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SMALL COMMUNITIES OF ARTISTS PAVING THE ROAD TO
MODERNISM: CANADIAN AND HUNGARIAN CASE
STUDIES

“...most menetekünk először egy időben, egy
rangsorban azokkal, akik a jövő felé haladnak.”
Dienes László¹

Comparing the early manifestations of Modernism in the case of what later will be called the 'Montreal group of poets' and poets starting their career in Szeged may first look a futile and unrealistic ambition—still these widely differing two cultures on 'the margins of Modernism' show remarkable common features besides the significant differences which result from the diverse social backgrounds. Using some theoretical statements concerning this complex and pulsing phenomenon on the literary scene of the interwar period I wish to elaborate on the basic features manifesting themselves in a rapidly developing North-American metropolis (i.e. Montreal) and a medium-sized provincial town of war-torn Central Europe. What pushed me in this direction is Raymond Williams's hinting at 'an alternative tradition taken from the neglected

¹ “It is my greatest pleasure that the experimental artists in our arts, music and literature are present simultaneously with the international new movements and are not their mere imitators ... At last we are not provincial in the back of beyond, and we are not following others with a 50 or 100-year delay. If I am not mistaken, *this is the very first time when we are marching at the same time, in the same row with those heading for the future.*” Letter by Dienes László, editor of *Korunk* (published in Kolozsvár, then Romania) in early 1926 to Kassák Lajos, cited by Kassák—Pán, 7. (translation mine, the motto in italics)

works left in the wide margin of the century'² (Williams 35) that can modify our image about the artistic movement of the 1920s and 1930s which incorporates widely differing—sometimes contradictory—credos and methods, which still is commonly put under the umbrella terms Modernism (concerning the Canadian examples) or avant-garde (with regard to the Hungarian artists).

In the most frequently cited theoretical elaboration of Modernism, Bradbury and McFarlane define it as a metropolitan movement the result of which is that “[m]any minor modernisms remain [...] excluded from standard accounts of this international movement” (Kronfeld 3)—in the past few years, however, a lot of research has been done to ‘de-center modernism’ (Schedler XI) and to map ‘border Modernism’. When outlining the same conceptual drawbacks of general surveys about modernism, Glen Norcliffe points out that there is “a competing conception of modernity that, by being situated and contextualised in particular settings of time and place, amount not to one totalizing explanation, but to a cacophony of variations on the theme of modernity”, and re-uses Philip Cooke’s term of a “geographically nuanced understanding of modernity” (10). Kronfeld reveals the dichotomy between a general feature of Modernism and its most widely accepted definitions.

Modernism is famous for its affinity for the marginal, the exile, the “other”. Yet the representative examples of this marginality typically are those writers who have become the most canonical high modernists [...] While they sometimes acknowledge the multicultural, international nature of the movement, handbooks as well as theoretical debates [...] focus on—isms and writers that are well within (the) major linguistic and geopolitical key. (Kronfeld 3)

The most visible difference between these two varieties of Modernism is that the main tendency of “metropolitan modernism was to turn inward, to dissociate the self from others and the external world”, while “[i]n border modernism, the external world is seen as constitutive of the self, and identity is explored through association with those defined as culturally, racially, or linguistically ‘other’.” (Schedler, XII, XIII) At the same time, it needs to be underlined that ‘border modernism’ also “bears the imprint of metropolitan modernism, even if in opposition to it”

² “‘Modernism’ is confined to this highly selective field and denied to everything else [...] [w]e must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margins of the century.” (Williams 34–5)

(Schedler XII). Border modernism—apart from the general search for new representational devices to depict a rapidly changing world—lays emphasis “on historical context, oral forms of expression, and simplification” (Schedler XIII).

Frederic Jameson introduced the term of ‘Third World Modernism’ (with reference to the Ireland of Joyce’s *Ulysses*) that can be linked with a post-colonial situation. The American continent, on the other hand, offers “another marginal, ec-centric space where First and Third worlds meet” (Schedler XIV). As early as 1925, William Carlos Williams suggested that “the modern artist must descend to the ‘ground’ to truly interact with the ‘other’” (cited by Schedler XVI) (although for him, the ‘other’ was the aboriginal Indian—we will see this idea manifested in the regular sociological and ethnographic/folkloric field work of the Szeged group).

Speaking of Modernism, one is faced with a wide selection of definitions and descriptions.

- Modernism is a complex response across continents and disciplines to a changing world (Gillies 2).
- N. Frye said in 1967 that “Modern’ [...] describes certain aspects of an international style in the arts which began, mainly in Paris, about a hundred years ago” (27), stressing that “Modern art [...] is concerned to give the impression of process rather than product” (38).
- Modernism can also be defined as a cluster of international movements and trends in literature and the arts. [...] There is little agreement about the term’s meaning and scope. Chronologically, it may start as early as the 1880s and last as late as the 1950s (Kronfeld 21).
- Willmott considers it a “self-reflexively experimental aesthetic practice that produces its meaning in dialogue with a social field characterized by historical modernization” (101).
- Bradbury and McFarlane in ‘The Name and Nature of Modernism’ enumerate five key modernist tendencies:
 1. Away from representational realism towards abstract an autotelic art forms
 2. High degree of aesthetic self-consciousness
 3. Aesthetic of radical innovation, fragmentation and shock
 4. Breaking of familiar formal and linguistic conventions
 5. Use of paradox (19–55).

- It involves a “breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions” (Cuddon cited by Gillies, 2).

It can be of use to recall an overview of the term ‘avant-garde’—and to highlight that in many respects it overlaps with Modernism:

the term *avant-garde* was first used in a military context at the end of the 18th century and then about 1820 became a political concept current among utopian socialists. [...] in the second half of the 19th century it became an aesthetic metaphor [...] used to identify writers and artists intent on establishing their own formal conventions *in opposition to the dominant academic and popular taste*. [...] The high point of the avant-garde [...] [was] particularly the 1910–30 period when expressionism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism, and constructivism were to generate antagonistic and visionary impulses which signalled a vital tradition of social radicalism and social innovation. (Bayard, 3, highlights mine)

All the above descriptions imply that these artists form a ‘minority’ in contrast with the dominant way of expression, practised by the majority of artists in a given period. It is not only the artists themselves who are in minority but their audience, as well—therefore their literary production could first appear in periodicals of limited editions, very often implying that the artists themselves would be actively participating in the preparation work (editing), as well as in the printing and distributing process without any honorarium. These journals are called the ‘little magazines’. “All the important events in poetry and most of the initiating manifestoes and examples of change are to be found in the little magazines.” (Dudek and Gnarowski 203).

This brief survey of terminology can provide us with ample background to our case studies, i.e. the Modernist/avant-garde communities of the interwar period in Montreal and in Szeged. As Dean Irvine puts it, “Modernism in Canada is [...] among the marginal modernisms outside the Anglo-American canon [...] the study of marginal modernisms not only performs a critique of canonical modernism’s exclusionary practices but also provides insight into the historical marginality of its avant-garde aesthetics.” (Irvine, 2005. 4)—actually, he goes as far as making a statement about “canonical modernisms’ indebtedness to marginal modernisms” (Irvine 8). He continues by citing Tim Conley: “Canada’s modernism is not tertiary or ‘after’ European and then American modernisms, but ‘between’ them.” (Irvine, 2005. 6).

“l’ange avantgardien” (F. R. Scott)

Although “[m]odernism arrived quickly in countries that had well-established literary traditions” (Norris 8)—and Canada in the early twentieth century would not count as such—forerunners of artistic innovation appeared already during and right after WWI, e.g. as early as 1914, Arthur Stringer published *Open Water*, a book of poems. In its preface he pleaded the cause of free verse. In the 1920s Dorothy Livesay wrote in the Imagist mode, experimenting with free verse: her poems appeared in American and English literary publications (Norris 10–11). The watershed date, however, was November 21, 1925 when the first issue of *The McGill Fortnightly Review* (1925–27), a new independent student journal edited by A. J. M. Smith and F. R. Scott, graduate students of the prestigious Montreal university appeared (Norris 11). (Although Montreal in the 1920s was not as francophone as today, these poets were active in a plurilingual milieu that points at not only a special attitude towards language but also at their ‘border-situation’.)

Canadian critics agree that it was the McGill group which cleared the ground for Canadian Modernism. Apart from Scott and Smith, the two leading figures of the group, Leo Kennedy, and later A. M. Klein also were part of its core. The *Fortnightly* not only condemned the backward literary condition of the country, but also “attempted to define Modernism in articles and in poems” (Norris 11). A. J. M. Smith is considered to be the theoretician of the new poetry: he visioned the relationship of a changing society and environment to poetry the following way:

Our age is an age of change, and of a change that is taking place with a rapidity unknown in any other epoch [...] Our universe is a different one from that of our grandfathers [...] The whole movement, indeed, is a movement away from an erroneous but comfortable stability, towards a more truthful and sincere but certainly less comfortable state of flux. Ideas are changing, and therefore manners and morals are changing. It is not surprising, then, to find that the arts, which are an intensification of life and thought, are likewise in a state of flux. [...] The new poetry [...] is less vague, less verbose, less eloquent [...] It has set before itself an ideal of absolute simplicity and sincerity—an ideal which implies an individual, unsteretyped rhythm. (27–28)

The two leading figures of the *Fortnightly* launched repeated attacks at the poets of the previous generation, i.e. the Confederation group: Scott and Smith “felt the absolute necessity to get beyond this maple-leaf

school of poetry.” (Norris 5). They sharply criticized the general policy of the Canadian Authors’ Association as chief representative of the “quasi-Victorian verse of the twenties” (Norris 4).

F. R. Scott, “the chief satirist in the Eliotic vein” (Dudek-Gnarowski 24) mocked their meeting, calling them “expansive puppets”, making fun of their loyalty and Victorian taste.

The air is heavy with Canadian topics,
And Carman, Lampman, Roberts, Campbell, Scott,
Are measured for their faith and philanthropics,
Their zeal for God and King, their earnest thought.

It is in the April 1927 *Fortnightly* publication of Scott’s “The Canadian Authors Meet” that the last stanza offers a contrast to the rejected school of Canadian poetry. Scott in these four lines draws a portrait of the Modernist poet:

Far in a corner sits (though none would know it)
The very picture of disconsolation,
A rather lewd and most ungodly poet
Writing these verses, for his soul’s salvation.

Scott lists the typical features of the ‘rebellious’ poet: isolated, neglected, discontent—with abundant self-reflection, and pointing out the process of writing.

As is the nature of student journals, at the end of the spring semester in 1927 *The McGill Fortnightly Review* ceased to exist, but a year and a half later, in December 1928 *The Canadian Mercury* was founded by Smith and Scott: it could last but a year (seven issues). Members of the editorial board were Jean Burton, F. R. Scott, Leo Kennedy and Felix Walter. A. J. M. Smith sent in his contributions from the University of Edinburgh, where he was attending graduate school; Leon Edel was in Paris, whence he filed reports on literary activity (Norris 15). The opening editorial of the new journal demanded a higher and more adequate standard of literary criticism in Canada and called for a general renewal in literature following the model of the Group of Seven Painters active in the 1920s (Norris 16). Stephen Leacock, the most widely known Canadian writer in Hungary (thanks to the first excellent translations by Karinthy Frigyes and his followers) wrote an article in the first issue about “The National Literature Problem in Canada” stressing his preference of Canadian qualities in Canadian literature to clinging to English and American

models and pointing out that Canada cannot close its eyes to the literature of the rest of the world (Norris 17). In the second issue readers could be updated about the current literary atmosphere of Paris thanks to Leon Edel's "Montparnasse Letter". The list of their literary models included Joyce, Pound, T. S. Eliot and Huxley as well as Hemingway and G. B. Shaw (Norris 16–17). The new decade—the Depression era—marked the end of the first period of Modernism in Canada. The culture of little magazines resumed after about half a decade—with a significant shift: women came to play a crucial role as editors and contributors alike (vid. Irvine, 2008).

[T]he international contexts of modernist and leftist little-magazine cultures permeate the literary and editorial work of women in Canada. [...] Many editors (both male and female) in Canada designed their magazines on the models of their predecessors and contemporaries in the United States and England. [...] the character of their little-magazine cultures is not just imitative but innovative [...] generative of alternative local and national communities of writers, editors, and readers. (Irvine, 2008, 6)

“the age's guide and grammar” (József Attila)

After the end of the First World War, the position of Szeged changed radically: it became a border town and part of the university of Kolozsvár was moved over to the banks of the river Tisza. Within Hungarian culture, which has always occupied a marginal position in the European perspective, culture in Szeged in many respects would qualify as 'border culture'. The political background in the 1920s was tellingly referred to as 'white terror', implying not only a severe censorship of newspapers, journals and theatrical performances, but also imprisonment and forced exile for artists and thinkers who did not surrender to the regime (e.g. Kassák Lajos, the most distinguished figure of Hungarian avant-garde, founder of the journal *A Tett* in late 1915, was first imprisoned, then fled to Vienna to found *Ma*, another avant-garde journal in May 1920).

In the early 1920s Szeged could boast of three generations of outstanding poets and writers—many of the aspiring new poets and artists had not yet graduated from high school, some of them were expelled from school or university because of their rebellious artistic convictions but they could contribute to (mainly short-lived) experimental journals. In the interwar period in Szeged 26 journals or weeklies appeared with a section

devoted to literature (poetry, stories and essays alike): half of them had only one issue, and only six could survive for 5 years.

On November 1st, 1922, *Szegedi költők versei*, an anthology of 56 poems by 13 poets (edited by Keck J. G.) came out, containing 4 works by József Attila (he was included thanks to Juhász Gyula, best-known figure of the 'old generation'). The young contributors of the volume, together with Juhász Gyula a few days later formed the 'Tömörkény Society'—just to be banned within no time as a result of protesting letters and newspaper articles of extreme right groups. The publisher of the anthology did not give in: the next journal, *Csönd*, first published in January 1923, with three issues altogether, claimed that “we do believe that Szeged does have a reading public with a thirst for literature [...] and is strong enough to raise young talents to the national scene” (cited by Pásztor 161). József Attila, still at the very beginning of his career, was most enthusiastic—the first issue published two of his poems and in a personal letter he expressed his hope that “after graduating from high school, most probably I will become editor-in-chief of the journal” (quoted by Pásztor, 162). That did not happen, but the very first review of his first individual volume of poetry was published in the last issue of *Csönd* by Kormányos István who claimed that “world literature of our days is oscillating towards a new classical poetry that would incorporate from widely diverse directions all that is useful and good and lasting for ages. We do believe that József Attila is the forerunner” (*Csönd*, no. 3, 49). Within a short time it became obvious that the artists gathering around this journal would form two groups—one believing in 'l'art pour l'art', the other in 'l'art pour homme' as a member and later highly acclaimed theatre theoretician and metteur-en-scène, Hont Ferenc put it (Pásztor 163). This latter grouping formed a creative community called 'Igen' (Yes) and organized a matinee performance of introduction in the local theatre, using *Színház és Társaság*, a programme weekly since 1919 (after 1923 edited and published by Koroknay József) that included some short works of literature (among others, published the very first poem in print by József Attila) as their 'loudspeaker'. This same weekly brought out the first review of József Attila's rebellious volume, tellingly entitled *Nem én kiáltok* ('It's not me shouting'). The programme weekly thus informed a relatively wide readership not only about upcoming events, but exposed them to the latest tendencies in poetry and prose, as well as reports from other countries: at Christmas 1924 a young poet and later playwright, Berczeli Anzelm Károly wrote about his experiences in Italy.

In the second part of the 1920s two important journals dedicated mainly to the avant-garde were published in Szeged. They respected the legal conditions of the time: periodicals appearing every month or more frequently had to be reported to authorities 15 days prior to publication—those coming out in longer intervals had to be shown to the legal court only before being distributed. Even so, court cases frequently followed—in 1938 a stricter act of censorship made political decisions easier, which is why in the following years the number of anthologies, almanachs, yearbooks and calendars increased (Pásztor 10).

The new university hired 35-year old Zolnai Béla as chairman of the French Department in 1925 who immediately started to play an active role in the cultural life of Szeged. The following year professors and talented students of the university together with writers residing in town formed 'Széphalom-Kör' (the name refers to a decisive place of the Hungarian Reform Age in the early 19th century), and in January 1927 they launched their journal, *Széphalom*, which aimed at spreading information about contemporary world literature, offering a forum for young talents (including 6 poems by Radnóti Miklós) and inviting the most highly acclaimed Hungarian poets and critics of the day, like Babits Mihály, Kosztolányi Dezső, Szabó Lőrinc and Szerb Antal.

In the second part of the 1920s the economical prospects of the country, and especially of provincial towns and villages were rapidly decreasing, the number of unemployed educated people grew day by day. A group of students with a strong interest in sociology and folklore founded the Szegedi Alföldkutató Bizottság ('Szeged Research Committee of the Plain') in 1927 and launched the journal *Népünk és Nyelvünk* ('Our People and Language') in 1929, edited by Bibó István who later became a decisive figure of political science in Hungary. They carried out field work in the neighbouring small villages and farmsteads (e.g. Tápé where Kodály Zoltán started his folksong recording activities in 1905). In the meantime (March 20th, 1928), another group of radical youth formed Bethlen Gábor Kör under the leadership of graphic artist Buday György who believed that the most important objective was to bridge the great physical and intellectual gap between people living in towns and in villages—he found that the job could be done only by the new generation who should get involved in a scientific research programme about life in the rural areas situated around the town (based on the model of the settlement movement in England the leaders of which Buday met in London in 1928) (Csaplár 22–24). The results of the first

sociological field work were published in the spring of 1930—a few months later, the Szegedi Fiatalok Művészeti Kollégiuma ('Art College of Szeged Youth') was founded by Buday and 14 other enthusiastic young people, who immediately started to organize series of lectures and discussions about art, exhibitions and publications (Csaplár 31).

In September 1930 Radnóti Miklós and Baróti Dezső started their studies at the University of Szeged and joined the literary circle around Professor Sík Sándor, an exceptional man with European perspective. In the following years, members of the group organized cultural events in small villages and rural areas including lectures about the folklore of the region (Ortutay Gyula), the social situation of American women (by Tomori Viola, 1934), accompanied by sociological photos by Kárász Judit, wood-cuts by Buday György, and even a lecture about Canadian agriculture. The events were interdisciplinary, crossing the borderline between scientific research, theatre art and photography, or graphic art. The College published a calendar each year between 1929 and 1938, launched a series of books of plays, and several members started an active period of publishing individual volumes. In 1931 Buday's pictures inspired by the annual religious festival in Szeged (*Boldogasszony búcsúja*), published by Kner Imre's prestigious company in a nearby small town was selected among the three most beautiful books of the year by Magyar Bibliofil Társaság. The same year (April 11th, 1931), however, Radnóti Miklós was charged with blasphemy and obscenity in his volume of poetry *Újmódi pásztorok éneke* (Csaplár 40–46, 68). He was found guilty and condemned to 8 days of prison (suspended for three years)—Horger Antal, professor of linguistics, responsible for József Attila's expulsion from the university, wanted to do the same with Radnóti, but Sík Sándor prevented him from carrying out this scheme.

It was in the field of theatre that the College was able to reach out to a big audience: Hont Ferenc—greatly influenced by French 'mass theatre' (Gémier), by Reinhardt's Salzburg Festival and the stage innovations of Jessner, Piscator and Brecht, as well as Meyerhold and Tayrov—directed *Az ember tragédiája* ('The Tragedy of Man') by Madách Imre with Buday's scenery on the enormous square in front of the newly built 'Votive Church' in Szeged for an audience of about 6 thousand on August 26th, 1933. Hont first put forward the idea of an open-air theatre festival in Szeged in the already quoted journal, *Széphalom* arguing that "not far from Szeged we have a border with two different countries where big numbers of Hungarians live. The open-air festival of Szeged should bring

these masses regularly to be exposed to Hungarian culture.” (263). His intention was to use the above mentioned European models, but not to copy them, and stressed that the future festival should offer “an exceptional artistic experience” (263) to its audience. Although there were some ups and downs and disruptions of the festival, it has been a summer attraction ever since. Its fortune can serve as a telling demonstration of the impact of a tiny group of young avant-garde intellectuals on the cultural life of a medium-sized provincial town in Southern Hungary.

With this positive note it may be of use to recall the initial idea of 'marginal' or 'border modernism' and conclude that both examples support the importance of closely-knit communities of writers, poets and other artists in the formation of not only regional, but also national culture during the interwar period. The Montreal group of poets had everyday contacts with French culture in the city, as well as with new ways of artistic self-expression in the United States and in Europe. Members of the Szeged College experienced the new border-position of the town, and travelled to big European cities (London, Paris, Rome) to see in what direction modern art (and society) were developing. Both small communities claimed it their mission to spread ideas about a new way of representation in arts and their activities resulted in including their bigger communities, the city and the town on the map of Modern art.

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