inadequate. In particular, the materialist consciousness that some claim differentiates post-modernism from modernism is, in fact, present in the works of many Canadian modernist writers. Furthermore, for many modernist writers materialist and even outspokenly Marxist critique functioned as a central concern of their writing, though critics have subsequently and consistently overwritten the issue in favour of the also-present autotelic, aesthetic, and imagistic tendencies of writing from the period. Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy, for instance, replicate the distorted depiction of modernism in *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English (1957-2003)*, the first seriously researched survey of Canada's “radical” literatures in English in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. A great portion of the theoretical component of the book involves distinguishing

their “rhizomatic” conception of radical literature from the more conventional “progressive” conception of a literary avant-garde; a distinction that seems to adequately divide the postmodern from the modern. They present (and demonstrate) a multi-axial model of Canada’s poetics that, beginning with Vancouver’s TISH movement and extending through the more overtly political eruptions of the 1980s and 1990s and beyond, have emphasized “the construction rather than the reflection of self and world—the production of meaning over its consumption” (xi). Though they notably avoid use of the term “postmodern,” this definition and periodization of “radical” comfortably accords with established conceptions of postmodernism, and particularly Linda Hutcheon’s characterization of the Canadian postmodern. But however useful and innovative Butling and Rudy’s narrativization of Canadian postmodernism may be, the narrative relies too heavily on an imprecise antagonism to other literatures in Canada, including (and the subject of my discussion here) with Canadian *materialist* modernists. They notably and without sufficient explanation omit from their account of radical writing in Canada those writers from the 1920s and 1930s who, oftentimes in conjunction with their political allegiances, also emphasized “the construction rather than the reflection of self and world—the production of meaning over its consumption.” Ironically, the primary political contribution of the modernist radical writers was their role and influence in the Royal Commission on Nation Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, which eventually but directly led to the creation of the Canada Council—the moment selected by Butling and Rudy as the genesis of radical writing in Canada.

Their study is notably organized around their own personal experiences of and contributions to various Canadian “radical” aesthetic communities. In a manner similar to Hutcheon’s self-conscious positioning in *The Canadian Postmodern*, the authors situate themselves within the community of writers they study—allowing themselves an evaluative, laudatory role in this book. They praise communities of writers “that embrace difference” (26) in defiance of “centrist, exclusionary systems” (32). The authors’ decision to celebrate the history of their own aesthetic communities is, inevitably, both the strongest and weakest dimension of their study. For instance, the self-congratulatory mythologies of the TISH movement are all carefully laid out and collected, but left generally unchallenged. To paraphrase the lore, the Vancouver-based poets associated with TISH magazine felt marginalized as West coast writers from lower-class backgrounds; they viewed their writing as an “oppositional poetry and poetics” (50) and sought to demonstrate their experience of Vancouver as a “legiti-

mate cultural site” (51). According to this account, it was not, as some have charged, simply neo-colonial mimicry of an American literary movement by enthusiastic undergraduates, but a conscious attempt “to stay in one place and ‘liberate’ that literary/social space, to make room for a different kind of poetry and a different kind of poet” (53). To her credit, Butling does contest the gender-politics of the founding TISH editors’ “marginalization”¹ by noting that “as young white men, their very radicality increased their social capital” within a patrimonial literary genealogy (57). Indeed, the TISH poets were quickly ensconced into the Canadian literary establishment and ultimately its canon.

Despite the book’s overall tendency to commemorate, the value of collecting the anecdotal mythologies behind TISH and many other such disruptive poetics in *Writing in Our Time* should not be underestimated. Though unabashedly biased in favour of the movements it records,² the book at the least provides the beginnings of an official narrative to which critics can respond: they advance the conceptualization of the hitherto awkwardly conceived period known conventionally as either the Contemporary Canadian or postmodern era. Frank Davey, in his recent review of *Writing in Our Time*, hails the work as “a major event” for its efforts in this direction (“Some Writing” 120). More critically, he also highlights a series of its theoretical shortcomings, in particular its brevity (just 254 pages) in contrast to its ambitious theme, its uneven and inconsistent point-of-view, its tendency toward anachronistic and overly tidily segmented stages in the development of radical writings, and, most importantly, its inconsistent and problematical vocabulary. Davey reminds us that centre-margin and mainstream-radical binaries oversimplify the dissentious negotiation of literary power. He also addresses various attempts by Butling and Rudy’s “radical” poets themselves to describe their innovations: bpNichol’s resistance to the idea of an avant-garde, for instance, and Fred Wah’s similar challenge to progressivist lineages of innovation. Despite the differences and contestations that Davey highlights, Butling and Rudy collect many diverse challenges under the rubric of “radical” in their effort to connect forty-five years of innovative writing in Canada. In fact, considering the privileged-insider’s subject-position of the narrators of the work, the text provides a useful opportunity to contrast the self-conceptualization of Canada’s “radical” postmodern aesthetic communities with other radical, avant-garde, and modernist literary traditions.

As Davey begins to address, however, there exists an overriding awkwardness in their vocabulary worth investigating further: the idea of a “radical” author as presented in this study bears little outward resemblance

to the political tradition of radicalism. For instance, the enshrinement of the TISH writers into the mainstream body of Canadian literature presents more of a contradiction to the book's rhetoric of antagonistic marginality than either Butling or Rudy admit in any of their essays; a contradiction that continues in their extensive list of other radical poets—including such “marginal” writers (144) as Robert Kroetsch (10), George Bowering, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Daphne Marlatt (23), bpNichol (24), Roy Miki (26), and Christian Bök (73). What brings these writers together is not cultural marginality, or even radical activity (in the conventional use of the term to refer to far leftist political agitation), but rather their commitment to experimentation, to new poetics, and to literary innovation. As the book indicates, they have been collectively influential “in recuperating the *old* and reconstituting the *now* into rhizomatic formations that embrace difference” (26). Butling and Rudy, however, succumb to the romance of the radical cultural position and rhetorically invoke a pervasive and threatening antagonistic conservative force that they claim holds a position of dominance over these important innovators. This may have been true for Canadian writers prior to the 1960s, but, in reality, the radical writers mapped out in this book participate in the contemporary Canadian literary mainstream; they are all amongst the most taught, hired, awarded, and celebrated of contemporary Canadian authors, and have all consistently been beneficiaries of governmental subsidies.³ While Butling and Rudy attempt to construct a menacing, unspecified conservative force, the weakness of their efforts in this direction reveals the purely rhetorical basis of the exercise. We are told that the radical writers oppose “the genteel literary establishment that prevailed in early 1960s English Canada” (53). Despite the careful research into the radical poets of the period, the specific details of the members, values, and contributions of the literary establishment they challenge is left to speculation; this genteel and antagonising group with their “elitist” poetics (54) are never identified nor their poetics explained. Even the landscape painters of the Group of Seven managed to convince a few prominent critics, including Hector Charlesworth, to publicly attack them as “radicals”—but of this lot, nothing (at least according to the evidence in this book). Instead, the antagonistic forces are left an unsubstantiated scarecrow, blown and trumpeted up out of proportion to perhaps increase the impression of their affectation.

Butling does much better in her short chapter on TISH when she confronts the close ties between the radicals and mainstream institutional powers and begins to re-define the term “radical” to suit the particularities of the Canadian postmodern context: “in order to articulate the ‘radical’ as a

position of power that includes non-mainstream subjects, we need to identify more pathways to that power and also to challenge some of the protective barriers erected by those who have a vested interest in maintaining its exclusivity" (57). This is the start of a useful recalibration of a vocabulary that, despite continuing to draw upon the romance of rebellion, admits that the reputation of literary 'rebel' is a source of literary power in Canada. Butling effectively illustrates a number of subsequent challenges in the 1970s and 1980s to the white/male-domination of literary subjectivity in the "first" generation of radicals. What is not clarified in the book but is consistently implied is that the designation of "radical" is constantly shifting with the times in response to, as the book's epigraph makes clear, "how everybody is doing everything." Convention and repetition, not self-declaration and intention, determine what is innovative and/or radical. Convention also, however, circumscribes and contests difference: particular aesthetics and ideologies (even those that were once considered "radical") inevitably seek to naturalize and duplicate themselves at the expense of any contesting aesthetic or ideology. Such a model of literary convention presumes instability; presumes that no particular aesthetic or ideology can sustain a privileged cultural position without contestation. So long as there is power, or as Frank Davey has put it, "literary power," there will be groups from opposing aesthetic communities vying for it. Davey invoked the idea of a specific literary power in reference to the competitive network of subsidies, publishing opportunities, distribution, and literary awards ("The Power to Bend Spoons" 2-3). He used the competition for power to explain the disintegration of a universal avant-garde movement into fractured aesthetic communities of the 1980s and 1990s. This competition between aesthetic standards has continued unabated into the new millennium. Ironically, and perhaps inevitably, the radical poetics mapped out by Butling and Rudy constitute a significant portion of the dominant praxis in contemporary Canadian letters. As a testament to this aesthetic shift, Montréal's reactionary traditionalist Carmine Starnino has launched numerous criticisms of radical writers like George Bowering, Christopher Dewdney, and Christian Bök that ironically (and perhaps self-consciously) echo TISH's early complaints of marginalization (see, for example, his introduction to *A Lover's Quarrel*. Or, merely open the book at random and witness his sedulous savaging of the cultural relativism of the new "official literati").

Beyond this semantic paradox where radicals of old have become dominating powers, another irony lurks in the periodization used in *Writing in Our Time*. The inaugural year for the period of their study of radicals

(1957) was selected precisely because that year the Federal Government instituted the Canada Council funding body for the arts. It is beyond strange to pick the moment the presiding government became involved in the arts as the moment of genesis of an anti-establishment tradition. True, the Canada Council was deeply influential on the careers of ensuing generations of Canadian writers; but if one is to tell the narrative of radical writings in Canada it seems inconsistent to privilege the formation of a government agency rather than the radical writers that demanded and provoked its creation. Instead, the pre-TISH writers are reduced to two brief sentences that praise a handful of undergraduates from Montréal for publishing a journal, and a handful of others from Toronto for mimicking Ezra Pound (17). This history, with subtle variation, is consistent with the narrative of Canada's literary genesis as told by the likes of John Sutherland, Louis Dudek, Ken Norris, and the TISH writers themselves.⁴ All notably suggest that writing of true relevance only begins in this country, with some scattered exceptions, with themselves.

Without questioning the importance of each of these writers, the history of Canadian radical writing demands a more rigorous conceptualization that predates the 1950s, just as it demands a more rigorous definition of the term if the unofficial but implied intention is to move beyond the conventional and restrictive terminology of modernism and postmodernism. A more holistic history of Canadian radical literature must at least acknowledge the writers associated with the Communist Party of Canada prior to the Second World War, such as Dorothy Livesay, Joe Wallace, and Oscar Ryan. Many of these writers were arrested for their "seditious" and "radical" writing (see Watt's *Radicalism* 261): legal designations used by the government to identify and disempower threats to their governing ideology. From the same period, writers from the Canadian mystical community, such as Bertram Brooker, W.W.E. Ross,⁵ Herman Voaden, and Wilson MacDonald, were using their writing to directly challenge conventional Western notions of individuality and monotheism. Early modernist and feminist writers, such as Flora MacDonald Denison, Louise Moray Bowman, and J.G. Sime, challenged the ideology, institutions, and literary forms of patriarchy. The neglect of these writers becomes most untenable in the period following the Great Depression when these aesthetic communities joined together to openly and directly challenge the federal government on numerous social fronts, including demanding more finances for writers and artists. Of these, in short, in *Writing in Our Time* as in the other histories by the authors mentioned above, there is nothing. For a book that proposes to challenge "the nationalist 'line' which collapses multidirec-

tional activities into a homogenous Canadian literary family complete with a genealogy of mothers, fathers, and rebellious or derivative sons and (mostly) dutiful daughters” (29), the authors do a remarkable job constructing just such a genealogy from the formation of the Canada Council and the emergence of the TISH collective. They construct a pastoral image of “a unified avant-garde in English-speaking Canada” that lasted until 1979 (23), a friendly narrative of radical activity first introduced and conceptualized by Frank Davey as a period of “cultural homogeneity” in his article “The Power to Bend Spoons” (15).

The ideological basis of the radical tradition Butling and Rudy provide relies upon a broadly defined epistemological challenge to the ideological assumptions of Western liberal humanism. The decision to exclude from their record similarly conceived challenges occurring before the Second World War—not to mention the radical poetics of 19th Century including African Canadian, First Nations, and Métis writings⁶—suggests the type of solipsism by which the ‘baby-boom’ generation has been stereotyped. More to the point, it continues “the self-promotion of the Tish poets” that M. Demels and Metro Paserik once likened to an infectious disease (Demels 144). The exercise of exclusively historicizing Canada’s radical poetics since 1957 is tenable only with the *presumption* that the authors have consciously limited their study to radical Canadian writings within one particular period—namely, the postmodern. To admit this caveat to the narrative they provide would at least admit to the exclusion of the extensive body of poetry of contestation. It would also admit the possibility of collecting and comparing the extensive sweep of radical Canadian poetry, including but not limited to Butling and Rudy’s important *initiating* research. In fact, there are surprising parallels between the ideological ambition underlying the radical activities of the postmodern writers Butling and Rudy explore and the radical activities of earlier, modern writers mentioned above. Considering the modernist influences admitted by contemporary postmodern writers, this is hardly surprisingly: prominent Canadian postmoderns like bpNichol and Steve McCaffery have frequently connected their work with modernist anti-art movements and other experimental activities.⁷ Amongst Canadian writings, the line of influence is much less concrete, though there are significant parallels between the anti-capitalist, anti-humanist tendencies that arose after the formation of the Canada Council in 1957 and those that arose before in the groups that demanded its creation.

In fact, the materialist consciousness that emerged in postmodern writing and theory echoes the same preoccupations of the more politically-

engaged “proletarian” radicals of the Canadian modernist milieu. Materialist critique provides an ideological continuum between the modernist and postmodernist radical literatures; two diverse pools of Canadian writers who used their writing to confront and challenge various aspects of Western liberal humanism. In speaking of feminism, Butling writes, “stories of women’s collective struggles [...] provide historical continuity and momentum and prevent each generation from having to start over” (153). The same is also true for all radical communities; as the stories of previous radical traditions (including early Canadian feminisms) have been so obviously displaced, invoking connections in our time *and* before our time is itself an act of re-membering the work of radical Canadian writers as part of a historical network of challenges to liberal humanist and imperially-oriented capitalist ideology in Canada.

My intention is not to preciously undermine the contributions of post-1960s writers, thinkers, and activists. The broadly-aligned postmodernists have had a transformative impact in Canada by bringing about an increased awareness of the machinations behind the production of culture, including of cultural forms and their relation to the manufacturing process. In the intersection of what McLuhan identified as the materialist nature of cultural products and what Marx understood to be the broadly political nature of material, the postmodern moment has politicized cultural products from the inside out. As a result, things in and of themselves lose their objectivity in exchange for the less stable subjectivity of cultural forces. Traditional Western hopes for and beliefs in the individual and the authorial voice suddenly seem mired in the muck of international economies and deep ideological bias. The cultural dilemma caused by participating in a local community deeply connected to and integrated within an exploitative global network provoke the kinds of problems explored earnestly in Jeff Derksen’s recent writing: “I want to see / the real relations / but you’ve got Nikes on and I like you / so I have to try and understand” (*Transnational Muscle Cars* 10). The material history of production is an inevitable part of cultural meaning in postmodern writing. In registering the ideological shift into postmodernism, Fredric Jameson connects the rise of global capitalism with the ‘outing’ of the private individual into a less coherently imagined construct of broadly public and political forces: “today, in the age of corporate capitalism, of the so-called organization man, of bureaucracies in business as well as in the state, of demographic explosion—today, that older bourgeois individual subject no longer exists” (6).

Postmodern writing in Canada has responded to this shift in historical consciousness by probing and exploring what previous eras have taken for

granted: including the immateriality of individualism and the materiality of cultural products. In her book *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon draws attention to the similarity between contemporary feminist and postmodernist challenges to “notions that are tied up with (male) notions of individual subjectivity” (7). The connection and parallels she identifies between postmodernism and contemporary feminism highlight the increased awareness of the ideological basis of culture: it is precisely the postmodern “willingness to confront both political and social issues” that overturns the “‘universal’ as a prime cultural value” in exchange for the “postmodern ‘different’” (ix). In the 1988 article version of “Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics,” Frank Davey comments that “The major ideological conflicts of our time concern economics, race, region and gender—usually not as single but as interwoven factors” (68). His study of Atwood’s writing examines the “parodies and subversions of official discourse [...] [the] multiple disruptive embedded narratives within ostensibly conventional ones” (81). While admitting that his initial reading of Atwood did “not go far enough” (71), he connects numerous paradoxical and parodic insertions in her feminist writings to the postmodern attack on the “bourgeois illusion of the free-standing subject, unproduced and freely acting, which a male-dominated Western culture has used since the Renaissance to conceal various culturally-constructed practices such as the oppression of women” (82). Davey’s postmodern criticism has consistently sought to postulate text in the context of broadly ideological cultural forces; revealing a text’s ideology through the formal arrangement of its language. In *Canadian Literary Power*, he explores the microcosm of Canadian governmental policy for literary grants, and the ideological and political machinations of publishing and distribution in Canada. His critical position as a postmodern writer and critic reacts against (the presumption of) a modernist period when such ideological concerns were not taken into account. Butling and Rudy, and admittedly most postmodern writers, have consistently used the broad generalizations built into this presumption without questioning, testing, or correcting its false premises: indeed, postmodernism has always had a difficult and awkward relationship to history and lineages.

A number of scholars, however, have catalogued the participation of materialist aesthetics in the development of Twentieth Century Canadian literature, particularly of Canadian modernist poetry. This influence is both profound and consistent throughout Canadian writing, with proleptic examples dating back to Confederation, and introduces the possibility of a substantial contiguity with the postmodern materialism identified by

Hutcheon and Davey. From Frank Watt's doctoral dissertation *Radicalism in English Canadian Literature Since Confederation* (1957) to James Doyle's *Progressive Heritage* (2002), studies of Canadian leftist writing have carefully documented the appearance of radical verse by the likes of Alexander McLachlan, Leo Kennedy, Joe Wallace and F.R. Scott, amongst many others. In the latter pages of his dissertation, ironically successfully submitted in the same year that Butling and Rudy suggest radicalism began in Canada, Watt offers a terse history of Canadian radicalism and literature:

In Canada, as early as 1872—and quite independently of Marxism—the discovery had been made by radicals that literature was a potent factor in moulding the attitudes and ideas of man as a social and political animal. During the 1880's and 1890's extreme attacks were being made on bourgeois culture as a means of conditioning men's minds to the evils of the capitalist *status quo*, and at the same time efforts were being made to create forms of literature which would present and create enthusiasm for the cause of the proletariat. Among the small minority who struggled to keep alive and to promulgate radical ideas during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the 'boom' era of Canadian economic development, not a few were poets, or to be more exact, poetasters; and these displayed in their practice their faith in the value of literature in the radical cause. But not until the 1930's do we find Canadian intellectuals endeavouring to develop a revolutionary aesthetic. (247)

Watt's discussion of the literature of the 1930s attends to the emergence of a conceptualization of art as fundamentally "a product of society" rather than of individuals (249). He argues that art from the period sought to shift the historical consciousness of Canadian society to recognize and confront the proletarian experience of place—similar to the TISH call for a politically-engaged conscious experience of locality. To substantiate the claim, Watt quotes from G. Campbell McInnes' 1932 article "Art and Propaganda" which argues that: "An artist, we have said, is one who reacts in a vivid and creative way, to his own significant and immediate environment; and in any reactionary environment [i.e. non-progressive, non-Marxist] there is an element of inherent falsity, which will, sooner or later, manifest itself in the work of artists who reflect it" (4-5). Also reminiscent of the post-individualist conceptions common in Canadian postmodern theory, Watt concludes of Canadian literature in the 1930s: "The social basis of art and the responsibilities of the artist were assumed or argued aggressively to such an extent that individualism in the simplest sense was no longer possible [...] The individualist of a former era seemed to be dead" (253, 257). The materialist consciousness of the Marxist writers from the period

were already considering and exploring the post-humanist conceptions of individuality Butling and Rudy use to distinguish Canadian “radicalism” in the latter half of the century.

Half a century after Watt’s study, James Doyle’s *Progressive Heritage* presents a thorough study of left-leaning Canadian radical writing as a self-contained genealogy, attempting, in part, to overturn “the artistic, academic, and bureaucratic establishments that have supported the prevailing liberal bourgeois conception” of Canadian literary development (1). Doyle makes a convincing case for the deep impact of leftist radicalism on Canadian literature since Confederation, focusing on the involvement of specific and influential writers with politically-oriented organizations. Bryan Palmer’s “Rhyming Reds and Fractious Fictions” addresses scholarly work on Canadian leftist writing, and notes the tendency by Canadian scholars to attend to highlighted themes of national mythology instead of analysis of socio-economic segmentation. And while contemporary radical poetics insist upon consciousness of Canadian class (and other) prejudice(s), Palmer’s paper effectively illustrates a similar struggle-to-conscious in many Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century leftist writers and critics—adding the names of many figures that Watt and Doyle overlook.

Larry McDonald’s survey of the intersections between socialist thought and the “English Canadian literary tradition” highlights the political activist writings of even recognized figures like Archibald Lampman, D.C. Scott, Nellie McClung, Laura Goodman Salverson, Ralph Connor (aka Rev. C.W. Gordon), Martha Ostenso, and Margaret Laurence. McDonald warns against the tendency to lump all writers influenced by socialism together, noting the sharp ideological divisions between various leftist communities. His point demands that we perceive and narrativize these Confederation-era flirtations and early Modernist engagements with progressivist politics through literature in such a way as to sustain the diversity of their approaches to radicalism. Like the splintering of radical aesthetic communities in the 1980s and 1990s mapped out by Davey and Butling and Rudy, numerous constituent leftist groups in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s competed amongst themselves for aesthetic and ideological dominance.

Allan Filewod’s “Performance and Memory in the Party” surveys the rise of one such community, the Progressive Arts Clubs (*hereafter* PACs) that coupled radical exploration of literary forms (most prominently drama in his discussion) with a practical understanding of the economies of production and dissemination. The PACs across Canada developed, produced, and distributed poetry, theatre, art criticism, visual art, short fiction, and

even novels, putting their work oftentimes directly into the hands of workers/readers. The modernist scholar Dean Irvine explores similar ground in his studies of poet Dorothy Livesay, a prominent member of PACs in Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver. Irvine's work, particularly in "Among Masses," explores connections between Livesay's political activity and her oftentimes less polemical creative output. Davey's own study of Earl Birney admits that "Both the humanitarianism which led Birney to Marxism and the optimistic humanism of Marxism itself endure throughout his poetry" (Davey *Earle Birney* 18).

While these studies are useful in documenting the associations and points of intersection between Canadian literature and specific political causes, they do little to indicate or demonstrate the cultural centrality of anti-capitalist and anti-humanist political consciousness in early Canadian modernism. Furthermore, they all end their discussion of radical tendencies in specific individuals without addressing the relationship between progressive politics and modernism, let alone identifying the ideological linkages to Canadian postmodernism and other manifestations of contemporary (radical) materialist critique. The assumption seems to be that the early Twentieth Century materialist and modernist movements, while related, have little to do with each other in any fundamental way: one is political and the other aesthetic, and never the twain shall meet. The separation helps to explain why the various "radical" histories of progressive literatures in Canada, from Dudek to Butling and Rudy, omit, overlook, and ignore their modernist forebears. The tendency, as I have previously mentioned, is not exclusive to members of "radical" aesthetic communities. Irvine, for instance, makes a pointed effort to distinguish Livesay's "proletarian" (184) or "antimodernist" (198) literature from her "bourgeois" (190) or "modernist" (199) writing, even though her most famous, influential, and modernist works—such as "Day and Night" and "Call My People Home"—are perfectly imbued with materialist consciousness and political ambitions. As she, herself, explains of Canadian literature in *Right Hand, Left Hand* (1977), "until we look to the people, and the industries, and the economics of our social set-up, we will have no original contribution to make" (230).

From the academy, Irvine is not alone in resisting the contiguities between Canadian politics and art: Brian Trehearne's groundbreaking studies of Canadian modernism have also thus far ignored the social and political consciousness of the period, arguing instead that Canadian modernism was primarily influenced by Aestheticism—the pre-Modern literary movement led by Oscar Wilde, et al, that propagated an autotelic "l'art

pour l'art" poetics. In Trehearne's 1989 book *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists*, Dorothy Livesay, for example, is only mentioned in passing (61, 252, 313), and—surprisingly—included in his catalogue of Canadian Aestheticists (313). In fact, throughout the book, Trehearne chastens Canadian modernist poetry up until the 1940s for its lack of "class-conscious historicity" and for its overriding echoes of British aestheticist poetics. The irony of the tendency to use a passionately communist poet from the 1920s and 1930s in studies that obfuscate modernist materialist consciousness was not lost on McDonald, who protests that such conceptualizations of Canadian literature tend to count "as an 'influence' in most studies of Livesay's writing that Livesay read Emily Dickinson; it does not count as an 'influence' on her writing that she worked night and day for seven years on behalf of communist revolution" ("Socialism" 215).

The existing barrier between Marxist political engagement and the broader network of movements associated with modernism (even while most scholars readily admit that Karl Marx was an important propagating force on the emergence of Modernism)⁸ must first be overcome before genuine and productive comparisons between Canadian modernism and post-modernism can be made, and genuine differences identified and understood. The divide, however, is in part the product of generations of advocates for an autotelic poetics, including Anglo-American High Modernists and New Critics (most prominently by Canada's own Northrop Frye)—whose own self-mythologizing historiography of the modernist period entrenched the division. The postmodern radicals that attacked the ideology of the autotelic poetics movements appear to have embraced the distorted history of Canadian modernism they were given without testing the ideological and limited nature of its formation.

The limitations of this history has led to a politically and aesthetically skewed literary history of Canadian activity. For instance, the limited inclusions of modernist little magazines in the various catalogues of little magazine history in Canada, most prominently by Norris and now Butling and Rudy, all conform to a biased conception of genuine literary activity that excludes political association. There are numerous examples from the period that highlight the untenable separation of art and politics, but none more so than the lively example of *Masses* and *New Frontier*. Dorothy Livesay's involvement with both of these magazines, during her decidedly political years in Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver, offers one of the most salient examples of the interfusion of Canadian modernism and materialist consciousness. In 1931, she and a diverse group of far-leftist Canadian art-

ists came together in Toronto to form the first PAC. The group, though connected through explicitly Marxist allegiances, was not directly or at least publicly affiliated with the outlawed communist party (though many of its members certainly were). The PAC was strictly artistic—though their poetics involved a utilization and exploration of Marxist ideology. In 1932, members of the PAC agreed to create a newsletter to clarify and debate their aesthetic ideas, to distribute poetry and visual art, and to spread news of their theatrical activity. Despite the inevitable political commentary in the magazine, *Masses* was decidedly and primarily aesthetic. The use of space in the magazine confirms the multidisciplinary aesthetic focus of the publication: the twelve issues averaged just twelve pages each, but of those pages, roughly four-fifths were devoted to art criticism, short fiction, and original poetry; the other fifth being given to political issues and community news. Each issue averaged seven poems. Though modest overall, the magazine compares well to the dominant forums of the period, such as *The Bon Echo Review* which averaged roughly four poems per issue, *The Canadian Forum*, which averaged roughly five poems per issue, and *The McGill Fortnightly Review*, the only modernist little magazine mentioned in *Writing in Our Time*, which averaged roughly five poems per issue. As these numbers indicate, in the context of the paucity of the times, *Masses* was a fairly substantial outlet for creative literary production in Canada between the wars. In total, twenty-four different writers published original poems in the journal, including some of the period's finest: such as Livesay, Langston Hughes, Oscar Ryan, and Bertram Chambers. With over one hundred PACs quickly established in Canada, this literary little magazine had unprecedented total control of their own creation, production, and distribution – all focussed around a specific and guiding poetics. Thus, in their very literal way, did the PAC respond to the material realities of literary production.

Of course, the magazine was only partly aesthetic. Its outspoken political ambitions—“it stands as a challenge to all that is corrupt, all that is reactionary in Canadian bourgeois society, and in Canadian cultural life particularly” (“Our Credentials” 3)—has led cultural critics, historians, and scholars to firmly parenthesise the writing away from the general corpus of Canadian literature. The distinction and the separation have been noted and entrenched by all critics who have commented on *Masses* in particular, and Canadian leftist writing between the wars in general. Bryan Palmer, for instance, in his survey of leftist poets like Joe Wallace—once an extremely popular Canadian poet⁹—notes with dismay how “marginalized such writing has come to be constructed by those who have defined

Canada's cultural standards" (9). "Marginalized," in this context, and in contradistinction from Butling and Rudy's use of the term, does not refer to innovative writers working with and within mainstream and governmental cultural institutions: Wallace, once a Nova Scotia parliamentarian, was arrested for his political activism and subsequently has gone completely out of print.

One of those modernists who lamented the aesthetic model of the radical leftist writers was Bertram Brooker, perhaps the finest general arts critic from between the wars. Though not without his own radical ambitions,¹⁰ Brooker lambasted writers like Wallace, Livesay, and the like for their utilitarian approach to art. Instead, he wrote that "Art is not—and should not be—*useful* to society, *in any sense whatever!* [...] [But] among fanatical Communists an artist who does not use his gifts to further the cause of the revolution is stigmatized as a sort of traitor to his generation" ("Art and Society" xv, xxi). Even still, even while contesting the poetics of the group, Brooker recognized that individual pieces of writing emerging from that segment of Canadian letters deserved full recognition. He was the first to anthologize Livesay's Marxist long poem "Day and Night"—in the same 1936 collection in which he lambasted the leftist writers.

Colin Hill, in his unpublished survey of early Canadian modernism, goes even further in embracing the leftist writers by making a firm connection between the distinctly Canadian strain of modern-realism with the social realism called for in *Masses*, and in its successor *New Frontier*. Hill explains that these magazines "deserve recognition as the founding periodicals of the leftist literary tradition in Canada. But another aspect of *Masses* and *New Frontier* has been entirely overlooked: their loud and polemical pages abound with comments on the importance of realism in modern writing...these magazines are of crucial significance to the modern-realist movement" in Canada (218-219). I agree with Hill's assessment of the interconnecting aesthetics of Canadian modernism and leftist radical writing. One need only compare, as he does, the various manifestoes from both sides of the ideological divide to recognize parallels between *Masses* and those of the gestating modernist aesthetic collectives. The spirit of defiance, self-confidence, and rejection of the establishment further characterise the impassioned pleas of both.

The radical left and the Canadian modernists shared the stylistic and aesthetic ambition of developing better modes of realist writing with stronger connections to genuine Canadian experience. Thus, Ross, an early Canadian modernist accepted by the likes of Dudek, Norris, Rudy, and Butling, sought to be "more 'Canadian' / than most / of what has been put

down in verse / in Canada [...] it is hoped / that [my poems] will seemingly contain [...] something of / the sharper tang of Canada” (“Foreword” 10). From the radical left, L.F. Edwards argued that the goal of authentic literature was “to transfer realistic life to the written page” (“Authorship & Canadiana” 9). The inaugural *Masses* editorial, too, sets the journal’s goal as the promotion of writing produced “from the life of Canada’s factories, farms,—and breadlines” (“Our Credentials” 3). The parallels in style and poetics draws the radical leftist and modernist movements in Canada into surprisingly close proximity. This connection highlights other shared characteristics of the modernist aesthetic collectives and the non-aesthetic leftist movements. For example, we have in *Masses* a fairly standard prototype of the modernist aesthetic collective—and of the same type valorised in *Writing in Our Time*. The group fashioned a specific (radical) poetic, drafted numerous manifestoes in its defence, and set to work fulfilling the aesthetic vision they had created. Also in typical modernist fashion, their literary activities focussed on little magazines, in opposition to the mainstream populist press, and their theatre was fundamentally experimental—as likely to happen off the stage as on it. The Realist orientation of the modernist radicals was not absolute, however, as various individuals in the Canadian leftist camp openly advocated for the connection between European *surrealist* art and political materialism (see, in particular, T. Richardson’s “A Defense of Pure Art” in *Masses*). While radical postmodernists might be hesitant to connect Realist movements with their own, Steve McCaffery argues in “Sound Poetry” that innovative contemporary experimentalism began in Canada in the 1940s as a response to French surrealist ideas. Either way, the radical modernist writers from between the wars were already exploring and experimenting with realism and surrealism.

The modernist activity that Butling and Rudy do embrace—the avant-garde they hope to distinguish from their notion of the radical—also shares important characteristics with the politically-aligned aesthetic communities. The early Canadian modernist collectives, including the artists associated with *The Canadian Mercury*, *Preview*, *New Provinces*, *First Statement*, les Automatistes, and even, to a lesser extent, Toronto’s modern occultists, borrowed heavily from the tradition of political collectives—adopting and adapting the use of manifestoes, for instance, as well as explicitly military jargon like “avant-garde.” The *politically*-oriented aesthetic collectives, ironically, aren’t accepted as modernist primarily because of their *genuine* use of these same political machinations. Like the more canonical modernist poets Ross, Call, and Knister, however, the leftist writers latched onto the specific forms of literary modernism—includ-

ing free verse, terse imagistic lines, and colloquial language. While the poetry in *Masses* was consistently derivative, awkward, and overly simplistic, and all else critics have assailed it for, the little magazine functioned as a forum through which writers could test and hone their writing. The magazine was put directly, and without charge, into the hands of its audience, and the poetry fulfilled its very specific function for a very specific audience. The contemporaneous existence of such similarly structured collectives, with direct overlap in their literary style and form, suggest the inappropriateness of the various attempts to divorce literary modernism in Canada from the literary side of the radical leftist collectives. Their shared attributes on either side of the ideological divide indicate important links in their formation and manifestation. Butling, in fact, explicitly praises the Montréal undergraduates for taking control of the production of *The McGill Fortnightly Review*, citing the fact as evidence that they had joined the “international avant-garde movement” (17). This university-funded little magazine is the sole publication from the 1920s and 1930s admitted into the TISH-centric genealogy in *Writing in Our Time*.

To complete my claim that early Canadian modernism contained a similar materialist consciousness as would later emerge in the familiar characterization of Canadian postmodernism, by 1936 for a few brief years the radical left and the pioneering Canadian modernists actually merged in the creation of one under-studied literary little magazine. *Masses* stopped publishing in 1934, but was replaced in 1936 with the more reformist and moderate *New Frontier*. Though made up of many communists from the PACs and *Masses*, *New Frontier* embraced the so-called “pink” leftists that *Masses* had openly mocked, in an effort to construct a “United Front” against fascism and capitalism. The reincarnated little magazine ran for 17 issues, each more than double the size of its predecessor, hovering around 30 pages. Its editors included many of the prominent writers and editors from *Masses*, but added some of the most recognizable names in the development of Canadian literary modernism, including Livesay, Barker Fairly (founder of the ‘bourgeois’ *Canadian Forum*), Leo Kennedy, Jean Burten (editor of the short-lived *Canadian Mercury*), and A.J.M. Smith. Contributors included W.E. Collin, Herman Voaden, A.M. Stephen, E.J. Pratt, A.M. Klein, Morley Callaghan, Ernest Hemingway, Leon Edel, and Stephen Spender. The amalgamation of pioneering modernists and radical Marxists bewildered pure aestheticists like Brooker—prompting him to protest the change in his essay quoted earlier. In this reformed Canadian leftist milieu, even the formerly “fascist” Group of Seven were admitted as

innovators in the radical realist stream: “All honour to those valiant pioneers, the Group of Seven, who dared to paint new pictures, inspired by the brilliant and sharp country they saw before them” (S. Livesay “Art” 26). All challenges to the existing social structure in Canada, whether through politics, activism, or aesthetic form—including both realism and surrealism—were admitted as part of the now broadly conceived radical poetics. Magazine publication during the tenure of Canadian modernism was dominated by politically radical journals with a developed interest in aesthetics (like *Masses* and *New Frontier*) and aesthetic journals with a developed interest in radical politics (like *The Bon Echo Review*, *First Statement* and *Preview*). These publications and the writers, with their distinctly leftist allegiances, characterize Canadian modernism in much the same way that the radical publications and writers mapped out in Butling and Rudy’s study characterize Canadian postmodernism.

Butling and Rudy’s study highlights the formation of the Canada Council as the ontological genesis of Canada’s contemporary radical literatures. Earlier I contested this use of the government agency in their study for its lack of reference to the history of its formation. Considering its impact on generations of Canadian writers, it is worth noting the role Canada’s radical modernists played in the formation of this important institution. For, indeed, the Canada Council, in many ways, forms the concrete link between these two eras of radical writing in this country. As Carol Boucher, a Program Officer with the Writing and Publishing Division of the Canada Council, noted in a recent interview, prior to 1957, “There were more and more artists putting pressure on the government to receive help in their craft. [The Canada Council] was founded as a result from a mix between the desire to create a national identity and as a response to the growth in the artistic community” (Maingot). Dating back to the 1920s, individual artists and critics like Brooker were already publicly calling for federal involvement in the arts through subsidization. Brooker used his nationally syndicated weekly arts column with the *Southam* newspapers to advocate on behalf of artists:

I am all for the subsidization of art, the building of opera houses, concert halls, art galleries. I am all for thrusting every kind of art manifestation under the attention of the masses, so that they cannot escape it. I am all for the doctrine that national welfare is not merely economic welfare but the welfare of contentment which springs from simple associations with beauty. I am all for making the whole nation an audience—a sympathetic audience—for every kind of art and every kind of artist, except the obscene, and especially an audience that will be tolerant to the experimentalist, for if we do not experiment

in this country, where are we to expect experiments to be carried on. (Brooker "The Seven Arts" 3)

But it was during the Second World War, with the almost utopian optimism surrounding the inevitable rebuilding of society, that the specific push for a national funding body for the arts became a *cause célèbre*. In June 1941, a large group gathered in Ontario for the Kingston Conference of Artists which led to the creation of the Federation of Canadian Artists (FCA)—the first national arts lobby group. The group was particularly connected with Toronto's Arts and Letters Club—a diverse club whose members included Vincent Massey, Ernest MacMillan, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Brooker, and Toronto's mystical playwright Herman Voaden. On 21 June 1944, the FCA, headed by modernist sculptor Elizabeth Wynwood, sent a delegation of artists (including MacMillan, Harris, and Jackson) to lobby the Special House of Commons Committee on Reconstruction and Re-Establishment in Ottawa (Litt 23). The demands for national funding presented in their "March on Ottawa"¹¹ were passed along to Prime Minister Mackenzie King. In 1945, another important lobby group emerged, the Canadian Arts Council representing eighteen societies and approximately ten thousand members (*Report* 182), with Voaden as its founding president. By 1949, King finally responded to these efforts and established the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, with Massey as chair. The Committee heard from reports from twelve hundred petitioners at one hundred and fourteen meetings across the country (Forster 218). Amongst those many petitioners were numerous advocates and representatives from the far leftist community. For instance, the Canadian Writers' Committee, representing forty-two Canadian authors including Frank Scott, Birney, Page, and Livesay, directly presented their views before the Massey Commission. Vincent Massey, himself, had numerous connections to pioneering Canadian artists, most particularly with Toronto's mystical modernist Harris.¹² Though Massey professed a more Arnoldian sense of cultural nationalism, Harris' fears of American liberal individualism were "instrumental" in influencing Massey's overall conception of art in society (Finlay 115). In fact, it was Massey's eventual official biographer, Dr. Claude Bissell, who stood before the Massey Commission as the official representative of the leftist Canadian Writers' Committee (Litt 110). Within the testimony itself, the Massey Commission also heard anecdotal evidence of the artistic successes of leftist arts groups as justification for the use of those models on the national level. For instance, in testimony before the Massey Commission, representatives from the Dominion Drama Festival outlined a vision of the theatre

inspired, in part, by what they had witnessed from the radical leftist community:

No one who was present will ever forget the thrill and impact of the production of 'Waiting for Lefty' (their scene of which is laid in a labour union hall) by Clifford Odets and presented by the Progressive Arts Club of Vancouver at the 1936 final festival in this city [Ottawa] before the then Governor-General, the then Prime Minister and a distinguished and international audience such as only this city can present. The impact of that very leftish anti-capitalist play in the audience of the Little Theatre was something. (Hoffman 47)

While Arnoldian notions of nationalism and nation building were the dominant ideological thrust of the Massey Commission, not to mention aggressive lobbying by the Canadian military for a state-regimented media,¹³ radical leftist writers pushed for the creation of a national arts funding body and were referenced within the proceedings for providing a successful model of Canadian art. The ensuing Report by the Committee of 1951, led directly to the formation of the Canada Council as a national arts funding body. The Canada Council Act, enshrined by Butling and Rudy as the moment of genesis for Canada's subsequent radical poetries, received its Royal Assent on 28 March 1957. It was the inevitably compromised product of decades of negotiations, testimonials, and lobbying—including the efforts of hundreds of artists and writers who directly influenced the process and conclusions of the Commission. If it is agreed that the Canada Council is to play an important role in the conceptualization and periodization of contemporary radical poetries in Canada, the efforts and careers of those that preceded and provoked it also deserve a place in the history of Canadian radical poetries. If nothing else, the Canada Council should be regarded not as a point of division, but as the existent bridge between the radical communities of poets across the post/modern divide.

Davey reminds us, in "Reading Canadian Reading" as well as in "Canadian Literary Power," that literature—even more abstract literary theory—contains the imprint of the political conflict surrounding its creation. That literature participates in the deeply ideological contest of cultures but yet—as he famously accused the thematic critics—conceals its own position with problematic claims of objectivity and inevitability. Both modernist realism and materialist or social realism sought to uncover and reveal the objective character of the society surrounding them. But Davey's theories insist that we recognize how even these writings have been shaped by their historical conflicts—including the divisive contest against each other. If we branch out to include in this discussion Harold Bloom's revelation in

“The Dialectics of Poetic Tradition” that modernism as a whole was a swirling contest of competing individuals and aesthetic communities—and was hardly a unified or inevitable progression—we can begin to recognize that even Canada’s own miniature modernist literary network contained the nodes of a little polysystem of competing poetics. It was, furthermore, comprised of numerous radical nodes, some of which directly connect to various manifestations of contemporary, postmodern radicalism.

The similarities between the modernist and postmodernist manifestations of radicalism are not presented here to minimize the difference between these two eras, but to suggest the inappropriateness of accounts of Canadian literature that ignore the contiguities that exist between the political and aesthetic ambitions of both. There are important contiguities in the primary aesthetic and political concerns of economics, race, region, and gender—all of which were, by the necessity of spatial limitations, only briefly touched upon in this essay. Each of these interwoven nodes of modernist and postmodernist radical poetics contain their own genesis, genealogies, and litany of heroics—some of which have been alluded to here. Most significantly, though, a substantial number of modernist and postmodernist radicals have consistently and similarly sought to invent poetics that challenged conventional assumptions of identity and ideology through a distinctly and consistently materialist consciousness. It is this contiguity that Butling and Rudy’s important and useful study needlessly omits and an important complication, indeed a nuance, that future assessments of Canadian radicalism ought to integrate into their narratives. Doing so will not only permit the study of genuine and significant connections, but it will also enable the more exact and coherent differences between these two bodies of Canadian writings to emerge.

Notes

- 1 Davey famously explained that the TISH writers “felt marginalized in a number of ways, having come from a small town. Marginalized by being Canadian in North America; marginalized by being from the West Coast and British Columbia, in the Canadian context; marginalized by becoming more and more interested in language rather than in content, which was the dominant esthetic” (Niechoda “A TISHstory” 92-3).
- 2 An example of how this bias reveals itself: of the 1979 conference from which the book took its name, Butling only tersely lists the fact that Phyllis Webb and Dorothy Livesay refused to participate and criticized the conference (24). Instead, she allows Warren Tallman to define their criticism and rebut it (28 fn13). As the only account presented in the book, Tallman’s dismissal is thus enshrined as authoritative, while Webb and

Livesay's concerns are both trivialized and silenced.

- 3 Butling notes a few exceptional literary magazines and small presses, such as *NMFG* and *Filling Station* that have received none or very little government funding (43).
- 4 Sutherland began his career as a radical critic in 1943 in the inaugural *First Statement* with the claim that "we will be talking in a vacuum...making gestures that have references to nothing" (21). As an aside, it is interesting to note that Sutherland is not even casually mentioned by Butling and Rudy. Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski's *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* (1970) announces F.R. Scott to be Canada's first modernist of note, though Scott's first book was only published in 1945. Ken Norris's *The Little Magazine in Canada 1925-80*, as in *Writing in Our Time*, hurriedly admits to a handful of individuals being active in the 1920s, but makes little effort to explore or expound on their aesthetic communities and contributions (11).
- 5 Ross has been enshrined as a founding Canadian modernist/radical because of his compatibility with Anglo-American imagism. He was equally, if not more, interested in mysticism and occultism. His papers, in the University of Toronto's Fisher Rare Books Library, contain huge amounts of unpublished surrealist and mystical writings.
- 6 In "Literary Activism: Changing the Garde," Butling speaks of "First Nations incursions" into Canadian literary discourse beginning in the 1970s and 1980s "when the alternative poetics networks were reconfigured to include these subjectivities" (229). Besides the pastoral and frankly patronising image of a dominant school of radicals benevolently conceding power to accommodate First Nations writers (instead of that power being wrested away from clenched fists), Butling's historical sense negates the life and career of such a poet as Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), who struggled against and challenged cultural and gender conventions that erased the subject position of aboriginal women.
- 7 McCaffery cites the American modernist Gertrude Stein as a "natural and obvious" antecedent for Nichol's work (192). Nichol and McCaffery often traced the genealogy of their experimentation back to the modern period work of Hugo Ball, Alfred Jarry, and Kurt Schwitters, amongst many others.
- 8 For example, see M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* entry for "Modernism," where Marx figures prominently in the development of the intellectual climate that led to modernism.
- 9 Wallace's overtly political and populist poetry fared especially well in communist countries, where, according to James Doyle, his "fame in Eastern Europe and China rivalled that of Norman Bethune" (Doyle "The Canadian Worker" 94).
- 10 As I argue in *'The Destroyer': Modernism and Mystical Revolution in Bertram Brooker*, Brooker advocated for and believed in a wide-ranging spiritual revolution led by artists that would overthrow the degradation of the present capitalist world.
- 11 An embellished moniker that self-consciously alluded to the more famous "On to Ottawa" trek in 1935 organized by Depression-era leftist activists.
- 12 See Karen A. Finlay's *The Force of Culture: Vincent Massey and Canadian Sovereignty* for more details on Massey's relationship with Harris, dating back to 1906, and other Canadian mystics.
- 13 See Litt's discussion of Minister of National Defence, Hon. Brooke Claxton's advocacy for a government ordained national arts culture and policy (11-29).

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