“let us find our serious heads”: Placing the Manifesto in Canadian Literature

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The year 2009 marks the centenary of the publication of “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” on the front page of Le Figaro. As Martin Puchner argues in Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes (2005): “Futurism taught everyone how the manifesto worked” (73). The manifesto was indispensable to avant-garde movements in the twentieth century, from dada and surrealism in the 1910s and 1920s to Canada’s own neoisin in the 1980s. These manifestos were bright, bold, and brash, like the vorticist “blast” sent out on the eve of the First World War by Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound. But the literary-artistic manifesto did not originate with futurism, and its use has not been limited to the avant-garde. This paper examines the changing role the manifesto played in Canadian literature from the early-nineteenth century to the Second World War; from its origins as a tool for progress in the struggle for national identity to its more self-consciously literary use as a means of modernist provocation. Louis Dudek, writing in the 1950s, described the modernist “retreat into intimate… publication” — he quotes Ezra Pound’s quip, “‘To hell with Harper’s’” — but this happened in Canada in a significant way only after the watershed of World War Two (Dudek 205).

That, in fact, is where our story ends — when Canadian writers attained the level of confidence and sophistication necessary to break away from the general readership and the fundamental questions of national identity to concentrate on more strictly literary matters. I will address what is still the pre-avant-garde era in Canada; from Romantic engagements in the early-nineteenth century to nascent modernist interventions in relatively mainstream publications of the twenties and thirties — neither a fully-fledged, high-modernist programme nor all-out avant-garde, but simply seeking, in the words of the Canadian Mercury in 1928, “the
emancipation of Canadian literature from the state of amiable mediocrity and insipidity in which it now languishes” (“Editorial” 246). I will not, therefore, be showing slides of Blast-style manifestos from the Canadian avant-garde, which came much later, but will instead address pre- and post-confederation manifestos concerned with feeding and forging what Thomas D’Arcy McGee called “The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion.” This paper will track the formation of attempts not merely to describe, or speak to, but ultimately to bring into being an indigenous literature in Anglophone Canada. The vehicle, in this case, is the manifesto: a declaration of principles, but also a call to action.

The manifestos discussed here rarely call themselves manifestos: they hold day jobs as editorials, prefaces, speeches, letters, essays, and poems. They speak of cultural identity and nation-building, the relative merits of nativism versus cosmopolitanism, and the value of European literary models. Almost unanimously they speak of the current state of Canadian literature — where it is said to exist at all — and how the national literature might be encouraged to grow and flourish (Plant metaphors abound.). What unites them — what unites all manifestos — is their sense of crisis; usually accompanied by a statement of principles and a polemical “us/them,” “blast/bless” structure. Manifestos often served to mask shortcomings in terms of actual product. Futurism, imagism, and vorticism all issued manifestos using the collective “we,” when in fact they were usually written by an “I” (Marinetti, for example, or Pound). In the early Canadian manifestos, the absence is the absence of a vital, viable literature. As Sara Jeannette Duncan wrote in a piece called “Saunterings” (1886): “hope and faith ... constitute the sum of our literary endeavour” (113).

A word about the title, “let us find our serious heads:” the line is from Leonard Cohen’s 1961 poem “The Only Tourist in Havana Turns His Thoughts Homeward,” which borrows the revolutionary manifesto form, in keeping with the time and place of writing (the Cuban Revolution), and uses it to comment ironically and humorously on issues of Canadian identity: “let us make the French talk English;” “let us make the CBC talk English;” “let us terrorize Alaska;” “let us have two Governor Generals at the same time,” and so on (104). Sometimes, as Canadians, it is hard to “find our serious heads” — to take ourselves and our culture seriously — and for that reason, at times, the manifesto seems out of place in Canadian
literature — too loud, too showy, too arrogant, too undemocratic. “Who do you think you are?” a voice asks. Canada sits more comfortably, perhaps, in postmodernism than modernism — now here is something we're good at! — with its pluralism and constant re-invention, and having no central myth of identity or “national essence” (like American individualism) except for the readiness to resist such essentialism, to be hybrid, provisional, local. Dwarfed by geography, how could Canadian identity be anything else? Nevertheless, manifestos did and do exist in Canadian literature and art, and we will look at a few of the literary ones now.

We begin, somewhat arbitrarily but not quite randomly, in 1824 with the manifesto-like preface to St. Ursula's Convent; or, The Nun of Canada. Julia Catharine Beckwith Hart's gothic romance, a lost classic until it was reissued in 1978, is generally considered to be the “first Canadian novel;” that is, the first novel written by a Canadian and published in Canada. The author's preface is, as one might expect at this early point in Canada's cultural history, modest in tone, self-effacing, almost cowed. She describes her book as a “homebred production,” “destitute of the elegance and refinement which adorn the land of our forefathers.” Nevertheless, she begs for patronage, on patriotic grounds: “Can the patriotic Canadian,” she asks, “refuse a kind reception to his own kindred?” (Hart 15-16). During the same year, in an editorial for The Canadian Magazine and Literary Repository, Canada is personified as a female infant bearing “the stamp of uncultivated wildness on her forehead,” and it is hoped only that “her” literature might be “useful and entertaining” — a mantra repeated throughout the nineteenth century. The editor, David Chisholme, was a Scot who had emigrated to Canada the previous year, which perhaps explains his gloss on Canada as “the country which we inhabit” rather than simply “our country” (17).

In the revolutionary year 1848, when Thomas D’Arcy McGee was plotting rebellion in Ireland, and Marx and Engels were setting a new standard with The Communist Manifesto, The Literary Garland in Canada published “Our Literature, Present and Prospective,” a strikingly conservative call for a national literature. The essay-manifesto declares that culture is a measure of a country's prosperity, and recommends, once again, a literature of “entertainment and instruction.” Placed in contrast to these worthy goals is the “polluting licentiousness” of nineteenth-century Dutch-
French erotic novelist Paul De Kock (a figure well known to readers of James Joyce’s *Ulysses.*) The new Canadian literature must take as its models solid, morally sound authors if it is to start off on the right foot (39-40). Guiding readers’ reading habits was a key service offered by magazines like the *Garland* — here, for example, they recommend Walter Scott as a useful tonic against the ills of De Kock.

We proceed now to the central case of Thomas D’Arcy McGee: the Irish rebel poet turned Canadian moderate politician and “founding father.” Here at last we find the short, sharp rhetoric that anticipates the fiery manifestos of the modernist period. McGee’s manifestos of the late-1850s are a product of the cross-pollination of revolutionary politics and poetry, and were directly influenced by the previous decade’s upheavals. Marx and Engels can be heard in the sweeping statements of “A Canadian Literature” (1857), which declares: “All Canada is interested in the creation of a literature.” This goal is framed as a revolutionary struggle against an antiquated status quo: that “the literature of the mother country” should serve well enough for its colonies. The tone is one of optimism, and McGee’s vision still resonates: “although we may not be able to form a literature purely Canadian in its identity,” he writes, “yet we can gather from every land, and mould our gleanings into a form, racy of the new soil to which it is adapted” (42). Though he borrowed from his experience as a revolutionary poet in the Young Ireland movement (with Oscar Wilde’s mother, “Speranza”), McGee could already see in Canada an opportunity to avoid the faction-fighting of the Old Country. He calls not for a narrow nativism, but for “the acknowledgement of all elements, foreign and provincial; the dispelling of all separate ‘clannishness,’ and the recognition of all nationalities in one idea and in one name”; a strikingly tolerant vision, even in the settler-colony context (43).

While he eschewed a narrow nationalism in favour of what we might now call multiculturalism, McGee was by no means dismissive of the power of a broader nationalism. The following year in the same magazine (his own *New Era*), McGee published another famous manifesto: “Protection for Canadian Literature.” His call for a home-grown literary industry is appealing for the importance it places on literature — not something you often hear from politicians. (McGee was elected into the House in 1858.) He declares that “Every country, every nationality, every
people, must create and foster a National Literature, if it is their wish to
preserve a distinct individuality from other nations.” He grounds his
concept of a national character not in race but in landscape and social
conditions. A national literature, he argues, would speak to the identity
born out of this unique set of conditions. As with the other New Era
editorials, there is nothing moderate in McGee’s language — this is a true
manifesto: “Canada does not possess a periodical worthy of support —
or a literary newspaper,” he declares (43). But he defends Canada’s
potential, and attacks the imagined adversary who would say that Canada
is not ready to sustain a fully-fledged literature: “This is a false idea,
imported from beyond the seas,” he writes, “and groundless in all its
premises. It is to be found in the mouths of cockneys who speak disdain-
fully of the ‘Colonies.’” McGee closes by contrasting the “unhealthy foreign
substitute” of imported literature with a robust and healthy national
literature, based in the landscape: “It must assume the gorgeous colouring
and the gloomy grandeur of the forest. . . Its lyrics must possess the ringing
cadence of the waterfall, and its epics must be as solemn and beautiful as
our great rivers” (44). Here again are lessons learned in Young Ireland:
nationalism and nature, the raw strength and health of the nation contrasted
with the decadent, overcivilized colonizing power.

In the year of confederation, 1867, McGee gave a famous speech
describing his vision of the new nation, and the role that culture would
play. The speech, “The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion,” was deliv-
ered only a year before his assassination. Here he argued that the identity
of the new nation should be based neither in “an exaggerated opinion of
ourselves and a barbarian deprecation of foreigners,” nor in “a merely apish
civilization”; it cannot be achieved only by material means, but must begin
in the intellect — the “mental outfit” — of its people (75). He raises a
question often raised in these manifestos: why, if Canadians are so literate
and well read, do we not produce better writers and critics? He challenges
the passivity of the colonial subject. “We are . . . a reading people; and if a
reading, why not also a reflective people? Do we master what we read? Or
does our reading master us?” (77). Since the reading material originates
largely from the mother country, this subversive line of questioning
unsettles the perception of power and mastery that many settlers might
have had.
The most striking and curious thing about “The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion,” however, is the ending. It is a shockingly transparent testament to the fluidity of national identity and allegiance. McGee, the former rebel of 1848 and poet-nationalist of Young Ireland, quotes Samuel Ferguson, a Protestant Irish barrister and poet of the older generation (who later served as a model for Yeats). The poem by Ferguson is a tribute to the Irish hero and principal organizer of Young Ireland, Thomas Davis — Ferguson acted as a lawyer for at least one Young Irisher accused of “sedition” — and to his (and McGee’s) generation. Quite astonishingly, McGee, having asked the reader’s pardon, substitutes “Canada” for “Erin” in the last line:

Oh brave young men, our hope, our pride, our promise,
On you our hearts are set, —
In manliness, in kindness, in justice,
To make Canada a nation yet! (89)

The original poem continues: “In union or in severance free and strong,” which McGee, who was soon to be assassinated for betraying his revolutionary ideals by the Fenian Patrick Whelan, might also have understood in a Canadian context. In the case of McGee, the manifestos provide a crucial link: between his radical republican past, seen in residual form in the polarizing language of his New Era editorials, and his more moderate vision of cultural independence for Canada and Ireland, which would be achieved through the development of a national identity fostered through the arts, without the necessity of a violent political rupture with Britain. In this sense, the manifestos also encapsulate McGee’s transformation from a self-proclaimed conspirator for Ireland — after the 1848 rebellion he signed one piece “Thomas D’Arcy McGee, A Traitor to the British Government” — to a victim of an Irish republican conspiracy.

We will skip ahead now to a very brief look at the 1920s and 1930s. The well known Canadian poet and critic Louis Dudek claimed, in his 1958 essay, “The Role of Little Magazines in Canada,” that only after 1940 did modernism and the little magazine flourish in Canada. “The Canadian part of this revolt,” he writes, somewhat ruefully, “came, like most Canadian artistic contributions, late” (Dudek 206). Naming some of the main literary periodicals of the twenties and thirties, Dudek argues:
The Canadian Mercury (1928-1929), The Canadian Forum (1920) and The Canadian Bookman (1919-1939), by and large have followed the [mainstream] pattern: they are not little magazines. (207)

Everything used in this essay, that is to say, is still part of the mainstream, according to Dudek. Nevertheless, these magazines did publish occasional "blasts" that conform to the characteristics of the manifesto.

The first explicit manifesto for Canadian literature that I know of is Lionel Stevenson's straightforwardly titled "Manifesto for a National Literature," published in the Bookman in 1924 when it was the official organ of the Canadian Writers' Association. Aside from the acknowledgement that "all institutions are insecure" — he was speaking for one of them — "and established traditions are cracking," this is pretty tame stuff by manifesto standards. There is the suggestion that something like the Irish literary revival might work in Canada (Yeats had just won the Nobel Prize for Literature), but the sense of urgency is missing from this "manifesto," and a distinct literature still seems a long way off. To his credit, Stevenson argues that a national literature in Canada "is more likely to be reached through a sincere effort to perceive the country's inward virtue ... than through oratory and aggression," which he sees as being anathema to the Canadian, as distinct from the American, national character (208).

A better example is an editorial from the first issue of the Canadian Mercury in December 1928. It begins by conjuring a tide of "reactionary opposition" to the journal that threatened its very birth. The editors, undaunted, were "determined to preserve its policies" and to demand "a higher ... standard of literary criticism in Canada" (246). The language of eugenics is used to interesting effect as Canadian literature is personified as a "lusty but ... inarticulate brat": "he has not reaped the benefits [of] an extensive immigration policy [as he would have in America]. He has retained the stifling qualities of Nordic consciousness and is likely, by present symptoms, to become [an] idiot." Rather than try to help this unfortunate being, the editors wish to start fresh, and taking a page from Blast ("Blast presents an art of Individuals"), or indeed the more contemporary transition, they declare: "The Canadian Mercury is individual .... We have no preconceived idea of Canadian literature ... our faith rests in
the spirit which is at last beginning to brood upon our literary chaos.” Echoing the Futurist manifesto mentioned at the start of this paper, they declare: “The editors are all well under thirty and intend to remain so” (247).

What Louis Dudek resented in these mainstream literary publications was the aping (to use a term beloved of Wyndham Lewis) of writers like Pound, Eliot, Yeats, and later Auden, at the expense of a “native” tradition. The worry over finding an original and distinctively Canadian voice is of course characteristic of the majority of these manifestos. Stephen Leacock’s “The National Literature Problem in Canada,” which was also published in the first issue of the *Mercury*, is one notable exception. Leacock, a staunch defender of the British Empire, is unabashedly sceptical of attempts to locate a distinct Canadian voice. “We don’t have to be different,” he complains (Leacock 8). He questions whether so thoroughly multicultural a nation as Canada could ever find a unique literary voice, and he doubts the wisdom of such a project. Instead, Leacock envisions a global culture, a republic of letters.

“It seems to me,” he concludes, “that the attempt to mark off Canada as a little area all its own, listening to no one but itself, is as silly as it is ineffective. If a Canadian author writes a good book, I’ll read it: if not I’ll read one written in Kansas or Copenhagen. The conception of the republic of letters is a nobler idea than the wilful attempt at national exclusiveness”.

(Leacock 9)

Dudek identifies the first true “little magazine” as *Contemporary Verse* (1941-1952), published in Vancouver, although even here he finds a telling weakness: no manifestos. Unlike the American and British modernist little magazines he mentions — *Blast, Poetry, transition* — “*Contemporary Verse* was not a fighting magazine with a policy; it was concerned only with publishing ‘good poetry’—which, in itself, can embody an affirmation — but it did not in addition work out any program of ideas.” (209)

Dudek’s survey becomes, as he reaches his present moment in the 1950s, a late-modernist manifesto in itself: little magazines, like the literary movements they represent, must immerse themselves “in the destructive element of reality,” he writes; they must provide a “vociferous reaction”
to the mainstream media and its audiences. Their success, he declares, “will be measured by the survey of Canadian Literature in 2000, not by the readers they had within their time” (212). And so, I suppose, it has come to pass: the tables of contents of the magazines he lists, like Contemporary Verse, Preview, Direction, First Statement, and the Northern Review, bear the names of Canada’s most celebrated twentieth-century poets: F. R. Scott, Dorothy Livesay, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, P. K. Page, Earle Birney, Phyllis Webb, Al Purdy. Even more than the prophetic tone at the end, however, Dudek’s piece may be called a manifesto because — in the tradition of that great promoter, Ezra Pound — he seeks to enact what he seems only to describe: his “history” and his list of “great authors” are brought into being, in part, by this very text — it is history in the making. We close, then, before the true heyday of the manifesto and the little magazine in Canada. But from a historical perspective, so does Dudek (writing in 1958): the “boom” would occur a decade later, in the late-1960s; the first wave of avant-garde activity, pre- and just post-WWI, passed by most of North America. It was only in the late-sixties and seventies that the so-called “second wave” avant-garde, as distinct from the high, late modernism of the fifties, which is really the stuff of Dudek’s essay, took hold. But that project will have to wait until some point in the near future.

**Works Cited**


Abstract

The year 2009 marked the centenary of the publication of ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism’ on the front page of Le Figaro. As Martin Puchner argues in Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes (2005): ‘Futurism taught everyone how the manifesto worked’. The manifesto was indispensable to modernist and avant-garde movements in the twentieth century, from dada and surrealism to Canada’s own neoism. But the literary-artistic manifesto did not originate with futurism, and its use has not been limited to the avant-garde. In Canada, for example, manifestos have served both to mark turning points and to generate ruptures in the longstanding debate on the value and viability of a national literature.

In this paper I will examine the changing role the manifesto played in Canadian literature from the mid-nineteenth century to the Second World War. Between these dates we can trace the genre’s early development in the struggle for national identity to its more precisely literary use as a tool of modernist provocation. The study will draw upon important literary magazines of the period, from Thomas D’Arcy McGee’s New Era (1857-58) to “little magazines” like Alan Crawley’s Contemporary Verse (1940-52). The manifestos appear not only as “manifestos,” but also as editorials, prospectuses, prefaces, speeches, letters, essays, and poems. What unites them is a tone of urgency, a promise of salvation, and the struggle to break a path out of the current crisis.

Keywords

Canadian literature, little magazines, McGee, Thomas D’Arcy, manifestos, modernism (literature).

Resumo

“O Futurismo veio ensinar a todos como o manifesto funcionava.” O manifesto fora indispensável aos movimentos modernistas e avant-garde durante o século XXI, desde o dada ao surrealismo, passando pelo próprio neoismo do Canadá. Mas o manifesto artístico-literário não nasceu com o futurismo, e o seu uso não tem sido limitado pelo avant-garde. No Canadá, por exemplo, os manifestos têm servido tanto para marcar pontos de viragem como para criar rupturas no já antigo debate acerca do valor e viabilidade de uma literatura nacional.

Neste texto irei examinar o papel mutável do manifesto no contexto da literatura canadiana, desde meados do século XIX até à Segunda Guerra Mundial. Durante este período é possível delinear o início do desenvolvimento deste gênero literário na sua luta por uma identidade nacional, até ao seu uso literário mais preciso como forma de provocação modernista. Este estudo irá chamar a atenção para importantes revistas literárias deste período, desde *New Era* (1875-58) de Thomas D’Arcy até às “pequenas revistas” como a de Alan Crawley *Contemporary Verse* (1940-52).

Os manifestos não aparecem apenas enquanto “manifestos,” mas também como editoriais, prospectos, prefácios, discursos, ensaios e poemas. Aquilo que os une é um tom de urgência, uma promessa de salvação e a luta para encontrar uma saída das crises atuais.

**Palavras-Chave**

Literatura Canadiana, pequenas revistas, McGee e Thomas D’Arcy, manifestos, modernismo (literatura).