Novelist, painter, and public intellectual, Bertram Brooker (1888-1955) was a leading force in the modernizing of Canadian culture in the early 20th century. Brooker believed that the rapid advances in technology and commerce associated with modernity had fundamentally changed the nature of Western civilization. Consequently, artists, whom he believed to be the most sensitive to broad social modifications, had a moral, indeed spiritual, mandate to respond to these changes. Furthermore, it was his hope that artists, especially Canadian artists, could seize the opportunity of the great opening and speeding up of society to surpass the various binaries that structured the Western imagination (such as body/mind, good/evil) for something more holistically integrated. The spiritual nature of his thinking was influenced by the popular mysticism of the Theosophical Society, though he was not himself a member, and by the materialist mysticism of John Middleton Murry, P.D. Ouspensky, and Richard Maurice Bucke, each of whom advanced an evolutionary model of human consciousness.

Brooker was more than an advocate or proselytizer of an abstract spiritual theory: he also attempted to become a living embodiment of his avant-garde vision, and achieved notable successes in many artistic disciplines in that pursuit. As painter, indeed as Canada’s first abstract painting, he explored spiritually infused expressionist themes. As novelist, his books explored and experimented with the implications of spiritual redemption in light of the material changes brought about by modernity. His first novel, *Think of the Earth*, was the first recipient of the Governor-General’s Literary Award (1936). As a dramatist, he wrote symphonic-expressionist plays that were produced and staged in the first manifestation of modernist theatre in Canada. As a critic, he published hundreds of manifestos, essays, and articles in the most prominent forums available to him in Canada, including in a widely syndicated weekly arts column that highlighted leading edge experiments in each of the seven arts. Brooker’s sheer energy astonished his peers (he was also throughout all of this an award-winning advertising executive and theorist, working for multiple major Toronto advertising firms), while his more-than-token success in the arts lent important credence to his advocacy for the avant-garde in Canada. His innovative and experimental contributions to Canadian art hastened the arrival and development of Canadian modernism.

Over the course of his career, he was attracted to and influenced by various European and American avant-gardists – including Friedrich Nietzsche in philosophy, E.E. Cummings in poetry, Wassily Kandinsky in painting, Eugene O’Neill in drama, and Maurice Maeterlinck in prose. Of all the avant-garde precedents, however, none come closer than the model provided by Wyndham Lewis, who also painted, edited, and wrote plays, criticism, and novels. Despite his communitarian vision, and his artistic successes, Brooker was never able to find or create the revolutionary avant-garde community in Canada that he envisioned.

List of Works

Brooker, B. (1980). *Sounds Assembling: The Poetry of Bertram Brooker*, Winnipeg: Turnstone Press. A short but rich sampling of Brooker’s poetry and essays on poetry.

Brooker, B (1936). *Think of the Earth*, Toronto: Thomas Nelson. This experimental novel grapples with the social implications of mystical enlightenment; particularly, a mystical enlightenment that is led astray by the unstable meaning of literature (including religious texts).

Brooker, B. (2009). *The Wrong World: Selected Stories & Essays of Bertram Brooker*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press. This book collects a diverse sample of Brooker’s experimental short fiction, essays, and manifestos.

Reid, Dennis. (1979). *Bertram Brooker, 1888-1955*, Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada. Reid provides a critical overview of Brooker’s visual art.