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Modernism on the “Margin” – The “Margin” on Modernism:
Manifestations in Canadian Culture

Katalin Kürtösi

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One of the curious paradoxes of current critical discourse on post-Modernism is the way the term is bandied about with great confidence despite the lack of any generally accepted consensus of what, exactly, is meant by the term Modernism itself. For that reason, it is always useful to return to an examination of Modernism, an exercise that is doubly valuable when it concerns Modernism in contexts where, traditionally, Modernism was viewed as at best a minor phenomenon. One such context is Canada and Canadian culture.

Katalin Kürtösi’s *Modernism on the “Margin” – The “Margin” on Modernism: Manifestations in Canadian Culture* sets out to explore the Modernist influence in the Canadian cultural tradition. She begins by looking at the broader picture: in the first section of the book she examines a whole set of features characterizing Modernism in general, paying particular attention to the question of centre and margin (more of this later). She then moves on to a very compact and richly detailed account of the “state of Canada” in the early twentieth century, showing the many ways in which the country was an integral part of contemporary social, economic and technological developments internationally and very much aware – though perhaps with a certain time lag – of European and American cultural trends. This section is concluded with a close look at the manifestation and impact of some of these trends within Canada.

The second – and longest – section of the book is entitled “The Canadian Picture of Modernity”. Over half the section is devoted to Emily Carr, a figure whose stature has increased enormously over the past few decades. Kürtösi’s treatment of Carr helps explain why this is so, and why she is such a key figure in Canadian Modernism: her extraordinary accomplishments as both artist and writer reflect her lifelong search to deal creatively with various kinds of marginalization – the result of her colonial



relationship as a Canadian to the United States and the “mother country”, Britain; her refusal to write in genres that were perceived to be prestigious; her use of local, colloquial language; her physical location within Canada; her position as a woman; her own eccentric person – and her re-discovery of the “primitive” in Canada. A very interesting sub-section on Carr discusses her as a subject of theatre plays, works that in effect confirm and even canonize her as a key figure of Canadian Modernity. This second section of the book concludes with a discussion of two other key Canadian modernist painters, Lawren Harris and Bertram Brooker (both of whom also made significant contributions in the field of writing), and examples of Modernist contributions in the world of Canadian theatre.

Literature is the focus of the third section of the book, or more precisely the depiction of “the artist” (in the general sense of the term) in the works of a number of writers, both Anglophone and Francophone: F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith, A.M. Klein, Sinclair Ross, Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Mordecai Richler and Michel Marc Bouchard. In examining these writers’ works the author stresses their strong self-reflective aspects and the tendency towards mythologizing Modernist art and artists they evince. In so doing, she indicates how these writers both seek points of reference in centres of Modernism and artists outside Canada and, at the same time, redefine Canada itself (or specific places/communities within Canada) as what might be termed “marginal centres”.

Stepping back a pace from Modernism itself, Katalin Kürtösi in her fourth section deals with Modernism viewed through the critical lens of five major Canadian thinkers: Harold Innes, Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan, Charles Taylor and Hugh Kenner (who was himself a former student of Marshall McLuhan’s). In a sense this returns the book to its first section, since all of these individuals tended to deal with the general phenomenon of Modernism (of them only Frye wrote systematically on Canadian-focused issues and individuals). But they do so from the point of intellectuals at the margins all of whom (with the possible exception of Innes) established themselves in the course of their careers at the very heart of contemporary critical discourse internationally. As such, they were able to shine a unique “Canadian” light on Modernism and its many varied manifestations.

Modernism on the “Margin” – The “Margin” on Modernism covers a very broad scope of issues, and does so on the basis of the author’s extensive and deep reading in the field. Its basic thesis concerning the importance of the marginal when it comes to the question of Modernism is not something new. We have come a long way from the time when Modernism was considered a product of the great metropolitan “centres”, or when it was spoken of only in the singular: the specific forms Modernism took in different places and at different times have given rise to increasing use of the more accurate term “Modernisms”. And Canadian Modernism specifically, as one of these,



has been the subject of much excellent work in the past ten to fifteen years. What distinguishes this work is the constant and delicate interplay between centre and margin and the insistence that the margin – in this case Canada – is the site of a specific Modernism with features of its own, features that in fact derive their strength from this very marginality. The effect is that of a continuous set of dialogues – between the world outside Canada and Canada; between regions of Canada; between different forms of creative expression; between different generations of artists; between the arts and critical reflection on the arts. And in all of these dialogues, the fruitful potentiality of the margin is observed and stressed. The overall result is a very complex set of perspectives on the phenomena of Modernism in general, and on Modernism as it has played out in Canada. This makes *Modernism on the “Margin” – The “Margin” on Modernism: Manifestations in Canadian Culture* a valuable contribution not only to Canadian Studies but to the wider discourse on Modernism as such.