

REVIEWS

Marginal Notes: *The Canadian Modernists Meet*

Irvine, Dean, ed. *The Canadian Modernists Meet*. University of Ottawa Press, 2005. xv + 363pp.

In reading *The Canadian Modernists Meet* I was struck by parallels with the recent controversies surrounding the expansion of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, perhaps the single most important institutional standard bearer for the modern in the twentieth century. The organization of the collection in its new setting calls into question “the continuity of modern art” which was implied by “the march of the permanent collection galleries in painting and sculpture” in the old setting which “leaves you virtually no choices.” The Museum’s Chief Curator, Kirk Varnedoe, has expressed the hope that “the story we’re telling [will] get more complex and more diverse..., but that we [will] not lose the sense of a main thread ...some sense of mainstream.” <<http://www.thecityreview.com/moma.html>> What is clear from these comments, to quote an essay by Arthur C. Danto, is that despite the implications of the expansion and the radical reorganization of the collection, the bullet has not yet quite been bitten: “What has not yet come to an end (or so it would seem) is the idea of a canon...one can see why the museum would want to give its authoritative vision of Modernism’s narrative an architectural embodiment. But [the] concept of a canon may itself be dated as an art historical reality.” <<http://ssl.thenation.com/doc/20050131/danto/3>>

These are precisely the kinds of issues addressed in *The Canadian Modernists Meet*, a collection of essays growing out of a symposium on Canadian Modernism held at the University of Ottawa in 2003. As Dean Irvine writes in his introduction to the collection, “the image of Canadian modernism’s mid-twentieth-century canonicity” has “faded” (11); and if there is one thing the essays in this collection have in common it is that they all contribute in one way or another to “the decentring of Canada’s modernist canon” and to “open[ing] the way for the production of multiple counter-narratives to contest the more restricted narratives promulgated during the period of Canadian modernism’s canonicity” (11). More specifically, Irvine argues for the importance of marginality, pointing to two different ways

in which a sense of marginality has been crucial to the development of Canada's own particular brand of modernism.

Now that modernism and the central modernist writers have been so thoroughly assimilated into the canon, it requires an effort of the imagination to recapture their sense of how marginal they were to the dominant traditions of Canadian literature and culture of their time. In an illuminating account of the poem from which the symposium and this volume take their titles, F.R. Scott's "The Canadian Authors Meet," Irvine discusses how the poem originally ended with the poet as the "very picture of disconsolation," sitting off in a corner and ignored. In the more familiar version of the poem, dating from the 30s when the position of the modernists seems much more assured, this ending has been altered, and the marginalized, disconsolate poet has been replaced by a brash self-confident satirist. One of the aims of this collection is to recapture the sense of marginality in Scott's original portrait of the modernist poet.

Marginality in a second sense is, if anything, more important: the marginality of Canadian modernism to the European and American forms of this international movement that so clearly influenced and stimulated modernism in Canada. Marginality in this sense is not a value judgement; it is a recognition that "Canada's modernists ... are characterized by ... their capacity to draw selectively from the cultural traditions of European and American modernisms without becoming assimilated by them" (9). Citing a phrase by A.J.M. Smith that recurs as something of a mantra in the collection, he refers to this as "eclectic detachment."

Most of the essays in this collection demonstrate the importance of one or both of these aspects of marginality to Canadian modernism, but beyond that they do not share any single thesis or approach. The contrast with this volume's most important and influential predecessor, Dudek and Gnarowski's *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*, which Irvine cites in his introduction, is informative. *The Making of Modern Poetry* has a story to tell, a canon to define. Basic figures are identified (all men, with the exception of P.K. Page, who is represented by a brief letter), key issues are articulated, and a basic chronological narrative, from "The Beginnings of the Modern School" to "Broader Horizons" is established. As the editors readily acknowledge, "the arrangement and presentation of this material in the chapter introductions imposes some interpretation on the part of the editors..." (Dudek and Granowski, v). To be sure, the same can be said for this volume, and in fact for any volume of essays which is intelligently edited, but there clearly is a difference. Readers seeking a single overarching definition of modernism in this volume, or a consensus on the major

figures or issues will be disappointed. But as a guide to what was going on among a wide and varied group of poets, novelists and playwrights (and one visual artist) in Canada in the second quarter of the twentieth century, who all saw themselves doing something new in the face of a conservative and generally hostile literary and artistic culture, the volume is of great value.

The volume consists of 14 essays, in addition to the editor's introduction. In what follows I will be focussing on the essays which seem to me particularly interesting, both because they are excellent representatives of the range of approaches taken in the volume and because they happen to deal with topics close to my own interests and areas of expertise.

In light of the volume's concern with marginality and counternarratives, it is a bit surprising how many of the essays deal with familiar figures—A.M. Klein, F.R. Scott, Raymond Souster, Sheila Watson, Marshall McLuhan, Louis Dudek, Dorothy Livesay, Sinclair Ross, Ernest Buckler, Elizabeth Smart, P.K. Page. Only a few contributors actually focus on previously neglected figures or bodies of work: Louise Morey Bowman, Katherine Hale, Anne Marriott, Arthur Stringer, Cecil Butler, and leftist theatre in the thirties. However, most of the essays on the "canonical" writers bring distinctly uncanonical perspectives to them. This is particularly true of the essays by D.M.R. Bentley on F.R. Scott and A.M. Klein, by Brian Trehearne on A.J.M. Smith, and by Glenn Willmott on Sheila Watson. The subjects of these essays are about as canonical as Canadian Modernists get, yet each essay explores, from its own particular perspective, the issues of marginality, particularly in the second sense defined by Irvine, the "capacity to draw selectively from the cultural traditions of European and American modernisms without becoming assimilated by them." Bentley approaches this marginality primarily from the Canadian side of the equation; Trehearne focusses on a central European modernist tradition as it is transformed in a Canadian setting; and Willmott explores a particular moment in the career of Canadian modernist, immersed in a European milieu yet responding to it with a very Canadian sensibility.

D.M.R. Bentley's essay, "'New Styles of Architecture, a Change of Heart'? The Architectures of A.M. Klein and F.R. Scott" is a product of wide reading in unusual areas and stimulating speculation. He identifies the importance of architectural space in Klein's *The Rocking Chair* and his unfinished novel, *Stranger and Afraid*, and in a series of poems about the Canadian North by F.R. Scott. Bentley's discussion of the use of architectural imagery in these works emphasizes the European and American influences on them (especially LeCorbusier's writings and the work of the

Tennessee Valley Authority), while at the same time observing how these influences are transformed in the Canadian context. In particular, while there are dark undertones to the urban landscapes portrayed by Klein and Scott there is a sense of optimism and delight, which is alien to the jaded portrayal by most European modernists of the unreal city as a symbol of spiritual alienation. While capable of sharp criticism of his beloved Montreal, Klein is also profoundly at home with it; and the urban landscape of madness and despair presented in *Stranger and Afraid* is part of a dialectic between a vision of architectural structures as “exemplify[ing] the negative aspects of human nature” and as “bespeaking humanity’s capacity to build a good and better world” (26). The same is true of Scott’s postwar poems about Canada’s North which grew out of a trip he took with Pierre Eliot Trudeau in preparation for a series of lectures on “Canada and Canadian-American Relations.” Bentley links these often harshly satirical poems to an essay on “The State as a Work of Art” which Scott had delivered some years earlier, in which he presents a vision of social development, especially of the North, as the creation of a “beautiful social language” (29). It is only in the context of this vision of hope and possibility, rooted in a particular moment of Canadian history, that Scott’s architect texts can be understood.

Trehearne’s essay on Smith and surrealism is part of a long range project with the aim of placing the modernist movement in Canada in the context of American and European developments, by carefully defining the terms of the argument and the nature of the evidence. In “A.J.M. Smith’s ‘Eclectic Surrealism’” Trehearne marshals convincing evidence that, even though Smith “rejected any identification of his poetry with surrealism” (119), he in fact he wrote a number of poems that clearly show the influence of surrealism, which played a key role in the development of his poetry, despite his attempt to identify himself exclusively with the Anglo-American modernism. Trehearne’s argument is convincing and his speculations on why Smith suppressed evidence of his Surrealist work or denied its importance are fascinating, though inconclusive. Like Irvine, he suggests that Smith’s reservations about Surrealism may reflect the “eclectic detachment” which Smith identifies as characteristic of Canadian modernism: he was inspired by the “new spontaneity, construction, and intensity of image” of surrealism, but was uneasy about the “flaunting of the self” (130) that it seemed to demand. Be that as it may, Trehearne’s essay provides a valuable and unexpected perspective on one of the most canonical of Canadian modernist whose reputation and readership may have suffered in recent years by too narrow a definition of his aims and achievements.

The Sheila Watson whom Glenn Wilmott portrays in “Sheila Watson, Aboriginal Discourse, and Cosmopolitan Modernism” is very much in the tradition of cosmopolitan modernism associated with A.J.M. Smith, but as far removed from his detached eclecticism as it is possible to imagine. Wilmott focusses on the period recorded in Watson’s Paris journals of the mid-fifties when, while struggling with an agonizing crisis in her marriage, she was simultaneously discovering Samuel Beckett’s “modernist vision of an alienated world, one stripped of...social ties” (104), which closely reflected her own personal situation. At the same time she was completing her work on *The Double Hook* which shares this modernist vision but sets it in a dialogic relationship to an aboriginal vision emphasizing “gifts, goods, commodities, and social relations alternative to the dominant economy and social culture of modernity’s capitalist and imperialist heritage” (109). In this sense Watson can be seen as engaging in a similar dialectic to Bentley’s Scott and Klein “exemplify[ing] the negative aspects of human nature” while at the same time “bespeaking humanity’s capacity to build a good and better world.” Her marginalization, in both senses which Irvine explores in his introduction, is a crucial element in her achievement as a Canadian modernist, sensitizing her in the most intimate way possible to the crisis of modernism, yet at the same time providing a distance and an alternative which allows her to create work which is both very much a part of the European cosmopolitan tradition and, as an expression of a specifically Canadian place and culture, very much apart from it.

Essays by Candida Rifkind on leftist theatre in the 1930s and by Tony Tremblay on the influence of Ezra Pound on Marshall McLuhan and Louis Dudek provide nuanced accounts of how Canadian artists at opposite ends of the political and esthetic spectrum, responded creatively to instances of primarily American modernism. Both essays illustrate “the complex ways in which the border between Canada and the United States contracted and expanded around national and international...imaginaries” (201).

Rifkind’s “Modernism’s Red Stage: Theatre and the Left in the 1930s” explores the intersection of modernism and socialism in “Canadian leftist theatre in the 1930s...understood as a collective effort to create an experiential and experimental space, in which everyday life is denaturalized and estranged to reveal the structural historical forces that shape it” (182). Her discussion focusses on these forces as she traces the shift from the agitprop theatre of the early thirties influenced by European models to the predominantly naturalist social dramas of the anti-fascist Popular Front which drew heavily on the example of the American Federal Theatre Project. She argues that this politically committed, formally innovative theatre which

crossed class, linguistic, and, to a more limited extent, gender barriers has been marginalized by the “notion that Canadian theatre must serve national interests, that the well-made play is the exemplum of the well-made modern nation” (186). From this perspective, the experimental theatre of the thirties which draws so heavily on foreign models, both European and American, is not Canadian at all. Rifkind, to the contrary argues that “the dominant definition of nation”—and of theatre—“since the nineteenth century” has, in fact, been “exclusive and colonial” (186) and that, in contrast, the active engagement Canadian leftist theatre of the thirties with “the spirit of international solidarity was not necessarily the mark of colonial mimicry” but an attempt to “re-imagine” the “experiences of the nation... at the nexus of modernist experiment and Marxist hope.”

Tremblay’s “a widening of the northern coterie: The Cross-Border Cultural Politics of Ezra Pound, Marshall McLuhan, and Louis Dudek” demonstrates, from a very different perspective, another instance of Canadian responses to and transformations of a powerful version of international modernism. His essay focusses on the influence of Ezra Pound on Louis Dudek and Marshall McLuhan, two of the most influential Canadian modernists. As a poet, publisher, critic, teacher, and editor, Dudek did as much as anyone to shape the vision of Canadian modernism which has dominated critical thinking until relatively recently. And, of course, Marshall McLuhan’s continuing influence on the world in which we now live is too well known to go into. What is fascinating in Tremblay’s essay is his demonstration of how these two conservative but radically different writers, one committed to an unapologetically élitist vision of art, the other adopted as an icon of popular, post-literate culture, took their initial cue from Pound’s example but drew on entirely different strands of his vision of modernism which they went on to “make new” in the Canadian context. Tremblay argues that McLuhan’s “idea that linguistic form or *technique* governed all media” (163) was inspired Pound’s totalizing vision of culture as a unified field which “could be most profitably analyzed and dissected by the literary critic” (163). Dudek, in contrast, mistrusted McLuhan’s focus on technique, finding in Pound the inspiration for his view of “the responsibility of the poet/thinker in society (to expound on what was good or bad in culture).” Tremblay sees these two aspects of Poundian modernism as reaching a working *détente* in Canada, “a dialectical modernism of multiple possibilities.”

Anne Quéma’s essay on Elizabeth Smart and Cecil Buller and Shelley Hulan’s essay on P.K. Page focus on three artists whose work was profoundly shaped by international modernism but whose marginalization as

Canadian women enabled them to question the masculinist assumptions underlying much of modernism and to make a “dialogical contribution” to it (276). In “Elizabeth Smart and Cecil Buller: Engendering Experimental Modernism,” Quéma explores how Elizabeth Smart, in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* and Cecil Buller, in her woodcuts on the theme of the Song of Songs, call into question Eliot’s celebration of impersonality, by evoking pathos and affect in their richly textured work. Quéma challenges the teleological narrative that sees the move to abstraction in modernist art in strictly formalist terms, arguing, instead, that it is driven by an impulse to spiritualization, which has its roots in a “gendered vision of passionate bodies” (285). She argues that this “gender inflection” (293) is a crucial contribution of both women to Canadian modernism. She also argues that their ability to “engage dialogically with some of the fundamental tenets of modernism” and to “have access to the multiplicity and complexity of modernism is something that is singular and specific to Canadian modernism” (294), citing Smith’s by now familiar comment on “eclectic detachment.”

Shelley Hulan’s “Canadian Modernism, P.K. Page’s ‘Arras,’ and the Idea of the Emotions” also takes as a starting point T.S. Eliot’s masculinist concept of impersonality—in this case the implication that there is a hierarchical relationship between emotion and reason and that the artist must learn to transcend emotion if he is to achieve the impersonal rational order that characterizes great art. Hulan argues that Page’s “Arras” presents a very different picture of the relationship between reason and emotion, one of dynamic tension rather than transcendence: “the movement between two poles, not the elimination of the difference between them” recording “two separate and equally rich streams of responses” (348). Hulan sees precedents for Page’s desire to experience phenomena both “reasonably” and “emotionally” (348) in the writings of Smith and, especially, Frye who argues for the importance of both “detachment” and “concern” (340), and she characterizes this attitude as “a modernist protest of a certain Canadian character against the real limitation that would be imposed by resolving the tension between the two kinds of responses” (348). The parallels between Page’s protest against the masculinist assumptions of international modernism and Smart’s and Buller’s dialogical engagement with them is striking.

The variety of approaches taken in the essays from *The Canadian Modernists Meet* which I have chosen to discuss is striking, and I think it would be difficult to formulate a definition of Canadian modernism that would encompass them all. However, if they do not arrive at an actual consensus

about the nature of Canadian modernism, they do seem to return to a common set of concerns, primarily the way in which a sense of marginality has shaped the evolution of modernism in Canada and has enabled Canadian modernists to engage in a productive dialogue with this international movement by which they were so influenced. This includes artists who were marginalized within the Canadian context, and whose achievements have not easily fit into the dominant narrative of the development of modernism in Canada, which presents it essentially as a later, imitative, version of something that happened elsewhere. The reappraisal of modernism undertaken by the various scholars in this volume is a sign that a limited and essentially colonial concept of Canadian modernism has had its day; and that a richer appreciation of the aims and achievements of modernism in Canada, and of the many artists who contributed to it, is unfolding.

Works Cited

Dudek, Louis, and Michael Granowski, eds. *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada: Essential Articles on Contemporary Canadian Poetry in English*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1967.

Zailig Pollock