

Spectres of Modernism

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Canadian Literature's winter 1995 "Marx and Other Dialectics" issue watched over the changing of disciplinary and literary old guards—or, if you will, an old left guard. This was the same number that announced the establishment of the journal's home page (canlit.ca) and the creation of the Canadian Literature Discussion Group listserv (CANLIT-L) hosted by the National Library. It was "an hour / Of new beginnings," as F.R. Scott said in his 1934 poem "Overture." That same year observed the deaths of Earle Birney and George Woodcock. Dorothy Livesay passed away the year following. These deaths signaled the passing of a generation that put into practice the dialectics of modernism and political radicalism. With the appearance of an issue devoted to Marxism and Canadian literature, it may have seemed at the hour of their death that their generation's literary and political legacies had for the moment been granted reprieves and survived the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of European communism.

An inventory of *Canadian Literature* from the two decades following the end of the Cold War reveals that Marx and Marxism slid into precipitous decline. Was the Marx issue an anomaly, a remnant of an outmoded critical practice? Or was it, as Charity Schribner puts it, a "requiem" for the socialist political and cultural projects of the twentieth century? "Whither Marxism?" was the question posed to and addressed by Jacques Derrida in 1993, one that he answered in a series of lectures translated and published under the title *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993; trans. 1994). *Canadian Literature's* Marx issue directed the question to the study of the old left in Canadian literatures

and produced—perhaps predictably—ambivalent responses. With its lead article by Christian Bök, the issue sounded the death knell of Marxism as “an ideological delusion that already contains the seeds of its political defeat,” “an experiment doomed to failure,” one which is corroborated by “the era of *perestroika*, with its global abandonment of Communism” and validated by readings of texts that “end with a social vision that almost seems to confirm the political irrelevancy of Marxism in Canada” (11-12). Although this incendiary lead is followed by essays on Frederick Philip Grove’s socialism and Margaret Fairley’s advocacy for a communist literary tradition, Bök’s anticommunist rhetoric is all the same symptomatic of a literary-critical climate at the turn of the millennium in which the political projects of the old left appeared irrelevant to a discipline preoccupied with postmodernity.

Whither modernism? *Canadian Literature*’s archive is replete with back issues dedicated to the major modernists—Malcolm Lowry (Spring 1961), A.J.M. Smith (Winter 1963), E.J. Pratt (Winter, Summer 1964), Louis Dudek (Autumn 1964), A.M. Klein (Summer 1965), Earle Birney (Autumn 1966), F.R. Scott (Winter 1967), Wyndham Lewis (Winter 1968), Dorothy Livesay (Spring 1971), P.K. Page (Autumn 1971)—but it has been forty years since the last of these numbers and none of the special issues since then has specifically focused on modernism, though essays on individual modernist authors have appeared intermittently. When in his 1999 study *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* Brian Trehearne surveyed the critical reception of modernist poets from 1970 through the end of the century, he reported a broad decline in the volume and frequency of Canadian modernist studies (322 n6). While that report is corroborated by *Canadian Literature*’s backlist, it does not anticipate the past decade’s increase in critical activity coincident with the founding of the Modernist Studies Association (MSA), an international association founded in 1999 and whose annual conferences have been held in Vancouver (2004), Montreal (2009), and Victoria (2010). MSA and its conferences have been the vehicles for the so-called new modernisms, a rubric that Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz have suggested expands the purview of modernist studies in “temporal, spatial, and vertical directions” (737). Because the rubric is more accommodating of the study of “late modernism,” it makes room for Canada’s mid-century modernists; it enables alternatives to literary-historical narratives predicated upon notions of cultural belatedness—or, more drastically, the absence of cultural modernity in Canada altogether. It also allows for the possibility of comparative work on the formations of

modernism in beyond the Anglo-American axis—such as the postcolonial modernisms of Canada and Australia—without having to reproduce narratives that correlate these emergent, marginal, or peripheral modernisms with a dominant cultural centre. That said, even though the MSA and its Canadian conferences represent the work of an active community of modernist scholars in Canada, it has been uneven in its efforts to internationalize itself beyond its predominant Anglo-American interests and facilitate scholarship on Canadian modernism. While the MSA conferences in Vancouver, Montreal, and Victoria featured panels devoted to Canadian modernists and—more frequently—their connections to Anglo-American modernisms, there has been a conspicuous lacuna in the representation of modernist authors and artists from Canada in articles and reviews published in the association's affiliated journal, *Modernism/modernity* (1994-). No doubt this situation is bound to change in coming years, but it stands to reason that any expectation of international recognition of Canadian modernism needs to correspond with a renewed and sustained interest in modernist studies in Canada.

Whither new modernisms? This special issue comes out of a roundtable session at the 2009 MSA conference in Montreal, where a group of established and emerging scholars were invited to address the coincident histories of modernism and the old left in Canada. Extending from conversations initiated at the roundtable, the call for submissions for this issue sought to bring together scholars who work at the intersection of leftist and modernist studies. Contributors have been invited to produce essays that negotiate between competing cultural discourses, at once to reanimate debates between leftists and modernists of the early- to mid-twentieth century and to allow their coextensive narratives to engage in dialectical exchange. This dialectical approach seeks to address the conjunctures and contradictions of modernist and leftist cultural formations in interwar, wartime, and Cold War Canada, a dialectic that recognizes the antimodernism and social-political radicalism of the old left as mediating discourses in the formation of modernist aesthetic practices. Whatever the storied antagonisms between modernists and leftists, and however distorted the retellings by critics and historians of the late twentieth century, the essays collected here are indicative of the ways in which scholarship on literature and theatre in early- to mid-twentieth-century Canada has shifted over the past decade toward more complex conceptions of the leftist social and political orientations of modernist cultural production. This scholarly transformation has taken place in conjunction with a broader international movement to explore what Perry Anderson calls the “imagined

proximity” (34) of socialism and modernism and their alignment as complementary modes of thought that Scott believed could work through “present forms to a new and more suitable order” (“New Poems” 297).

One of the ways in which modernist studies in Canada differentiates itself from the dominant Anglo-American mainstream is its interlingual and multilingual modernisms. With recent and award-winning scholarship on francophone modernisms in Québec by Sherry Simon and Annette Hayward, as well as ongoing editorial projects affiliated with Le Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la littérature et la culture québécoises—notably Le Centre Anne Hébert at l’Université de Sherbrooke, Le Centre Hector-de-Saint-Denis Garneau at l’Université de Laval, and Le Centre d’archives Gaston-Miron at l’Université de Montréal—the study of *la modernité* and *les modernistes* in French Canada appears to parallel the past decade’s renaissance in modernist scholarship in English Canada. At the annual conferences of *L’Association de littératures canadiennes et québécoises/Association of Canadian and Québec Literatures*, there have been continuing efforts to organize bilingual approaches to modernist studies, but these have mainly resulted in the dissemination of discrete research streams without the co-ordination of sustainable interlingual and intercultural scholarly dialogue. Through the recently established bilingual Canadian Writers Research Collaboratory/*Le Collaboratoire scientifique des écrits du Canada*, there are still other possibilities emerging for collaboration between anglophone and francophone modernist scholars working across languages in a multilingual digital environment. To this end, modernist studies in Canada and Québec is positioned to transform itself from a state of linguistic separatism to one of interlingual and intercultural exchange. If, as part of an ongoing project to which this special issue contributes, scholars work to articulate circuits of communication and translation across languages, we may begin to bridge the untranslated gaps between francophone and anglophone modernist studies in Canada and Québec and, in doing so, recapture the cosmopolitan and multilingual formations that characterize both the historical formations of cultural modernism as a global phenomenon and the transnational discipline of the new-modernist studies.

It no longer suffices to say that postmodernism killed modernism or that the fall of European communism ushered in the death of Marxism. This kind of end-of-history thinking about aesthetic and cultural formations and their relation to leftist politics and ideology is far more deterministic than the most blunt instruments of so-called vulgar Marxism. Rather, these deaths of modernism and the old left commemorate the ways in which they come

back to haunt us, as Derrida says of Marxism, as the eternal return of the revenant in the work of mourning. These spectres of modernism and the old left cannot be exorcized by modes of critical thought that attempt to propel the field of literary studies in Canada forward by regarding its outmoded histories and political affiliations as skeletons to be kept closeted. Given the past decade's widespread interest in the neo-Marxist and post-Marxist critical theory and philosophy of Alain Badiou, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek, it seems that rumours of the left's death may have been greatly exaggerated. With the appearance of titles such as Owen Hartley's *Millitant Modernism* (2008) in which he posits a return to a leftist modernism along the lines of the Soviet Proletkult of the 1920s, and with the publication of James Doyle's *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Tradition in Canada* (2002) and Candida Rifkind's *Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature, and the Left in 1930s Canada* (2009), the critical reaction against declarations of the left's death at the end of the Cold War has gathered significant momentum over the past decade. Let this special issue declare itself in solidarity with the modernist and leftist ghosts of Canadian literature and international politics. If "it's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted," let us say with Birney that after decades of declaring one or the other dead, the spectres of Marx and of modernism have returned to remind us how to mourn them.

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