

Early and Ahead: Reconceiving the Avant-Garde in Canada

Gregory Betts. *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 310 pp.

One of the great pleasures of reading Gregory Betts's *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations* is witnessing a scholar delineate a field of research that many readers will assume does not exist. Any student who has taken the ubiquitous university course in "Canadian Literature: 1967 to the Present" will probably surmise that experimental writing in Canada is a post-centennial phenomenon or, at best, a post-Second World War development involving a few outliers from the forties who managed to inspire an exuberant generation of artists in the sixties. Certainly, the tendency of every generation of Canadian authors to declare that no writing of any consequence had appeared in Canada before their particular literary moment exacerbates the misperception that Betts combats. In *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations*, Betts demonstrates that from the turn of the twentieth century onward Canada produced a series of important avant-garde artists whose work spanned literature, the visual arts, and radical theatre. What is more astonishing, Betts illustrates that this avant-garde activity was not confined to a few cliques labouring in obscurity. Rather, Betts demonstrates that the innovations of the avant-garde had significant influence on the material, aesthetic and political development of Canada in the early twentieth century, and that these innovations have subsequently been suppressed by literary and cultural historians. For example, one is gobsmacked to hear, at the end of an exhilarating chapter on the diverse manifestations of surrealism in Canada, that "a 2002 Surrealist exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario—the so-called Biggest Surrealist Experience Ever—... included exactly zero Canadian works despite its size and the diversity of represented Surrealisms" (190). Whereas most good books of literary criticism leave me with the feeling that individual authors or works are more complex than I imagined, I concluded *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature* with the conviction that entire discursive fields of literature and Canadian Studies need to be reconfigured.

Betts's survey is impressively detailed and wide-ranging; it is not the kind of book one writes over a summer. Although Betts frequently pays homage to the scholars who blazed trails into this field of modernist

research before him, it is worthwhile distinguishing the scope and ambition of Betts's work from that of his predecessors. *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations* is not a lightly annotated collection of esoteric but intriguing texts, as is *Avant-Garde for Thee*, edited by Margaret Atwood and Christian Bök. Nor is it an eclectic collection of essays on diverse aspects of early twentieth century writing, as in Dean Irvine's *The Canadian Modernists Meet*. Nor is it an edgier interpretation of the period usually covered by CanLit courses, as in Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy's important book, *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English (1957-2003)*. More akin to Christian Bök's *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science*, Betts's study revisits rare or overlooked work to connect Canadian avant-garde movements to international ones and to demonstrate that these relationships are collaborative and creative, rather than simply derivative. Betts certainly depends on his predecessors, but the temporal, linguistic, and geographical range of his work is much greater than anything that has preceded it, as is the surprising degree of coherence Betts wrests from this diverse material.

Avant-Garde Canadian Literature builds on the research informing Betts's monograph on Bertram Brooker and his editorial work on the urban poetry of Lawren Harris and the linguistic experiments of Bill Bissett. However, Betts's greater achievement in this volume is to synthesize current scholarship on the avant-garde with the kind of broad, interdisciplinary knowledge that has earned Betts the directorship of the Centre for Canadian Studies at Brock University. His opening chapters survey "the normative models of avant-gardism in order to understand the Canadian difference" (9), and his later chapters always take time to point out national nuances in the network of avant-gardes, such as the fact that the "optimism in Canada following the First World War (in poignant distinction to Europe's disillusionment) left many keen and ready for some momentous indeed glorious occurrence" (105), making the cultural climate ripe for the daring of avant-garde art. Betts also moves easily from theoretical to poetic examples across an astonishingly large range of texts. For example, his 58-page chapter on "Theory of the Avant-Gardes in Canada" is sufficiently rigorous that he can begin a later chapter on Canadian Vorticism with an epigraph from Robert Service. Peppering the book with populist references such as Service's verse underscores Betts's argument about the broader awareness of avant-garde activity in early Canadian letters and gives the scholarship a wry humour. Yet Betts can also move in more arcane directions to illustrate, say, the impact of the eminent Canadian Kant scholar

John Watson on the idealist philosophical tradition in Canada and, by extension, theosophist painters and poets such as Harris.

For simplicity's sake, Betts divides avant-garde writing in Canada's first century into three broad categories. To begin, there are the "Cosmic Canadians," such as Harris, Brooker, Wilson MacDonald and Flora MacDonald Denison, who draw upon Dr. Maurice Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study of the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901) to develop literary and painterly forms that express their mystical notions of a transformative evolution in human consciousness. Bucke's theories proposed a new union between nature and humanity, as well as between science and religion, through an evolution of the human soul to a higher plane of interconnection, examples of which are found sporadically, but with increasing frequency, in figures such as Buddha, Jesus, and Walt Whitman. The "Cosmic Canadians" who strove to join this pantheon fused Bucke's ideas with other mystical traditions to produce a variety of formal innovations across the arts. For me, the revelation of this chapter was Betts's discussion of the vibrant arts scene that coalesced around Bon Echo Inn in Eastern Ontario, which functioned as a summer hotel and spiritual retreat for artists and thinkers from Toronto and the northeastern United States. The novelist and suffragist Flora MacDonald Denison operated the inn as well as editing "English Canada's first modern literary magazine, *The Sunset of Bon Echo*" (96). Regular visitors included writers such as Albert Durant Watson, who produced *The Aureole*, "Canada's first published free verse long poem" (98), and associates of Walt Whitman. Indeed, the Bon Echo arts scene evolved out of a Whitman Club organized by Denison, and she had the following quotation from "Song of Myself" cut into a cliff face above Mazinaw Lake: "My foothold is tenon'd and mortised in granite / I laugh at what you call dissolution / and I know the amplitude of time." Denison's son Merrill, himself a pioneer in Toronto's Little Theatre movement and an advocate for innovative drama, donated the inn and surrounding property to create Bon Echo Provincial Park. Somehow I grew up in a theatre town, paddled across much of Ontario, attended Queen's University in Kingston, and studied Canadian painting, theatre, and literature without anyone explaining these interconnections before.

In his next chapter, Betts moves to francophone Quebec to study Canadian surrealism and *les Automatistes* such as Thérèse Renaud, Claude Gauvreau, Paul-Émile Borduas, and Françoise Sullivan, whose "total refusal" of the status quo in Quebec culture is better known to scholars and art lovers. In Quebec, the publication of the manifesto *Refus global* in 1948 and the subsequent firing of Borduas from his college teaching position is

considered a catalyst of the Quiet Revolution and the re-evaluation of Quebec's traditional mores in the 1960s. *Les Automatistes* are also well known in English Canada, in part because among them "[a]ll of the hallmarks of canonical avant-garde movement are present: they self-identified as a group, wrote manifestoes that sought to articulate the aesthetic ambitions of the collective, and produced work with radically eruptive styles that formally embodied the sociopolitical values they mapped out for themselves" (139). In my opinion, Steve McCaffery's 1978 lament, cited by Betts, that the influence of *les Automatistes* does not extend beyond the borders of Quebec needs to be updated: anyone who studies modern Canadian painting today must know Borduas and Jean-Paul Riopelle; anyone interested in modern dance and feminist performance art must know Françoise Sullivan. However, anglophone criticism tends to accentuate the group's formal innovations while muting their political objectives. Betts makes an interesting intervention in this criticism, and dodges the fraught question of whether the "French Canadians" discussed in *Refus global* are Canadian and/or Québécois, by arguing that "English Canada went through its own quiet revolution" (142) in roughly the same period as Quebec and then by tracing parallels between the two sociocultural transformations.

Finally, Betts examines "Canadian Vorticism," a branch of a "short-lived avant-garde art movement from England of less than a dozen members" named for "the image of the inner circle of a whirlpool where the churning energy of water is at its maximum speed and intensity" (192). Ezra Pound, an American in London, coined the term "vorticism," and one of the ostensibly British movement's leading practitioners, Wyndham Lewis, was Canadian by birth if not by temperament. During the Second World War, Lewis fled to Canada where he befriended Marshall McLuhan, and the chain of vorticist influence in Canada can be traced from this meeting: "McLuhan supervised Sheila Watson's doctoral dissertation on Lewis's aesthetics, and Sheila Watson (née Doherty) married Wilfred Watson who co-wrote *From Cliché to Archetype* with McLuhan. Nearby to McLuhan at St Michael's College at the University of Toronto was John Reid, the fourth central figure of Canadian Vorticism, the novelist who lived with Pound in Rapallo, Italy, for nine months (having secured an invitation through T.S. Eliot), before returning to Canada" (192). While these vorticists did not identify as a group, they did cluster around the Universities of Toronto and Alberta and they did transmute the British movement's genocidal fantasies of cleansing wars into a drive to "experiment with the meaning of ritual and language in the electric age" to counteract what they perceived as "the degenerating course of Western culture" (201).

The only weakness of Betts's book is his treatment of relations between the aesthetic and radical avant-gardes. These two spheres of avant-garde activity overlap, but in general the aesthetic avant-garde is concerned with formal innovations that generate new forms of consciousness, while the radical avant-garde considers art as a means to facilitate a new political order: "whereas the revolutionary projections and politics of the aesthetic avant-garde are first realized in the work of art and later contribute to political change, radical avant-garde artists use their work to advance the cause of an already existing political revolutionary movement" (33). Betts clearly sympathizes with the radical avant-garde's attack on bourgeois mediocrity and tries to contextualize the shortcomings of radical ideologies when put in practice. However, the evidence of his many case studies inadvertently reads like a stacked argument against the programmatic use of art because the political acumen of the artists, beyond the initial gesture of protest, is frequently poor. One recoils in horror, for example, at the thought of what disasters might have ensued if a stylistic innovator such as Lewis really did have the power to redesign British society according to vorticist principles when one reads political analyses such as his assertion that Hitler was a "Man of Peace" and "not a sabre-rattler at all ... I believe Hitler himself—once he had obtained power—would show increasing moderation and tolerance to the Jews" (206). The fascist tendencies of the modernist avant-garde are well known, but Betts's third chapter also demonstrates that André Breton's attempt to enlist surrealism in the cause of communism resulted in disappointment and discord between artists and statesmen. Elsewhere, when Betts addresses the radical avant-garde's disdain for, and affinities with, liberal capitalism, he must appeal to a sense of irony: "Ironically, avant-gardism now seems oddly commensurate with the explosive and dangerous capitalist vision that insists upon innovation, individualism, and future vision (at the expense of tradition, multiplicity, and environment)" (11). Perhaps it is not, as Betts suggests, "ironic that avant-gardism borrows its vocabulary from the military, exploration narratives, and scientific discourse, three central pillars of state ideology" (13). Perhaps the modernist avant-garde's need to be seen as revolutionary, to engage in vigorous self-promotion, to impose order, and to make a spectacle of aesthetic and political violence, guaranteed its failed overthrow of liberal capitalism. If this is the case, then the culture of spectacle that Betts bemoans at the conclusion of his book for its degrading effect on the avant-garde's mystical visions and utopian political projects is also one of the "early manifestations" of avant-garde activity in Canada ripe for reconsideration. The fact that Brooker, McLuhan, and several members of the

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Group of Seven had extensive, if somewhat antagonistic, ties to the advertising industry makes these ironies seem more structural than accidental. Still, these contradictions do not detract from the overall brilliance of Betts's book, the exciting fields of artistic endeavour that he maps, and the conviction he inculcates in his readers that this little-discussed body of literature is indispensable for a proper understanding of the evolution of the arts in Canada in the twentieth century.

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