

AVANT-GARDE CANADIAN LITERATURE

The Early Manifestations

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GREGORY BETTS

Avant-Garde
Canadian Literature

The Early Manifestations

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50 YEARS OF ONTARIO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE ARTS

50 ANS DE SOUTIEN DU GOUVERNEMENT DE L'ONTARIO AUX ARTS

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Introduction

As the cutting edge of Modern, the avant-garde establishes the point at which Modern must enter its new phase in order to keep up with itself. The avant-garde points toward the future, and as soon as it is absorbed into the present, it ceases to be itself and becomes part of Modernism. It is, in fact, always contingent, in danger, endangering itself.

The weapons of the avant-garde as it helps to redefine the main body of Modernism are designed to play on the fears and hostility of those who accept only a culture of the familiar. Avant-garde, however, is, more frequently than not, a *new type of order*.

Frederick R. Karl, *Modern and Modernism*

In 1927, Europe and America's avant-garde arrived in Toronto for a month-long exhibition of the strangest, most disturbing, most bizarre, and most exciting visual art being made anywhere in the Western world. The show included hundreds of works by 106 active, contemporary artists from twenty-three different countries, including work by cubists such as Pablo Picasso, Alexander Archipenko, Georges Braque, and Fernand Léger; Futurists like Wassily Kandinsky, Umberto Boccioni, and Joseph Stella; Dadaists like Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, and Francis Picabia; Surrealists like Max Ernst, Hans Arp, and Joan Miró; and other avant-garde experimentalists like Joseph Albers, Paul Klee, and Piet Mondrian.¹ Canadian painter Lawren Harris, the principal Canadian advocate of the International Exhibition of Modern Art (hereafter the IEMA), had participated in the exhibition in New York in 1926 and wrote to the Exhibition Committee of the Art Gallery of Toronto on the hopes of bringing the show to Toronto: 'I believe it to be the most

representative, most stimulating and the best exhibition of advanced art so far shown on this continent. There is nothing in it of an offensive nature, that is, decadent in a moral sense' (Letter, 84). Harris hoped the show would not only help legitimize avant-garde work underway in this country, but would further accelerate and inspire active experimental artists to discover and test new channels. His letter to the committee concluded with a veiled threat: 'I have written Miss Dreier informing her that should the gallery here find it necessary to refuse the exhibition and providing the expense is not too great, that I will endeavour to have the exhibition come here and hold it somewhere else.' Katherine Dreier was the New York artist and patron who, with Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, founded the Société Anonyme, the group that organized the avant-garde exhibition. Toronto's gallery rose to Harris's challenge and accepted the exhibition. To support the show, the gallery published a catalogue with two introductions and organized a series of related events including lectures and musical performances. Significantly, Dreier delivered an interpretive lecture and defence of modernism on 2 April 1927 before an audience of 346 people (Pfaff, 81). It was to be Canada's Armory Show, and acclaimed historian Ramsay Cook has declared that it fulfilled that role (Cook, 'Nothing,' 11). Pinpointing the particular significance of that moment in Canadian art history, the painter Charles Comfort wrote of the event, 'Such of my friends as Bertram Brooker, Edna Tacon, Gordon Webber and Lawren Harris were, of course, aware and interested in the directions in which the exhibition pointed. Personally, I believe that the beginning of abstract painting in Canada, certainly in Toronto, can be dated from that period' (qtd. in Gray, Rand, and Steen, 18). In all, 10,630 people attended the IEMA during its month-long stay (four times as many people as usual, according to Pfaff), making it one of the Toronto Art Gallery's most successful and important exhibits (Bohan, 84). The avant-garde, it seemed, had arrived in Canada.

While comparing Canada's IEMA to New York's 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, better known as the Armory Show, is useful for illustrating the intentions and ambitions of the organizers, the differences between the two events could very easily overwhelm the similarities. Despite debate over the extent of the transformation it caused, it is fair to say that the New York Armory Show 'sparked wide-spread interest in avant-garde painting and sculpture throughout the United States' and marked the beginning of the end of America's cultural isolation and provincialism (L. McCarthy, 2). Some scholars such as Frank Anderson Trapp question the depth of the impact of the show, but there is little

doubt that the Armory Show drew an enormous amount of attention to the aesthetic questions raised by radically experimental works. During the 1927 IEMA in Canada, Lawren Harris engaged in a one-time public debate with the former member of the Group of Seven Franz Johnston in the pages of the *Canadian Forum* expressing their respective opinions of the aesthetic merits of the art in the show. The paintings were nothing more than ‘abortions in paint’ to Johnston (241), but in contrast, Harris encouraged people to consider the novelty of the work through the logic of the spirit in which they were created:

I doubt if any exhibition we have had ever displayed such a wealth of ideas, or so much real adventuring, or so large a proportion of stimulating and profound works ... most of the pictures required of the spectator a new way of seeing ... the most convincing pictures, were directly created from an inner seeing and conveyed a sense of order in a purged, pervading vitality that was positively spiritual ... they were achieved by a precision and concentration of feeling so fine that on the emotional gamut they parallel the calculations of higher mathematics. But, they remain emotional, living works, and were therefore capable of inspiring lofty experiences; one almost saw spiritual ideas, crystal clear, powerful and poised. (‘An Appreciation,’ 240)

For the sake of concerned Canadians worried by the apparent freakishness of abstract art, Harris stressed the moral benefit: ‘There were a few works so purged of all smallness, vagueness, and sentimentality, so pure and elevated, that they acted on some individuals as saints do on the gross-minded’ (241). The purity of the abstract art obviously spoke to Harris’s religious sensibilities, and within seven years of the exhibition he himself gave up landscape painting for transcendental abstractionism. He was, it should be noted, the exhibition’s principal financier as well as Canada’s only member of the New York-based avant-garde collective Société Anonyme. Out of modesty and discretion, or perhaps (given his similar reticence to speak on behalf of Brooker’s abstractions as discussed below) out of reticence in light of the predictable negativism the show would attract, he did not exhibit in the Toronto event even though one of his paintings was included in the two other IEMA exhibitions in Brooklyn and Buffalo. Positive reviews of the show were also written by Fred Jacob in *The Mail and Empire* and Lawrence Mason in *The Toronto Globe*.²

Despite this enthusiastic beginning to the public discourse, and in contrast to the lasting influence of the Armory Show in New York (especially on collectors like Katherine Dreier, the principal organizer of the 1927

IEMA), negative reviews began accumulating.³ Meanwhile, the public debates surrounding Toronto's 1927 avant-garde exhibition descended quickly into paroxysms surrounding the scandal caused by Alexander Archipenko's 'Woman' and an unnamed nude by Max Weber,⁴ both of which were purported to be rather conventional figurative nudes in an exhibition dominated by abstract and non-representational art. As it turned out, the Ontario police physically removed the paintings from the gallery walls. Months later, a similar event took place with even more fanfare in the 1927 summer exhibition at the Canadian National Exhibition. In the latter exhibition, the removal of Canadian John Russell's 'A Modern Fantasy' and British George Drinkwater's 'Paolo and Francesca' from gallery walls was thoroughly applauded by editorials in *The Toronto Daily Star* ('Box Office') and in *The Toronto Globe* (Editorial 1927).

The Canadian painter, writer, and essayist Bertram Brooker was infuriated by the treatment accorded to artists here. After witnessing a series of similar moments of public censorship over the ensuing years, including the censorship of his own cubist nudes, he wrote and published an excoriating essay called 'Nudes and Prudes' in 1931. In the essay, he blames Canada's media and education system for teaching fear and disdain for the human body. He tells the story of a visiting French artist in Toronto, two years after the IEMA, en route to a figure drawing workshop in the city. Brooker quotes the artist sardonically drawling, 'In Paris, I would show a woman, but in Toronto I show a 'orse' (93). Brooker was one among numerous other local and international artists to be censored by the police and, perhaps even more nefariously, by Canadian gallery directors as well. Even though the IEMA was a success in terms of bringing avant-garde art to Canada, in terms of bringing Canadians to avant-garde art, and in terms of connecting contemporary Canadian artists to the international avant-garde community, the debate surrounding nudity overshadowed its achievements. Brooker reacted against Canadian prudery as directly and thoughtfully as he could:

It is time that artists in Canada raised their voices publicly against this sort of thing ... To withhold knowledge of the human form and its functions, and to discourage appreciation of its beauty at an early age, is to bring up a child with a sneaking curiosity in respect to that unity which of all unities is perhaps the most mysterious and the most important for men and women. It is to implant in [a child's] mind the feeling that natural admiration for bodily beauty is sheer animalism, and something to be ashamed of ... He who says so blasphemes not merely against the special God he has been

brought up to worship, but against any conceivable scheme of the unity of life that it is possible for men to hold. The vileness associated with sex is purely a man-made matter. ('Nudes and Prudes,' 98, 104–5)

Prudery and philistinism were shared concerns for all North American avant-garde artists and aficionados. Katherine Dreier too fought against entrenched conservative aesthetics, but she was able to conduct her campaign in a public forum without interference by the law (Herbert, Apter, and Kenney, 20). Despite the shared contextual conservatism, there is something far more nefarious about the Canadian experience of censorship and the ensuing silence. Brooker and others, most notably William Arthur Deacon, fought the censorship of visual art and literature in Canada. It is telling, though, that while in prudish America artists fought for privilege and general acceptance, in prudish Canada artists had first to fight for basic legal rights of self-expression and access to public space.

I begin this discourse on avant-gardism in Canada with this rather embarrassing national portrait to highlight the relationship between the people I will be discussing in this book (including Bertram Brooker, Lawren Harris, and William Deacon in chapter two) and their contextual environment. While this opening story concerns the visual arts specifically, the primary focus of this book will be the literary arts. Arts communities, however, and especially avant-garde arts communities, are not discrete or closed communities. The conditions affecting the visual artists, in other words, were the same as those affecting the writers. But before we begin to dissect the terms of this project and enumerate its principal figures, before we engage with the remarkable and sophisticated achievements of outré artists here, it is essential, I believe, to recognize that until very recently Canada has not been a good or encouraging setting for avant-gardism. Prudery is different from other conservatisms in that it responds to what it deems outrages by attempting to silence and repress them from collective memory. Sigmund Freud connects such social regulations to the ability of civilizations to survive, which develop primarily from the 'renunciation of instinct' and the repression of desires (*Civilization*, 52). This includes the constant repression of violent urges. The censorship of art parallels the repression of instinct as the necessary cost of holding society in place. There develops from this faith in social restraint a syllogism that art's potential to excite repressed feelings threatens the entire social contract. For some, Freud argues, this amounts to a neurotic, overly burdensome sacrifice of pleasure: 'what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and [many feel] that we

should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions' (38). For most, however, and for Canada in general (especially in the early half of the twentieth century), suppressing or plain forgetting contentious art was a sacrifice suitably justified by the protection of the social contract.

The IEMA example is also important for drawing attention to three too often unacknowledged facts: first, that the avant-garde had a presence in Canada long before any literary history⁵ of Canada recognizes them; second, that within Canada there were individuals committed to the idea of avant-garde art; and third, that the radical terms of engagement presented and embodied by avant-garde art have consistently been sabotaged by the most pedestrian and prudish terms of engagement by the Canadian media, public, and state apparatus. This book will focus on a fourth fact suggested but not included in the story of the IEMA exhibition: the fact that Canadians were also themselves producing avant-garde art. Of the body of avant-garde art produced in Canada, this book will be primarily concerned with literature of all kinds: prose fiction, prose non-fiction, poetry, drama, and the ongoing melange of literary categories that inevitably happens in experimental writing. This book makes no claim to being a complete history of avant-garde activity or even avant-garde literary activity; it is perhaps wiser to think of it as a position paper offering developed examples of a kind of writing rarely *collectively* acknowledged in the Canadian context prior to the 1960s. Unfortunately, as a result of the combination of the four facts outlined above in the lived experience of Canadian art making, and a testament to the power of fact three, the history of Canadian experimentalism has been supplanted by a history of art that survived the crucible of an extremely conservative aesthetic. In the 1920s, the novelist Morley Callaghan recognized the challenges facing Canada's aesthetic innovators as ones that encouraged compromise, what he called 'the mellowing effect of the soil' (Letter, 1).

As a result of suppression, repression, censorship, and the even more tenacious habit of marginalization, twentieth-century Canadians with avant-garde ambitions have had few if any acknowledged (let alone celebrated) local models of eruptive art or artists despite the many efforts that preceded them. Such a habitual amnesia not only discourages young writers from attempting or publishing their more eccentric ideas, given the abyss into which such writers languish in this country, but it has also resulted in a distorted memory of Canadian literature ironically perpetuated by avant-garde authors who have themselves been misled. Avant-garde writing here proves that CanLit is not and has not always been a

static aesthetic bounded by the lyric and realist prose styles. The situation has changed in recent times, with the publication of studies such as Christian Bök's *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science*, which directly connects the writing of Christopher Dewdney, Steve McCaffery, and bpNichol with Europe's most acclaimed avant-gardes, Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy's *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English (1957–2003)*, which presents a selective lineage of two generations of experimental writing primarily in western Canada, and Dean Irvine's *The Canadian Modernists Meet*, which collects a scattershot array of essays by leading scholars on topics ranging from James Joyce's influence in Canada to Surrealism in Canada. It is possible that conditions have changed enough that a veiled line of radical experimentalism here extending back three, four, and more generations might be ready to reveal itself.

The ambition of this book is to encourage such an unveiling of a tradition of avant-garde literature in Canada, including both theoretical and practical texts. This book, in turn, begins by offering an entrance into the vocabulary of the ongoing and primarily international debate surrounding the idea of avant-gardism, and by doing so offers a functional vocabulary for remembering, reading, and discussing some of the most hermetic and yet energetic literature ever produced in this country. Connecting Canada's avant-gardes with their European counterparts helps to contextualize the discussion of colonialism (and postcolonialism) that flavours the analysis of avant-garde writing throughout this book, and it also provides the useful contrast of establishing the normative models of avant-gardism in order to understand the Canadian difference. In this book, the subsequent chapters will address three different nodes of avant-garde literary activity and their approximate periods of peak activity: including the Cosmic Canadians from the 1910s to the 1930s; Surrealism especially in the form of Automatism in Canada from the 1920s to the 1960s; and Canadian Vorticism from the 1920s to the 1970s. It does so by considering these three early literary avant-garde nodes – *almost* veritable movements in the established sense of canonical avant-gardism – as challenges to the way Canadians thought about art and about themselves. The principal figures in these nodes, such as Flora MacDonald Denison, Wilson MacDonald, Lawren Harris, and Bertram Brooker of the Cosmic Canadians, Thérèse Renaud, Claude Gauvreau, Paul-Émile Borduas, and Françoise Sullivan of the Automatists, and Marshall McLuhan, Sheila Watson, Wilfred Watson, and John Reid of the Canadian Vorticists (to single out but a few of the figures addressed in this book), consciously sought to revolutionize the very meaning of

reality. Indeed, at their utopian extreme, these proponents envisioned a reoriented consciousness emerging from their art movement that would reconfigure conventional ideas and experience of social reality.

The terms might be unfamiliar to some, and for that reason alone deserving of at least a terse initial gloss to establish a context for the present study. The idea of a movement called 'Cosmic Canadians' in fact collects a broad and diverse network of mystical modernists from across Canada who worked from the evolutionary model of consciousness proposed by Dr Richard Maurice Bucke in his book *Cosmic Consciousness*. They became avant-garde as their revolutionary mysticism became increasingly manifest in their art. Surrealism in Canada collects a range of artists from across the country (though primarily in Quebec) who took up the aesthetic initiatives pioneered by the avant-garde movement from France with the same name. Automatism is the name of a specific group of Canadian artists influenced by the Surrealist movement. In particular, this aesthetic initiative was shaped by a commitment to explore the irrational dimensions of the mind, if only to combat the over-rationalism of Western society that had led to the extreme violence of the First World War. Ever since their appearance in 1924, numerous Canadian writers have been inspired by the Surrealists' manifestos, essays, poems, novels, and visual art and have sought to incorporate their radical propositions into art here. The Canadian Vorticist group was smaller than the other two groups but was more tightly aligned and lasted for a longer period. Vorticism, a short-lived English avant-garde movement that lasted just a couple of years ending with the First World War, is predicated on a notoriously difficult concept to pin down. In terms of literary themes and aesthetics, the movement can be unified in their collective striving for a writing built of raw, violent energy (the vortex itself is presented as the precise point of maximal energy). In terms of literary history, and of more specific significance to how the Canadian Vorticists were conceived, the movement can be equated with the influence of the members of the Vorticist movement, especially by the sort-of Canadian Wyndham Lewis and the early work of Ezra Pound. There are many other topics in the broad, emerging field of Canadian avant-gardism, including individual artists working outside of collectivities as well as various other movements, that will also be touched on or suggested in the following pages, but it is worth repeating that the goal of this project is not to be encyclopedic. It is an inevitable impulse for the first holistic consideration of a topic to attempt to encapsulate the boundaries of the field, but instead this book offers a series of entrance points into the grounds and, therein, a vocabulary by which to

recognize the unique accomplishments and features of the early Canadian literary avant-garde. As it is, the boundaries of early Canadian avant-garde literature are actively expanding as new works steadily emerge from the archives and marginal publications are reconsidered.

The first chapter in the book explores the theoretical implications and limitations of avant-gardism, as well as documents the changing function of the category 'avant-garde' in Canada from its first usage at the beginning of the eighteenth century through to its demise as a relevant literary category at the end of twentieth century. The next three chapters highlight three very specific nodes of early twentieth-century avant-garde literary activity in Canada, which are identified here under the monikers 'Cosmic,' 'Automatist,' and 'Vorticist' respectively. These chapters present a survey of literary and related activity associated with each avant-garde node, tracking the ideological and aesthetical ambitions and accomplishments of each. Specific exemplary texts are explored at length in each chapter so as to demonstrate tangibly the specific literary innovations and ambitions of each avant-garde node.

Though the avant-garde has a history that extends back centuries from the present, a lineage that meanders through such contradictory embodiments as European military imperialists, Parisian dandies, South American socialistic revolutionaries, and American free-jazz musicians, it has retained its highly valued and privileged social position in late-capitalist societies. 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). A study into avant-gardism must begin with a recognition of its persistent value, indeed its problematic value, and yet also recognize how its value participates in and reacts against broader social networks. More than anything, avant-gardism represents an extreme paradox – for the avant-garde is, at one and the same time, both radically outside and actively opposed to the social contract and yet also inside and actively fulfilling the desires of its contextual society to remake and improve itself.

What, then, is the avant-garde? It is easily imagined and romanticized as a metaphorical place out in front of society occupied by artists who discover or invent a new conceptual or aesthetical space into which a society will eventually spill and settle. The term, however, developed from the French military to refer to the soldiers at the head of the army who took the greatest risks and tended to suffer the highest casualties. They served the state through their military sacrifice. Because of this etymo-

logical history, it is especially important to map out the relationship between avant-garde artists and their contextual society. For instance, the rhetoric surrounding avant-garde practice can echo in disconcerting ways the discourse and rhetoric of imperial exploration and colonialism. However, the comparison to historical explorers and settlers/colonialists provides a useful point of juxtaposition to help clarify the distinct socio-political ambitions of avant-garde artists. There are, to be clear, important points of contiguity between these very different groups: explorers and avant-garde artists both, for instance, experience an enormous separation from their contextual society, whether caused by mapping new geographies, ideologies, or aesthetics, that leads them into confrontation with a radically dissimilar (perhaps imaginary) society. A primary difference between geographical explorers and avant-garde artists, however, is that, in confronting the possibility of radically different social configurations and ideologies, historical explorers documented the means by which those differences could be harnessed and exploited in the service of their homeland. Upon encountering the 'Canadians' of the new world, Jacques Cartier, for instance, wrote in his journal, 'We perceived that they are people who would be easy to convert' (22). His description of them and their belongings highlighted the ease with which they could be impressed and dominated: 'This people may well be called savage; for they are the sorriest folk there can be in the world, and the whole lot of them had not anything above the value of five sou, their canoes and fishing-nets excepted' (24). This description noticeably ignores the differences between the two populations, and attempts to situate the aboriginal population in the terms of the European economy. Avant-garde artists, in contrast, are more likely to become propagandists and advocates for the new. They seek to overthrow the values of their contextual society, provoking a rebellion focused first and foremost against the art institutions of their society. The appeal to a creative violence directed against the existing social order is especially commonplace in early avant-garde texts. In the founding Vorticist manifesto, for instance, Richard Aldington, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and the rest declared themselves the 'Primitive Mercenaries in the Modern World' whose ambition was to 'Stir up Civil War among peaceful apes' (Aldington et al., 'Manifesto,' 30-1). Their sense of the relative value of art versus English society was left unfiltered: 'IF YOU DESTROY A GREAT WORK OF ART you are destroying a greater soul than if you annihilated a whole district of London' (Lewis, 'To the Suffragettes,' 152). Albeit with a less violent vocabulary, Canadian avant-gardists, from Lawren Harris to Claude Gauvreau to

Marshall McLuhan, have all written about the possibility of ending the stale, existing social contract and the possibility of a new order arising.

It is ironic that avant-gardism borrows its vocabulary from the military, exploration narratives, and scientific discourse, three central pillars of state ideology, in order to express dissatisfaction with society. Though the power of this language is intended to be reversed against the power structures that concocted it, the shared discourse hints at an avant-garde complicity with capitalist society's constant (and violent) desire to improve itself. Indeed, despite a half-millennium unbroken string of attempted aesthetic revolutions, the rhetoric of sociopolitical progress and a vocabulary of economists haunt and even warp the ambitions of the avant-garde. An aesthetic revolution, of course, extends beyond the inevitable mandate all writers face to create original forms or new means of expression. Aesthetic revolution, in the particular sense relevant to the avant-garde, refers specifically to the participation of artists in or their contribution to sociopolitical revolution. Hannah Arendt explains revolutions as uniquely modern phenomena in their aim not just to replace or reform power structures of a historical civilization but to restart history with the violent provocation of a new civilization.⁶ In this way, aesthetic revolutions participate in the destruction of the foundational values of a contextual civilization with the explicit purpose of creating space for the new beginning. As American avant-garde theorist Rachel Blau DuPlessis intones, 'Destroy worship and worshippers. Let the fragments roar' (53). The avant-garde invests in the liberational potential of the new civilization by dedicating art practice to the service of the new ideological order. Within avant-garde circles, a central debate has surrounded the role of art in relation to the revolution. Is art a source of liberation or a means by which to create the conditions that will enable liberated consciousnesses? If a liberated consciousness is not possible within a pre-revolutionary culture, as Lenin argued, then avant-garde art practice should be limited to changing society and creating the new liberated culture, lest it be irrelevant or worse misleading: 'Revolution alone can "abolish" the bourgeois state' (Lenin, 274). Lenin's insistence on violent revolution being a necessary start to the proletarian civilization corroborates and informs the avant-garde tendency to expostulate ecstatically on the redemptive possibility of violence.

Contemporary postmodern artists and theorists, apprehensive of the rhetoric of desire and the veiled teleologies of capitalism, have grown increasingly resistant to the revolutionary and violent language of avant-gardism. On the one hand, wave after wave of avant-garde movements – from Symbolism to Zaum to Futurism to Dada and beyond – failed to

alter the physical violence associated with capitalist exploitation, to alter the cultural violence associated with neoliberal globalization, or to overcome the spiritual and ethical abyss of pluralistic relativism. On the other hand, the discourse of innovation that informs avant-gardism seems altogether complicit and in comfortable accordance with the cultural institutions and ideologies it portends to revolutionize. Blau DuPlessis, for instance, notes the tendency of formally radical authors to rely upon 'the familiarity of gender limits' in order to make their experimental works 'relatively accessible – readable' (42). So, while avant-gardism failed to fulfil its radical promises, it has also and too often remained within the ideological strata of the society it presumed to be outside of and tried to remake. Thus, ironically, avant-garde art and aesthetics functionally participate in and inevitably contribute to the sustenance of values they purport to oppose. The distinction between *avant* and *au courant* (or perhaps, *la même chose*) blurs remarkably fast. For instance, whereas modernist author Ezra Pound's dictum to 'make it new' was once regarded as a radical aesthetic proposition that threatened the foundation of art history, in the present moment multinational corporations, unconcerned by grammar, now routinely invite contemporary consumers to 'think different' without any anxiety that those different thoughts will preclude their own late-capitalist model of consumption. Like the Mounties and the banks waiting in advance in the Canadian west for settlers to arrive, more often than not the system expands into new territories without fundamentally changing.

In the specific use of the term that I develop in this book neither Pound's imagist aesthetic nor Apple Inc. (the owners of the 'think different' campaign who now describe their latest consumer product as 'revolutionary') fulfils its denotations despite the significant influence and innovation of both. The model I use develops from the theorization of avant-gardism that begins with the pioneering work of Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger, Charles Russell, John Weightman, Julia Kristeva, and Marjorie Perloff. While there are numerous points of debate both minute and essential between these and the many other thinkers I lean upon in this study, my approach follows Richard Kostelanetz's belief that the avant-garde is a remarkably rare phenomenon in art history for having measurable characteristics. Though my sense of those characteristics differs from what Kostelanetz proposes, we agree that avant-gardism is most distinctly an art of the future – not necessarily the technological future of society (as in science fiction), nor defined by the formalist techniques of future art practices,⁷ but the revolutionary art that attempts to provoke

an experience of the consciousness of a future, potential social order within an audience of the present. This work does not escape the present, but at the least it attempts to reconstitute the ideologies that prescribe and determine significance in the present. For, as Giorgio Agamben writes in his discussion of the films of Guy Debord, the very act of creation fundamentally involves resisting and even undoing the conditions, the facts, of the world: 'Every act of creation is also an act of thought, and an act of thought is a creative act, because it is defined above all by its capacity to de-create the world' (318). Avant-garde art constitutes a creative de-creation specifically designed to spread like a virus:⁸ it aims to infect its contextual society and spread until the world has been remade. It is also like a rhizome that spreads across ideological landscapes, transfiguring what it means to be alive in the present moment.

It is worth pointing out at this point that acknowledging a text as avant-garde should not be equated with a value judgement of the art so-defined. Avant-garde art is not synonymous with innovative art nor does it automatically imply great art. Both such designations, and the various configurations of similar evaluations, are relativistic valuations determined by social practice and ideology. Avant-garde art, in contrast, attempts to escape all existing social practice and ideology – and is thus inevitably *bad art* when judged by the criteria of current aesthetics. As a non-evaluative term, then, avant-gardism becomes an enormously useful descriptor of a strain of Canadian literature that proposes and imagines a rupture from contemporary life, and advocates or serves the propagation of that rupture. I believe that the idea of avant-gardism, with its uniquely revolutionary and sociopolitical orientation, is particularly, indeed singularly, relevant in identifying the constituents of a para-tradition within the broader scope of Canadian and Western literature. I have come to think of the avant-garde's relationship to Canadian modernisms, postmodernisms, realisms, and all other vaguely canonized Canadian writings as being similar in kind to the a-parallel evolution of two symbiotic entities mapped out by Deleuze and Guattari in which the one morphs into the other in a circulation of intensities (10). I use the avant-garde, then, as a portal into an obscure but potent field of writing submerged beneath or beside (and sometimes above and beyond, often in the middle of) the familiar canon of writing in Canada. A few of the authors I discuss, such as Lawren Harris, Marshall McLuhan, and Sheila Watson, will be familiar to many, though likely not as familiar in the manner in which I discuss them here; other figures, such as John Reid and Bertram Brooker, have been rescued from the archives for this study, or else, as in the case of the

Automatist authors, translated from their familiar abode in French Canadian literary histories into a new context in which they are rarely acknowledged. My ambition is not to invent, exaggerate, or solve early avant-garde literary activity in Canada, nor to declare that the aesthetical and ideological ambitions of the disparate authors involved were unified. The ambition of this book is to begin the process of reading a series of scattered nodes of strange and difficult early Canadian avant-garde writings in relation to a shared revolutionary animus.

Postmodern scholars have long reminded critics to be aware of the implications of the questions they ask: to consider who gets excluded and why as a result of the way they have staged their studies. The questions prompting this book reveal an alternative literary history of Canada. Almost none of the authors I consider have been canonized within the dominant tradition, or if they have, only their most traditional and recognizable work has been acknowledged. Still, this project does not begin in a void: it must be clear from the outset that this project builds from an already existing and voluminous amount of scholarship on each node of avant-garde activity by attempting to set them in dialogue with one another. Thus, my project aims to connect the remarkable parallels between work by Ann Davis, John Lennox, Gillian McCann, Sherrill Grace, Michèle Lacombe, Birk Sproxton, Dennis Reid, L.R. Pfaff, Roald Nasgaard, and Glenn Willmott on the Cosmic Canadians; work by Ray Ellenwood, Andre Bourassa, Christopher Butterfield, Caroline Bayard, Dennis Reid, Roald Nasgaard, and François-Marc Gagnon on the Automatists; work by Brian Henderson, Christian Bök, Stephen Scobie, Jack David, and Johanna Drucker on Canadian concrete (visual) poetry and sound poetry; work by Richard Cavell, Paul Tiessen, Paul Hjartarson, Glenn Willmott, Toby Foshay, Sheila Watson, F.T. Flahiff, Robert Stacey, and Catherine M. Mastin on Vorticism in Canada; work by Barbara Godard, Nicole Brossard, Judy Rebick, and Marie J. Carrière on radical feminism in Canada; and work by Frank Davey, Linda Hutcheon, Marjorie Perloff, Jeff Derksen, and Christian Bök on postmodernism in Canada, among many others who are already involved in the discussion in various ways. My work, if anything, floats on theirs, dependent on their updraft.

Despite the abundant work already done on each of these nodes, studies of avant-gardism in Canada have consistently been predicated on a model of exclusivity that highlights both the novelty and the difference of each node or particular experimental author from the imagined (conservative) aesthetics of Canadian literature. It is, unfortunately and ironically, a rhetorical model that has only facilitated the ongoing exclusion

of avant-gardism in Canada and one that has thus far resisted considering the links and connections between the diverse experimental aesthetic communities. This book proposes a link between them through contemporary theories of avant-gardism – even while recognizing avant-gardism as a polyvalent phenomenon. To write a book-length consideration of this para-tradition in Canadian letters, then, is in many ways to offer one answer to the question of who has already been excluded. By presenting an entrance point to its alterity, the consistent marginalization of Canadian avant-gardism can at the least be recognized and at the best begin to be undone. By offering enough evidence to conceive of a para-tradition of literary activity in this country, this book will hopefully generate future endeavours.

The first task, in working towards such a goal, must be to address the mutating and diverse use of the two words ‘avant’ and ‘garde’ – two words that can be literally translated from the French into English as ‘before’ and ‘guard,’ respectively. Combined, though, over the past 400 years, the denotation of these two words has spun an intricate web of connotations to variously describe the military elite force of a government, seditious anti-establishment members of a society, open-form jazz musicians, and even artists whose decadence fulfils bourgeois taste. In addressing this contradictory diversity, let us start with a brief survey and history of the term as it has been used in both international and Canadian contexts.

Avant-gardism invariably begins with an assumption of the inadequacy of current tastes and the belief that society can be remade and history restarted. Like the idea of revolution, which began synonymously with the idea of a restoration of previous order, there is a sense in which avant-gardism proposes a return to the beginning and the creation of a fresh start for a new civilization. It is through the enormous ambition of correcting the debased tastes of the bourgeoisie that the myth of a self-conscious and heroic avant-garde class of artists emerges, built of those eager and willing to wage battle with philistines over the future of art and society. While, as Richard Kostelanetz points out, avant-gardism always refers to new and influential means and modes of art making (‘ABC,’ 6), the revolutionary social and political ambitions of avant-garde art are useful in distinguishing the substantial differences between the various models and theories. All models of avant-gardism (excluding, of course, the contemporary post-avant school discussed below) begin with the assumption of a revolutionary art – an art that participates in or serves the liberation of culture and ideology. The desire for newness and regeneration, however, dangerously echoes the rhetoric of progress – or what

Wyndham Lewis disdainfully described as the 'pathological straining after something which boasts of a spectacular *aheadofness*' (*The Demon*, 64). Staying ahead of the game, as Lewis's criticism implies, can become a fashionable obsession – or rather an obsession with fashion – that threatens the total co-option of avant-garde revolutionary art within existing social paradigms and practices. Constantly struggling to stay up to date is very different from being in advance of a future unalienated state. The pattern of this constant, pressing need for artistic innovation establishes a process that Martin Puchner, in surveying the patterns of historical movements of Western art, characterizes as the 'avant-garde history of succession and rupture' (71). While avant-gardism, unlike other forms of experimental or innovative art, intertwines aesthetic novelty with sociopolitical revolution, previous conceptions of the liberated state are discarded by each subsequent wave of the avant-garde, undermining the revolutionary vision each previous wave had proposed. As a result, over the course of the twentieth century, there developed a gradual resistance to or boredom with the discourse of sociopolitical progress and militant revolution associated with avant-garde movements. This dynamic relationship between avant-garde art and revolution, however, coupled with changing attitudes to progress, provides a useful means of distinguishing four distinct faces of the avant-garde. These categories are not meant to be exclusive or reductive, particularly because artists move around or between categories rather freely, especially over the course of their careers. They are meant to be useful in recognizing the central points of ongoing debates in avant-garde circles about the nature and function of their art vis-à-vis society and the revolution. European Surrealism, for instance, was torn apart over the distinction here described as 'aesthetic' versus 'radical' avant-gardism – a fissure that ultimately guided the decision by Canada's Automatists to dissociate themselves from the continental movement. Many principal figures in the French Surrealist movement began with Dada, but grew impatient with its 'decadence' in the sense described below. The faces of avant-gardism, and related debates, will be particularly instructive in the discussion of Canadian nodes of avant-garde activity, but can be briefly summarized in the following ways:

The *Radical Avant-Garde* is distinguished by the use of art in support of a sociopolitical revolution. Radical avant-gardists believe that the desired revolution will alter consciousness, restart history, and create the conditions for a liberated consciousness. Only upon the creation of these conditions can a truly liberated art emerge. In the meantime, art provides a propagandistic function in the service of the sociopolitical cause. Radical

avant-gardism is most immediately and easily connected to the numerous Marxist and socialist movements that formed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If we take radical avant-gardism more generally, however, as indicative of an aesthetic that used art in the service of a political cause more abstractly committed to liberation, we can use it in the context of discussions of art that appeared by groups like the English Suffragettes, North American feminists, and in Canada, Québécois separatists.

The *Aesthetic Avant-Garde*, by far the most familiar category of avant-gardism and the primary focus of this book, can be distinguished by the belief that art has the power to change and shape society. In its mildest form, as Lisa Robertson suggests, such work describes or represents 'what change might be, the physics of change' (C. Stewart, 1936). The rupture provoked by the new ideological model, however, invites dramatic and indeed revolutionary possibilities. The desired sociopolitical revolution begins with an altered consciousness that can be evidenced, demonstrated, or provoked by the new ideas embedded in revolutionary art. Consequently, the art object is given revolutionary status and is judged by the purity of its commitment to the revolutionary consciousness. Any compromise for popular taste or propagandistic purposes diminishes the avant-gardeness of the art. The pure, liberated art has the potential to spread a revolutionary consciousness around the globe, which will in turn bring about dramatic changes to the sociopolitical world. Unlike radical avant-gardism, however, the liberated art comes before the sociopolitical revolution and can create the conditions for a permanent and widespread shift in consciousness. The three nodes of literary activity charted in this book were all aesthetic avant-gardes and were all drawn into conflict with radical avant-gardes over the question of art's relation to revolution. The three nodes, each in the terms suitable to its respective node, echo the French Surrealist Louis Aragon's rejection of radical revolutionaries who are 'carried along by fashion and belief in the strength of a doctrine' – he calls these political idealists 'shamefaced' realists and dismisses the epistemology motivating their politics and their aesthetics: 'Nothing will make such people understand the true nature of the real: that it is a relation like any other, that the essence of things is in no way tied to their reality, that there are relations other than the real that the mind is capable of grasping, and that are also primary, like chance, illusion, the fantastic, the dream' ('A Wave of Dreams').

Decadence and *Postmodern Decadence*, while usually used in reference to a particular historical movement (or in Italy, to refer to modernism in toto), can be distinguished by the use of art to expose and deconstruct

(or destruct) the paradigms and practices of the dominant ideology. Rather than advocating or evidencing a particular revolutionary consciousness, decadent art focuses on falling away from, liberating, or merely disrupting failed or compromised aesthetic models and ideologies. If at all, the possibility of revolution (and the point at which decadence intersects with avant-gardism) is implied through a negative dialectic. Historically, and as will be explained in more detail below, Dada can be thought of as a decadent rather than avant-garde movement. The transition from Dada to Dadaism, however, signals an increasingly avant-garde nature of the movement's ambitions in the future of their society. Tzara's 1918 manifesto already contains hints of this revolutionary creative de-creation: 'Let every man shout: there is a great destructive, negative work to be accomplished. Sweeping, cleaning ... After the carnage we still have the hope of a purified humanity' ('Dada Manifesto,' 300, 302).

The *Post-Avant* refers to experimental modes of art making that challenge the various hegemonies of neoliberalism and modernity, but without much tangible faith in progress or revolution. As some of these hegemonies take the form of masculinism and militarism, the rhetoric of avant-gardism has been broadly called into question for its complicity with intolerant ideology. Theorist Perry Anderson outlines the problem: 'Since the seventies, the very idea of an avant-garde, or of individual genius, has fallen under suspicion. Combative, collective movements of innovation have become steadily fewer, and the badge of a novel, self-conscious "ism" ever rarer. For the universe of the postmodern is not one of delimitation but intermixture – celebrating the cross-over, the hybrid, the pot-pourri' (93). Yet, despite the widely proclaimed 'death of the avant-garde,' post-avant artists continue to experiment in a manner that is at least analogous to previous avant-gardes, even though the embrace of revolution, progress, and militant rhetoric has disappeared. Furthermore, post-avant critics have begun to recognize a nefarious complicity in the avant-garde commitment to innovation and newness with capitalism's constant manufactured desire for the same. As Puchner observes, with their instant commodification, all would-be avant-gardes today seem to be 'speaking for multinational capitalism' (243). Indeed, for almost 200 years the status quo in the Western world has been shaped by a capitalism that is predicated on a similar embrace of invention and the disruption of convention. Anticipating this post-avant criticism, Wyndham Lewis pointed out in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) that the accrued discourse of constant change has become commonplace and even central

to capitalist culture since the industrial revolution: 'It is because our lives are so attached to and involved with the evolution of our machines that we have grown to see and feel everything in revolutionary terms, just as once the natural mood was conservative. We instinctively repose on the future rather than the past' (11). The toll of this Futurism is precisely a replication of the alienation that avant-garde movements were attempting to overcome through their experimental art: 'Science makes us *strangers* to ourselves' (13). Despite Lewis's criticism and many other exceptions, the post-avant generally refers to artists and critics from the contemporary era who create their work in aesthetic modes associated with postmodernism or those that come after postmodernism.

This criticism of the avant-garde as an unwitting participant in the very social values it attempts to undo provides a useful clue as to why the avant-gardes were unsuccessful in their respective revolutionary initiatives. In the words of Charles Jencks, 'the avant-garde which drives Modernism forward directly reflects the dynamism of capitalism, its new waves of destruction and construction' (222). Ironically, despite the romance of rebellion associated with the avant-garde, such criticism highlights the complicity of avant-garde art with the existing ideology of its time. Furthermore, and to build from Jencks, each of the four faces of avant-gardism outlined above can be understood in relation to the oscillation of destructive and constructive tendencies: for while aesthetic and radical avant-gardes construct idealistic visions and revolutionary phantasies, decadent movements (such as Dada, for instance) destroy the illusions upon which ideology is constructed. As the final phase in the process, and arguably the least politically ambitious phase, the post-avant does its best to avoid sustaining the system while drawing the system's contradictions and costs into greater consciousness.

Despite giving up on the possibility of achieving a revolutionary remaking of society, the post-avant creates art that is simultaneously both a-political and a self-conscious manifestation of the avant-garde spirit. In favouring nuance over resolution, however, post-avant critics have also struggled with or resisted articulating its complex relationship to the existing sociopolitical world. Butling and Rudy characterize the broad field as 'a wide-ranging, historiographic project to reconfigure existing domains, reterritorialize colonized spaces, and recuperate suppressed histories ... literary radicality in the second half of the twentieth century is best characterized as multiple "nodes in an alternative poetics network," rather than as a single line with one group out in front' (19). Such a reconfiguration (which helped to shape my own project's nodal model)

recognizes ongoing efforts and experimentation without relying upon linear or teleological conceptions of history – and, significantly, without reverting to the revolutionary language and promises of avant-gardes past. If the century and a half of ecstatic avant-garde projections and prophecies has proved anything, it is that history is not going to be resolved anytime soon but rather spills messily into the future without design. However, if the concept of avant-gardism now holds little relevance to contemporary art making, this distance only serves to make it easier and necessary to reflect on its remarkable influence on and relevance to previous generations.

The differences between the four faces of avant-gardism, including one orientated against the categories of art and artist and another that explicitly rejects the historical conceptualization of avant-gardism, give some indication of the complexity and difficulty of studying avant-garde art and writing in the twenty-first century – the denotative field of the term has accrued both extremely multifaceted and contradictory applications as well as extremely broad and ultimately bland implications. How the term is defined has significant impact on who gets included within the category, which is still and surprisingly presumed to be a privileged community. Various debates have developed in the theorization of the concept, particularly in determining the relationship between avant-gardism and history, creating a dialogue that can be read in relation to the four faces introduced above. For instance, Poggioli was the first to make the key distinction between what I have termed the aesthetic versus the radical avant-garde (his terms were artistic versus radical), theorizing a ‘divorce of the two avant-gardes’ following the Paris Commune uprising in 1870 (12). Following the divorce, politics for the artistic avant-garde ‘functioned almost solely as rhetoric.’ Peter Bürger, one of the most influential critics in postmodern decadent circles, rejected Poggioli’s a-political rendering of the artistic avant-garde. For Bürger, the avant-garde criticism of art as an institution was a fundamentally political act: ‘The avant-garde turns against both – the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy’ (22). The aim of the avant-garde ‘is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life’ and would amount to a fundamental remodelling of bourgeois society. Bürger arrives at his theory of the avant-garde through a Marxist notion that builds from Habermas, who argued that art in bourgeois society serves as a sanctuary for the fulfilment of unmet needs in that society. Bürger extends this focus to consider the avant-garde’s revolution of the content of art within that sanctuary to include self-criticism (25). The singular focus on the general impotence of the

avant-garde to change the world, however, threatens to overwrite or else undermine the significance of the distinctive nature of their sociopolitical and aesthetical ambitions. While it is true, as Seamus Heaney suggests, that ‘in one sense the efficacy of *poetry* is nil – *no* lyric has ever *stopped a tank*,’ it is also true that very few poets outside the avant-garde have ever attempted or desired to wrestle control of a tank through their poetry: indeed, one could equate the desire to control a tank with a poem as an almost exclusively avant-garde ambition (though, certainly, not all gardes would share such a desire). Discussing avant-garde artists through their motivations and ambitions, rather than through their sociopolitical impact, addresses them as subjects within history rather than subjects to history.

The post-avant phase of avant-gardism, however, marks a general retreat by artists and critics from militaristic commitments to revolutionary politics. Kostelanetz, for instance, defines avant-gardism through three aesthetic criteria that exclude any relation to sociopolitical revolution. His criteria include work that evidences aesthetic innovation, that is initially unacceptable, and that has its maximum audience in the future (see ‘ABC,’ 6). Such a model positions avant-garde art entirely within its contextual social contract, whereas the avant-garde ‘hope for a liberated humanity’ is predicated on a contest between the unemancipated polis and the liberating vision of the emancipating artist. The shift away from the commitment to creating a new order or a new consciousness can be seen in post-avant critics Butling and Rudy’s response to Kostelanetz, where they criticize his model of avant-gardism for not being inclusive enough. His canon of ‘overwhelmingly white and male’ authors (Butling and Rudy, 20), they argue, distorts the pool of avant-garde authors by ignoring innovations in implied subject positions within texts. Their critique focuses on the importance of experimental women’s and minority literatures without recognizing the already depoliticized nature of Kostelanetz’s criteria – for it is only when avant-gardism becomes depoliticized, derevolutionized, that it becomes hypocritical to exclude the so-called schools of identity writings. Avant-gardism, as I’ve outlined it thus far, however, is a different phenomenon from identity writing to the extent that the ambition of much identity writing is to secure recognition and participation within the existing social contract. Acknowledging the rights of all citizens to be equal participants within society does not entail a radical reconfiguration of the society, but rather seeks to reform the people with access to its power (a bank is still a bank regardless of the gender or colour or sexual orientation of its CEO). Feminist and identity writing, however, becomes avant-garde proper when the goal of inclusion

or recognition is supplemented by the desire to completely dismantle the dominant social contract and remake it in revolutionary form. Barbara Godard, for instance, outlines the 'revolutionary' nature of radical feminist authors' attempts to de-create patriarchal grammar and create a language that does not exclude women – and from such a liberated language follows a liberated consciousness. Writers with a similar kind of revolutionary impulse include many from Langston Hughes to David Antin, or in Canada, from Roy Miki and Fred Wah to Marlene NourbeSe Philip, who not only demand to be identified as legitimate participants within their society, but have also advocated for an entirely new constitution of that society.

Given the contestations and the rich, diverse history of the term, this book will not attempt to present a new, singular definition. Instead, I will be primarily focused on using the historically and philosophically different positions, including the four faces of avant-gardism outlined above, to illuminate the particular aesthetic project of the three nodes of early Canadian avant-garde writing that this book addresses: the Cosmic Canadians, the Automatists, and the Canadian Vorticists. As much as possible, this book will resist the temptation to present a unified theory of avant-gardism: its diversity, predicated on the more elusive requirement of experimental innovation, is left open to allow multiple entrances and exits to the para-tradition of Canadian experimental literature. In the case of each node of activity, however, the connections and contradictions between the writing and various theories of avant-gardism will be directly explored – as will the group's own sense of how and why they relate to canonical avant-gardes, respectively Expressionism, Surrealism, and English Vorticism. The nuances and intermingling of the theories of avant-gardism, what we can call, to borrow bpNichol's term, the border-blur between them, will be addressed in the subsequent chapters that address the particular manifestations of avant-garde activity in Canada.

Two dimensions of this study require clarification right from the outset. First of all, though this study is primarily focused on literary avant-garde activity, the authors and the avant-garde nodes addressed were not themselves limited to literary orientations. Consequently, occasionally and where appropriate, examples from other disciplines (including, in particular, visual arts, theatre, and dance) will be included in my discussions. These are specifically intended to connect the literary activity to contemporaneous work in other mediums, and thereby corroborate specific avant-garde ambitions of the particular node under discussion. Brooker, for instance, who appears variously throughout this book, won Canada's

first Governor General's Award for literature and wrote experimental plays and poetry, but was also Canada's first abstract painter, a musician, a sculptor, and an actor. Lawren Harris, Brooker's peer, is famous in Canada for his visual art, but appears in this book primarily as a writer of poetry, manifestos, and criticism. Part of Brooker and Harris's avant-gardism, as with the Automatists and the Vorticists, is tied up in this commitment to multidisciplinary.

The other issue that needs to be clarified is my use of non-English sources which have been translated into English in the text of this book. Given the emergence of avant-gardism as a concept from the French military and subsequently from French art history, it is inconceivable to consider ignoring French antecedents or the remarkable avant-garde activity in French Canada. As this book is intended for an English audience, however, it does not serve its audience well to leave passages in their original language. Translations, where available, or paraphrases have thus been used throughout; the original French has been recorded in the endnotes where relevant. The politics and implications of translating French Canadian authors into English for a study of literary avant-gardism in Canada appear in the relevant chapters. The politics and implications of translation, as a potential metaphor for avant-garde ambitions in toto, is explored throughout this book but particularly in the conclusion.

In Automatist playwright and poet Claude Gauvreau's first play, 'The Good Life,' discussed in chapter three, he begins with a rather enigmatic but distinctly resonant line: 'Hands in the abyss making leaves: that's a wedding.' In this book, I have attempted to wed the avant-gardes to one another in a marriage defined less by the singularity of their ambitions and aesthetics and more by their shared commitment to making the 'leaves' of their books, pamphlets, and manifestos out of shared rejection of the values of their contextual society. The abyss is a familiar metaphor for the unknown, but with the avant-garde the abyss becomes also an allegorical site in which the bonds of ideology are lifted. In the abyss, the artist experiences a fleeting liberation from society. It is here that avant-gardists discover the paradoxical power and potential of creative de-creation. Those that write in the abyss, that keep their hands in the abyss, write outside of the world that yet possesses their bodies. Bertram Brooker's poem 'The Destroyer' makes use of a very similar allegorical geography when he writes: 'I have been / where there are no selves ... no evil ... no laws ... no sin ... no good ... no god ... I am come back only to destroy' (30-2).

Theory of the Avant-Gardes in Canada

No doubt all successful ... revolutionaries must always be driven by enthusiasm and irrational hope, since they would otherwise make the common-sense judgement that the risks and costs of revolution outweigh the possible benefits.

Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution 1917–1932*

The history of the term ‘avant-garde’ in Europe has been thoroughly documented by various continental scholars with no substantial disagreements about the early development and uses of the term.¹ The idea of an avant-garde was first coined in fifteenth-century France to describe the military unit at the fore of the army – the avant-garde was the group that defended the country and all it represented, and that, upon successful defence, pushed forth into new territory. The avant-garde used violence to protect and enlarge a nation’s territorial holdings. From this militaristic and nationalistic root, the term avant-garde transitioned from a literal implication to a metaphoric implication in the years leading up to the 1848 French Revolution. In this new phase, art, in writings by radicals such as Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant and Henri de Saint-Simon, was said to serve a similar function in advancing the cause of the revolution as the soldiers who advanced the territory of the nation did. The goal of art, as Laverdant suggests, was to ‘lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are at the base of our society’ (qtd. in Poggioli, 9). Avant-garde art was seen as a tool to hasten political change. In this new metaphoric use, avant-garde service to the existing nation was replaced by service to the projected, post-revolutionary nation: ‘to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is’ (ibid.).

The early uses of the term, which have been dated back as far as the second half of the sixteenth century,² have little relevance to the present study of literary artists who embraced the term for its positive implications with regards to social change. Similar to the term revolution, which Hannah Arendt shows began with surprisingly conservative implications, the term avant-garde also only gradually developed its unique and radical implications. There is, for instance, an important distinction between the descriptive militaristic metaphor in the very early usages and the self-conscious metaphor used by agonistic writers in the nineteenth century. As Matei Călinescu explains, 'Although it is encountered in the language of warfare, the modern notion of "avant-garde" has a lot more to do with the language, theory, and practice of a comparatively recent kind of warfare, the revolutionary civil war. In this sense, it is safe to say that the actual career of the term avant-garde was started in the aftermath of the French Revolution, when it acquired undisputed political overtones' (100-1). Revolutionary avant-gardism relies upon an artist or group of artists recognizing themselves as agents both within a specific historical moment (time) and within a particular geography (space). It is worth adding a small caveat here: both time and space can be understood as ideological borders and, working from Althusser's use of the term ideology, as the imagined composition of reality. I add this caveat because many avant-garde movements, including the Cosmic Canadians, advocate perceptions of reality that are not shaped by time or space or both. Acting against their contemporary milieu then, avant-garde artists from the mid-nineteenth century subsequently positioned themselves within a projective and progressive trajectory of history that they believed would lead to a turn in their society, a revolution, which would open up the possibility of a liberated social contract in the future, starting history anew. Thus, Rimbaud's call for 'a derangement of *all the senses*' (Letter to George, 365) was an attempt to make of the poet 'a seer': 'The Poet ... exhausts every possible poison so that only essence remains. He undergoes unspeakable tortures that require complete faith and superhuman strength, rendering him the ultimate invalid among men, the master criminal, the first among the damned – and the supreme Savant! For he arrives at the *unknown*! For, unlike everyone, he has developed an already rich soul! ... It doesn't matter if these leaps into the unknown kill him: other awful workers will follow him; they'll start at the horizons where the other has fallen!' (Letter to Paul, 367-8).

Eventually, the metaphor of the poet leading society bored Rimbaud, but in the passage above, taken from his famous and very influential letter to Paul Demeny, the disruption of the present alienated social order was