

# FROM EMILY CARR TO JOY COGHILL . . . AND BACK: Writing the Self in *Song of This Place*

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SHERILL GRACE

“I hate painting portraits. I am embarrassed at what seems to me to be impertinence and presumption, pulling into visibility what every soul has [a] right to keep private. . . . The better a portrait, the more indecent and naked the sitter must feel.” (Journal 31 December 1940, *Hundreds and Thousands*, Carr 891-92)

I

**B**Y THE TIME BRITISH COLUMBIA painter Emily Carr (1871-1945) expressed these sharp reservations about portraiture in one of her autobiographical texts, she had begun to achieve some of the recognition that, since her death, has marked her as one of the finest talents of her generation, a painter, as Sharyn Udall has demonstrated, easily on a par with Frieda Kahlo and Georgia O’Keefe, and an artist Canadians now rank with (or even above) the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson. For all her formidable personality and artistic daring (see Figure 1), Carr was a reserved, private person, and her comment (above) on portraiture suggests that she may have feared how others would depict her when she was no longer alive to protest. That she wrote her own autobiography in several books and stories suggests, moreover, that she wanted to control the invention of her life, to tell it herself, as *she* saw it, rather than trust to others to get things right. And well might she have been concerned about portraiture because few other Canadian artists have attracted as much attention from biographers and other artists as has Carr. Only Tom Thomson has had more attention and even more fantastic recreations, but he died suddenly, mysteriously, at an early age without leaving much of a personal accounting behind him, thereby leaving a wide open field



Figure 1: Emily Carr, *Self-Portrait*, 1938. Oil on wove paper, mounted on plywood, 85.5 x 57.7 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of Peter Bronfman, 1990.

for creative speculation.<sup>1</sup> Of the plays inspired to date by Emily Carr's life and work (the painting and the prose), only one strikes me as unusual and good enough to warrant close analysis. Joy Coghill's *Song of This Place*, which premiered in 1987, differs from other plays about Carr (and from so many attempts to recreate famous artists) because it approaches its subject in a unique way and because it raises, and faces, a number of interesting questions about why one artist would want to create the life of another and just what is at stake when one tries to do the impossible – to capture the essence of a life and re-present that life on stage.

In her note on the text, Vancouver poet Kate Braid puts the central question that *Song of This Place* tries to answer when she asks: "Why does such an eccentric misfit [as Emily Carr] appeal to so many of us? . . . What is it about this woman that has inspired other artists to create poetry, dance, theatre and radio about her?"(1)<sup>2</sup> The key word here, I think, is *about* because the great majority of these works is, indeed, *about* Carr and her work, from biography and catalogues raisonnées to poems, stories, ballet, songs, a musical, and five plays. In my view, only Coghill's *autobiographical* approach challenges this *about* by going under or pushing beyond the objectification implicit in creating anything about another person. Moreover, I am convinced that it is the auto/biographics<sup>3</sup> of this play – not just in its genesis but in its form and performance – that frees it from the *about* of biography or art history into a performance of something that theatre alone can achieve.

<sup>1</sup> I discuss the many inventions (biography, plays, novels, films, poetry, photography and painting) of Thomson in my book, *Inventing Tom Thomson*. Other Canadian artists to have received some of this kind of creative attention are Malcolm Lowry and Glenn Gould. But the phenomenon of inventing a real artist's life through dramatic, filmic, or other artistic media is by no means limited to the British Columbia and Canadian scene. Artists as different as Artemisia Gentileschi, Shakespeare, James Joyce, Jackson Pollock, Virginia Woolf, Mozart, and Maria Callas, to name just a few, have all enjoyed this kind of posthumous treatment.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are from the unpublished script because the published play, which is due out in July 2003, has unfortunately not reached me in time for citation here; see the works cited for a full reference to the publication. Braid has herself written poems inspired by Carr; see *To This Cedar Fountain*. For a critical discussion of plays about Carr, see Kröller and Nothof. For Carr biography see Blanchard, Braid, Hembroff-Schleicher (the only first-person autobiographical biography of Carr), Shadbolt, Tippett, and Walker.

<sup>3</sup> See Gilmore's discussion of autobiographics (42-5) as the practice of constructing, as distinct from telling or mirroring, one's life. I have examined what I call performative auto/biographics in "Sharon Pollock's Portraits of an Artist," and in a 2003 paper called "Performing the AutoBiographical Pact." I use the slash to stress the close interrelationship between autobiography and biography which, more often than not, co-exist within the same work. For discussions of performance and performativity, see Bennett, Butler, Diamond, and Worthen.

So back to Kate Braid's question: what was it about Carr that inspired Joy Coghill (1926- ), an award-winning Canadian actor, director, artistic director, and writer, to tackle the subject of this play? One answer sounds simple: Coghill was fifty-six when she decided to write a Carr play and, as she explains, "when any Canadian actress reaches her fifty-sixth year, she develops a passionate desire to play Emily Carr. The initial impulse has a lot to do with the fact that Emily did her best work after" that age (4). As a moment's reflection confirms, good stage or film roles for older women are not all that common. Many artistic directors, directors, and playwrights, not to mention audiences, seem to want ingenues, pretty faces, sexy youth on stage – it is good for box office and "PR." It is not so good if you are Judy Dench, Maggie Smith, or Joy Coghill. And yet, the art of acting takes a long time to master, and by fifty-sixth you may be just reaching your prime...*as an artist*. But surely this answer only begs the question instead of answering it very fully. Why Emily Carr? And why Joy Coghill? If Carr was reserved about her life-story and wanted to keep it in her own hands, then the same can be said of Coghill who has not yet published her autobiography or authorised anyone to prepare a biography. Yet I suspect that some of the deeper answers to these questions lie in Coghill's life-story and that we get glimpses of this autobiography in the play she wrote. Both artists are women (a point I will return to) struggling to succeed in male-dominated fields and both are closely identified with British Columbia. Coghill must have seen other, more personal, parallels in their lives and perhaps in their subjective, expressive approach to art that made the figure of Emily Carr especially resonant.<sup>4</sup> If at some difficult personal or professional crossroads this actor was seeking inspiration or a role-model, who better to turn to than the indomitable Millie (as her family always called her) Carr? But in the last analysis, it is the drive to develop one's art, to strive for more as a professional

<sup>4</sup> Joy Coghill received her early training in Theatre at the University of British Columbia and an M.A. in Fine Arts from the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. In the 1950s she joined Sydney Risk's Everyman Theatre in Vancouver and helped establish Vancouver's Holiday Theatre for children. She has served as Artistic Director of the Vancouver Playhouse and, in the early '70s, as Director of the English Acting section at the National Theatre School in Montreal. After her return to Vancouver to act, direct, and produce, she asked others to write a Carr play in which she could perform, but no one wanted to tackle this subject, which had produced slim results for other playwrights. As a result, she wrote her own play. Coghill has won numerous acting awards, and over her distinguished career, she has created major roles for the stage and for films. She is a member of the Order of Canada, holds honorary degrees from UBC and Simon Fraser University, and in 2003 she received the Governor General of Canada's award for lifetime achievement in the arts.

that grounds the connection between the two and makes Coghill's play so much more than a play *about* Emily Carr, let alone a play about British Columbia's forests.

In the discussion that follows, I want to briefly describe *Song of This Place* by drawing on its 1987 premiere at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, when Joy Coghill starred in the role of the actress, Frieda, who is struggling to write the play we in fact watch and who wants to create the role of Emily Carr, which was performed by Joan Orenstein. My illustrations of scenes in the play (Figures 2, 3, and 5) are from this production and also appear in the published text.<sup>5</sup> My analytical approach to the play is shaped by theories of autobiography as these apply to theatre performance, and I stress this approach because I believe it illuminates the central premise of the play, a premise missed by reviewers at the play's premiere. Thus, I examine what makes this play *auto/biographical* by considering how Coghill enacts Carr's story, not simply through her considerable research into Carr's own autobiographical writing, her painting, and the work of Carr's biographers, but through the theatrical materials she deploys, through the aesthetics of performance demanded by the two lead characters – Frieda, the actress, and Millie, the presence of Emily Carr – and through her own autobiographical identification with Carr. Finally, with this last point in mind, I situate this play in the context of other Canadian plays that I consider *auto/biographical* to highlight what I find unique in its creation.

## 11

When *Song of This Place* opens, we find a company of actors setting up a playing area in what looks like a forest. They cart on their props, musical instruments, and an unusual group of large puppets and masks. They argue, discuss Emily Carr (in anything but reverential terms), and “warm up” (9). They are waiting for the main character to come on. As soon as Frieda arrives in her wheelchair (which recalls Carr's condition in her final years), the fun stops and work begins. Frieda, “*a passionate, intelligent self-centred woman, an actress first, a person second*” (13), is both the lead character and the author of the

<sup>5</sup> I was fortunate to see the premiere and, unlike some of the reviewers of the play, found it to be moving and challenging. Criticisms of the play grew from an inability to accept the basic autobiographical premise of the text. For a summary of the reviews, see Nothof. I am grateful to Joy Coghill for her permission to quote the play at length and to Coghill and the photographers for permission to reproduce production photographs.

play being rehearsed. She is fifty-seven and desperate to capture the “voice” of Emily Carr so she can complete her play. Thus far in the creative process, she has managed to capture the other “voices” she needs, so that when the puppets are manipulated during the action that unfolds, they all speak through Frieda. Only the “Millie” puppet evades Frieda. By coming to this forest place to rehearse, Frieda hopes she will get deeper inside her role as Millie and be able to find that voice. The association seems simple: Carr did not paint many portraits and only a couple of self-portraits. Instead, she painted the west coast forests and trees like no one else; they are her signature work, even, as Sharyn Udall suggests, her truest self-portraits.<sup>6</sup> Surely if Frieda immerses herself in this natural world (or in the stage set representation of it), the spirit of Emily Carr will come through. And it does, albeit not quite in the way Frieda expects.

*Song of This Place* unfolds from this initial situation. The company is there, ready to manipulate the puppets; Frieda is there, ready to act the parts of Carr’s story; the forest set is there, with images of Carr’s trees, one source of the painter’s energy, surrounding them. Enter Emily Carr, an extremely aggressive, hostile, challenging presence, and a superb role for an older actress. (To distinguish between Frieda’s Millie-character and the actor who performs the role of Carr, I will use Carr or Emily Carr for the latter. In the play itself, this character is always called Millie, whether it is being played by the Carr figure or by Frieda when she takes over the part.) Midway through Act I, and just as Emily appears, the first stage of transition is reached. Frieda begins to let go of the puppet voices to let them speak with their own voices (given them by their manipulators, who must act as well as manage the puppets). The implied lesson here is that Frieda is going to have to let go of a great deal more if she hopes to find *her* Millie voice; she will also have to learn a lesson in acting and interacting with the indomitable Emily Carr.

The rest of Act I focuses on the relationship between Frieda and Carr, which begins as a battle over who Frieda is to think she can

<sup>6</sup> Coghill’s “Millie” makes this point in Act II of the play (52), and in her discussion of the self-portrait (see Figure 1), Udall claims that what Carr unknowingly revealed in this painting, executed when she was sixty-seven, was her “core identity,” “nothing less than the artist’s ultimate and complete union with nature, perhaps her most intimate secret of all” (100). Udall also suggests that Carr’s mountains, trees, and forests are her form of self-portraiture; see 5, 97–101. I would suggest that this play is Coghill’s self-portrait, a version of her autobiography.

poke her nose into Carr's life. Frieda's response to Carr's question is to say that the two of them are a lot alike, but Carr is not impressed:

MILLIE: (*Stares at Frieda*) So you think you can succeed where others failed?

FRIEDA: Yes. All I need is your "voice," what you would call your "essence."

FRIEDA: (*Before MILLIE can explode again*) What I mean is there's something . . . something missing. Something right in the centre I have not understood. And yet we share so much.

MILLIE: We do?

FRIEDA: Yes. Born and bred in the west. Forced to study abroad. Pioneers in art. Women in a man's world. And now I'm fifty-seven . . . my God, fifty-nine. It goes faster all the time.

MILLIE: What's age got to do with it?

FRIEDA: That's when you did your best work. That's when you soared.

MILLIE: In whose opinion?

FRIEDA: History.

MILLIE: Ah . . . So what makes you think you can become me, even if I could give you my "voice"?

FRIEDA: I am an actress.

MILLIE: Oh, dear.

FRIEDA: I am a professional.

MILLIE: Ah!

FRIEDA: I am an artist.

MILLIE: I think not. (21-22)

Clearly, they are not off to a good start, these two. And the fight will continue until Emily has reduced Frieda to such angry frustration that she dismisses Carr – "You stupid old woman! . . . I'm not interested anymore. That's it. Finished. Go back where you came

from" (25). But with this apparent victory over the would-be biographer, Carr shifts ground and challenges this "Miss Actress Person" to a "test" (26): she will play Millie, and Frieda will play Carr's sister Alice. They begin by using the puppets, but so successful is this test that they abandon puppets and conclude Act I speaking directly to each other. This shift from puppets to direct interaction is crucial: Emily Carr has slipped so smoothly into a performance in this lesser art of acting that she relishes the role of her younger self; she proves to be good at acting the part. And Frieda has passed the test well enough to convince the painter that she will lead the actress deeper into the role, the "essence," if you will, of being Emily Carr. Through the course of Act II, as Frieda learns how to become Millie, to perform Millie's life-as-woman-artist, the various puppets will "die," to be replaced by the "*manipulators who become actors*" (33). Then, in a climactic moment, Frieda will declare – for *both her self and her Millie*: "I – I am Emily Carr" (51).

To get to this point of auto/biographical identity, however, proves painful. Much of the second act is devoted to reenacting a few important scenes from Carr's life (as constructed for us in her autobiography, letters, and by her biographers) in which key relationships are explored. One of these scenes and relationships is with Harold, the mentally disabled man who was a dear friend of Carr's and was writing his autobiography to include Carr; another is with Carr's childhood persona "Small" from *The Book of Small*. With the arrival of Small, Frieda is challenged to admit that she cannot be an artist if she does not have a Small and then, worse still, Carr tells her that she is completely wrong about the biography, that what has just been performed as her story is a lie: "You made it up. It's you who think all that is true. But I say it's all a lie!" (41) All it amounted to, however well-done or convincing, was acting, says the spiteful Carr:

FRIEDA: You mean it wasn't true?

MILLIE: Ah! Well, I don't know. Is acting true? How true? What kind of true? (*Suddenly aggressive*) Who are you? What do you want?

FRIEDA: I want to play Millie Carr. But you have destroyed my belief in my work. You have left me with nothing. (41)

Once more having reduced Frieda to despair over the failure of her art to capture this other life, Carr decides to teach Frieda what it was really like – *truly* like – to be Emily Carr. Two absolutely crucial



experiences will be necessary for Frieda to learn this lesson: an encounter with the clinic in which Carr was put to be cured of her hysteria (and her artistic ambitions) and an encounter with Carr's father. In the first, Carr will play the role of the psychiatrist who incarcerates Millie (played by Frieda), forces her to defend herself as an artist, and then condemns her to electric shock treatments to cure her (see Figure 2). For this scene, Coghill draws closely on the on



Figure 2: A scene from Act 2 of *Song of This Place* showing Millie in the sanatorium. Millie is played by Joy Coghill (centre in wheelchair) and the psychiatrist is played by Joan Orenstein, who also plays the character of Emily Carr. Puppet manipulators are: Sarah Orenstein, Robert More, Allan Zinyk, and Debra Thorne; masks by Frank Radar. The production photograph by May Henderson is from the 1987 premiere of the play.

biography and on Carr's own description of this traumatic period in her autobiographical narrative called *Pause* (see Carr 607-52). This is a powerful piece of theatre in which Frieda/Millie experiences what it is like to be trapped in a world where someone else holds all the puppets' strings. Emily Carr had found delight and purpose by raising song birds in her English sanatorium with the hope of bringing them home to British Columbia, but just before her electric shock treatments, she had the birds destroyed. When Frieda is finally crushed *in her role as Millie*, she whispers that "When they had finished with me, I had no desire to paint and the birds were dead" (46). By making this remark, Frieda is *experiencing* (as distinct from enacting) a critical moment in Carr's life, and although she cannot see it yet, this scene, and admission, indicates a real advance in her understanding of Carr's ordeal.

In Shakespearean or classical drama, we would call this the turning point, the peripeteia. Frieda is about as shattered, as reduced to nothing, as it is possible to be. She is now ready to admit that to be an artist means confessing to one's Small. Whatever Emily Carr understood by this concept of a Small – the free spirit within, the child within, the creative imagination within – Coghill understands that her Small, and Millie's, must entail an encounter with the father,<sup>7</sup> and in the next scene the Father's HUGE mask will hover over the women until Frieda/Millie is able to repel his power. She must answer the most basic question: "Did Millie hate him?" (48) Her instant answer is "Yes" (48). But it will take the combined forces of Frieda/Coghill and Millie/Carr, with Frieda playing Millie, to face down this threat, to perform this aspect of the life, and, as Coghill tells us in a stage instruction: "*MILLIE and FRIEDA are now face to face. This is the 'transfer' as MILLIE gives and FRIEDA takes over MILLIE's 'life' and memory*" (49).

There has been much speculation over what Carr meant when she referred to "the brutal telling" she experienced with her father, but Coghill focuses less on what may have been said or done and more

<sup>7</sup> Frieda recovers her own Small by recounting a moment on the prairie when she was alone with her father before he died and he told her to listen to the music of the earth and stars and to obey their laws. Remembering and telling this moment from her own past, which may very likely be one of Coghill's own memories, liberates Frieda and her Small. Frieda's (Coghill's?) father seems to have been a much more sensitive and enabling presence than Carr's. This is a problematic moment in the text and only a consummate performance is going to capture some of what is at stake here – the very liberation of creativity itself through personal memory – and I wonder how successful this moment of non-brutal "telling" could be if someone other than Joy Coghill played the role of Frieda. Would the actress need to tell something from her own autobiography?



Figure 3: The scene from Act 2 when Frieda describes her Small and an increasingly sympathetic Millie watches. Frieda is performed by Joy Coghill, Millie by Joan Orenstein. The production photograph by May Henderson is from the 1987 première of the play. Reproduced with the permission of May Henderson.

what his negative, death-dealing presence did to her creativity (see Tippett 13-14). During Frieda's/Millie's fight with the mask-presence of the father, she gradually asserts herself as a creator of life as life was meant to be – "Rooted in the Earth Mother and reaching for the sky" (52). In other words, she defies his patriarchal, sexist authority, rejects his value judgements, and asserts: I am right. I am an artist. "I am Emily Carr."<sup>8</sup>

Throughout this painful encounter, the Carr character is watching Frieda's performance to see if this "Actress Person" truly is an artist, and she is judging (see Figure 3). This aspect of *Song of This Place*

<sup>8</sup> She resists more than the patriarchal authority of the father here by so unequivocally using the first person pronoun. If James Olney is correct in his analysis of Beckett's plays, particularly of *Not I*, that twentieth century artists (his prime examples are Beckett, Giacometti, and Kafka) faced a crisis in using the "I," then claims like Coghill's (for Carr here) must be examined more closely for their assertion of a powerful subjective identity. It seems to me that, at first glance, the gender of the artists is a crucial index of both their need to assert "I" and their ultimate ability to do so, and Olney fails to come to terms with either gender or, when discussing Beckett's plays, with actual performance; see Olney 248, 267.

reminds me forcefully of Sharon Pollock's play *Blood Relations* about the infamous Lizzy Borden, who was accused and acquitted of murdering her father and stepmother. In *Blood Relations*, another actress (Lizzy's close friend) will take on an autobiographical role (she will *play* Lizzy) in an effort to discover whether or not Lizzy did kill her parents.<sup>9</sup> Like *Blood Relations*, *Song of This Place* draws on biography and history but insists that to understand the truth, or more importantly to discover what truths might lie hidden in a life-story, one must take on that life, appreciate its complex relationships with others' lives and stories, make it one's own through the *art* of performance. The better the performance, the more truthful it will be, which is not to say that the performance will be *the* truth. Also like Pollock's play, Coghill's requires witnesses: Lizzy will watch the Actress, judging and coaching her; Carr will watch Frieda and finally let her go far enough to perform aspects of Carr's life-story. In both plays, we – as readers and audience members – are also necessary witnesses, although our participation in the action of Pollock's play is more complicated, and complicit, than it is in Coghill's. We are left at the end of *Song of This Place*, not to decide who committed murder and whether, in Lizzy's place, we would have done the deed ourselves, but to decide whether the art of theatre can match the art of painting, whether an actress can tell us something profound about a painter, indeed, about the creative life. And we are left to ask ourselves, among other things, what we have learned about the power of theatre, a question Pollock leaves us with as well.

### III

By sketching the main features of Coghill's play, I have also made several points about what I think makes this play *auto/biographical*. But I now want to examine this matter more closely. We know, because Coghill has told us and because anyone familiar with the core Carr texts will recognize, that Coghill immersed herself in the basic materials of biography and autobiography. She talked about Carr with others who knew her work well, like Doris Shadbolt and

<sup>9</sup> So fully caught up in her role does the Actress become that she is able to imagine Lizzy being driven to commit murder. At the play's climax, and just before the lights go to black, we see the Actress standing over Mr. Borden with an axe raised above his head. Although the play ends with a return to the present and with Lizzy still refusing to admit that she killed anyone, the Actress has played her part so well that we are able to believe that Lizzy could have done the deed.

Kate Braid, and she looked long and hard at the paintings.<sup>10</sup> But this research is the tip of the iceberg. Judging from the play itself, Coghill had to face certain things about herself, her own life and life-story, before she could wrestle her play and the spirit of Emily Carr into a creative relationship with her. These things are only hinted at in the play and Coghill is reticent about her own autobiography, but it is enough to acknowledge that the play shows us forcefully that in Coghill's philosophy, to perform Emily Carr meant letting go of reservations and personal control in order to locate that subjective place within her self where she could ground her interpretation of Carr's life. The song of this place is not, in the last analysis, about Carr's west coast forests (though it has elements of that place to be sure), as much as it is about the place within the autobiographical self, whether that self is Coghill or Carr. Moreover, that place can only be reached through a combination of research and art, discipline and freedom, self-assertion and faith. To reach that place is, in those words of Carr's *I began with*, to pull "into visibility what every soul has [a] right to keep private."

In dramatizing her search for this place, Coghill has consciously exploited as many of the resources of theatre as she can, and she has with equal deliberateness avoided others. Let me return to what she has avoided and why I think this avoidance has allowed her to escape the *about* that I criticized at the beginning. The first play written on the subject of Emily Carr was Herman Voaden's "Emily Carr: A Stage Biography with Pictures" (1960).<sup>11</sup> In this play, Voaden tried to tell Carr's story through slide projections of her paintings, but in the process he created a woman artist as a lonely eccentric who had failed in the *normal* activities of a woman's life. Amelia Hall, another well-known actor, enjoyed playing the part of Emily, but production photographs indicate clearly that it was a period piece role, almost a caricature, that stayed very much on the surface of a life seen, by Voaden, as odd (see Hall). Carr's paintings upstaged the human being who created them. I make this brief comparison to stress the sharp contrast between Voaden's approach and Coghill's; in *Emily Carr* we have performance-as-impersonation, as *role*, whereas in *Song of This*

<sup>10</sup> In her note to the play, Coghill acknowledges some of her research sources as well as the artists who created the premiere. In conversation with me during our visit to an exhibition of Carr's work, Coghill described her extensive reading of Carr's published work and the impact some of these pieces had on her.

<sup>11</sup> For discussions of this play and comparisons of it with other Carr plays, see Kröller and Nothof.

*Place* we have performance as artistic performativity, what I have called elsewhere the performativity of autobiographics (see Grace 2002). The former is always *about*; it is always objectifying; Voaden's Carr is an eccentric object of our curious sympathy. In Coghill's play, Carr is a three-dimensional human being with agency and subjectivity. She lives in dialogic relationship with Frieda because Coghill develops her creation of Carr by establishing a dialogue between two women artists, each of whom must reveal herself to the other and learn to accept the artist in the other.<sup>12</sup> What we watch is the struggle to find this place of mutual support, of mutual self-portraiture. The battle ends, not just in a truce, or with one winner and one loser, but in a "transfer" (Coghill's word) between the two artists that can only occur through trust, the trust inherent in revealing the *autos* within the *bios* of the life-story (see Ty).

And yet, Coghill's play is a *play!* It is, first and last, theatre. Not only is it mere artistic representation, it does not have the solidity of a painting; it is ephemeral. Moreover, it is only one woman's version of another woman's life, which will be different each time it is performed, and surely will be very different when Joy Coghill does not play Frieda. However, to acknowledge these qualities of theatre is only to recognize the nature of the medium and the genre – the very grounds (the *place*) on which Coghill makes her case. Not once in this play does a painting get painted; not once does Coghill call for a projected image; the props do not include an easel or paint brushes. Instead the entire focus is on theatre, its resources, powers, and challenges. Coghill is after more than painting. She is trying to understand and portray art and what it takes to create great art. This is a very bold gambit. As I see it, Coghill has dared to ask if theatre can match painting and if her performance can dare to match Emily Carr's. Her answer is yes, not because this play is better than that painting but because both arts entail a life of continuous artistic performance and belief in the *autos*. Coghill avoids the painting to focus intensely on the life of an artist, a *woman* artist trying to function in a male-dominated discipline, and on the auto/biography of both Carr and herself.

The resources of theatre that Coghill foregrounds are many, but let me mention three: puppets, masks, and living actors.<sup>13</sup> Puppets

<sup>12</sup> In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin insisted that drama could not be truly dialogic (17). However, scholars have rejected his categorical position and argued for the many ways in which the dialogic does indeed function in a play and in performance; see Knowles.

<sup>13</sup> The presence and significance of masks in Carr's work have been examined by Stich (160) and developed by Udall (305). Stich sees Small as a mask for the autobiographer in prose

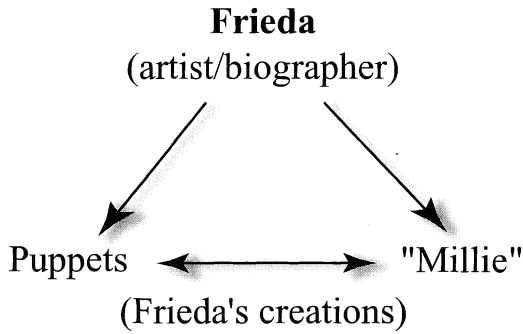
and masks are quintessentially theatrical, and in this play they function as crucial signs of that theatricality. When well done, puppets quickly make an audience believe in them, while simultaneously and constantly reminding us of their artistry, their make-believe status. In *Song of This Place*, they perform in Act I as extensions of Frieda; she gives them their voices and speaks for them. They also help her work the magic necessary to invoke Emily Carr who will eventually banish the “Millie” puppet from the stage. But it is the concept of relationship that is so strategic here. While Frieda insists on doing all the voices and on capturing her idea of Millie’s voice, her relationship to Carr’s story is objectifying. Frieda remains Frieda the actress, the one in control of another’s life-story, the real puppet master. Only as she relinquishes this authority – I am tempted to say the phallic authority of the father – will she open herself to another form of relationship, one that will enable her performance as Millie Carr. One by one the puppets will die. Gradually their roles will be taken up by the puppet manipulators who must also be actors. And through the process of give and take with the actor who plays Emily Carr, Frieda will learn how to relate dialogically with Millie. The most powerful mask in the play is that of Carr’s father, and this domineering, disembodied, pervasive presence remains after the puppets have left. To banish this force will require the performance of a lifetime in which one woman must embody the creative force of another to such a degree that she can defeat its patriarchal power. During Frieda’s/Millie’s argument with the father-mask, the stage instructions tell us that the mask will fade until it disappears altogether just as Frieda/Millie exclaims: “I...I am Emily Carr” (51).

Which leaves me with the absolutely central relationship in the play: that between Frieda and Millie, between Joy Coghill and Emily Carr. To understand this relationship and the transformations it must undergo, I have plotted the relationship at three different stages, to illustrate three configurations, although the actual performance of the relationship is dynamic and fluid, not fixed and static as these diagrams suggest (see Figure 4). At the beginning of the play (Stage 1), Frieda is in command; she speaks for all the characters in a monologic attempt to tell Emily Carr’s life-story. In the second stage

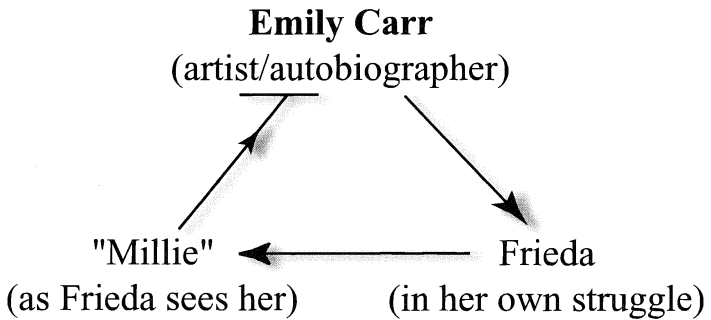
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and D’Sonoqua as a maternal mask for the painter. Udall argues for a much more comprehensive understanding of the concept of masking throughout Carr’s oeuvre. It is beyond my purposes to explore the parallels that might exist between the use of masks on stage and their representation in painting, or particularly in Carr’s work, but the matter is an interesting one, worthy of a separate study.

**Stage 1**



**Stage 2**



**Stage 3**

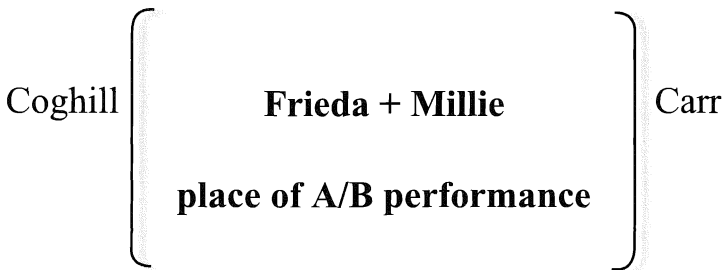


Figure 4: Shifting A/B relationships in *Song of This Place*



(Stage 2), the tables are turned. Frieda's theatre has succeeded in raising the angry spirit of her biographee – the autobiographer herself. Now Emily Carr is in command and Frieda is forced to face the enormity of her own life's struggle as an artist and accept the fact that her "Millie" is a cypher, a puppet in the worst sense of the word, an untheatrical puppet! By the time we reach the third stage in Act II, after the "transfer" between Frieda and Carr has taken place and Frieda has undertaken the dual challenges of the sanatorium and the father, a completely different relational configuration exists (Stage 3). Now Coghill's life outside the theatre and Carr's outside her art are free to shape the action proper of the play by informing the double life-story of two artists who join forces to create their song of this place, which is the place of performative auto/biographics. Coghill's play stages the merging of *autos* and *bios* (both Coghill's/Frieda's and Carr's/Millie's) through a difficult process of learning to let go of authority and control until one can feel and act as the other, *perform* the other because one is, to some considerable degree, performing oneself.

#### IV

Judging from the contemporary Canadian theatre scene, auto/biographical plays are increasingly common. In Linda Griffiths' recent one-person tour de force, *Alien Creature*, poet Gwendolyn MacEwen comes back from the grave to tell us her story; in Wendy Lill's *The Occupation of Heather Rose*, another one-actor play, nurse Heather returns (a bit like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner) to tell us what she has seen on a northern reserve; in Michel Tremblay's splendid *For the pleasure of seeing her again*, the son (Tremblay) relives crucial moments with his mother, and in Robert Lepage's *The far side of the moon*, Lepage, who performs this one-person drama, is re-telling and re-living aspects of his autobiography on stage. This same autobiographical performance is both the point and the action of Lorena Gale's self-dramatization, in *Je me souviens*, of being black and Québécois in Anglophone Canada. In R.H. Thomson's *The Lost Boys*, the playwright/performer uses actual family letters to reconstruct both his own and his family's story, and in several of her plays (*Blood Relations*, *Doc*, *Moving Pictures*, and *Angel's Trumpet*), Sharon Pollock draws upon her own family history and the biographies of others to explore issues of identity, relationship, and the ethics of art. These,



Figure 5: Joy Coghill as Emily Carr for her performance in *Song of This Place*.  
Reproduced with the permission of the photographer, David Cooper.

and many other plays I could mention, all draw on biography and autobiography for their primary subjects and all, to varying degrees, reflect on this process of staging a life. What *Song of This Place* does, especially when Joy Coghill performs in it, that the others do not (except Pollock's *Moving Pictures*) is to lay bare the inner workings of auto/biography as artistic creation. In this play, the actor must move beyond telling a story about someone else's life-story to telling that story through performing her own (professional, artistic) life in public, on stage (see Figure 5). By pushing the concept of auto/biographical theatre to its core as self-performance, Coghill is able to accomplish many things besides creating a play on the subject of Emily Carr.

On the most prosaic level, of course, she does dramatize her version of Emily Carr and to do that she had to do her homework. But the play is as much an exploration of art as it is an exploration of Carr's biography, and this is where Coghill moves beyond creating a play *about* Carr. This play demonstrates that to stage another's life an actor must perform her own story, that *autos* (one's own life) is inseparable from *bios* (others' lives). It also warns that the truth of a life is made-up, created, written, edited, and performed; it is *art*. What Phillip Lejeune, speaking of prose narratives, calls the "autobiographical pact" – the tacit agreement a reader enters into with an author that the "I" in the narrative is identical with the author who signs the title page and is, therefore, telling the truth – must be entirely restructured, possibly jettisoned altogether for theatre.<sup>14</sup> One of Frieda's most shocking lessons in this play is to be told that her version of Carr, based so carefully on the written record, is a lie. To reach an approximation of truth, as distinct from Truth, the actor must dare to let go, to trust her art, as Emily Carr finally learned to do. She must make herself vulnerable in order to achieve success and be true to her art. In this play (and in a few others like Pollock's *Moving Pictures* or, in somewhat different ways, Gale's *Je me souviens*), the theatrical point is emphatically that the performed role can be the reality, that we are the selves we perform, that art is true.

<sup>14</sup> In "Performing the AutoBiographical Pact," I have tried to demonstrate that the pact in theatre performance is a more complex and multiple one than the triadic relationship underlying prose autobiographies. It is also possible that in performance (at least if I am correct in describing autobiography in performance as the *performativity* of autobiographics) we both expose and reconstitute an actual truth of identity that can only ever be represented, at second hand, in a text that is read.

But there are at least two more truths that I find in *Song of This Place*. They are integral with Coghill's approach to art and auto/biography, and they contribute significantly to the way auto/biography is performed. At two interesting junctures in the play, Emily Carr agrees to become an actress, even though she has begun by dismissing the activity of acting as a sham. She plays her younger self opposite Frieda's Alice, and she plays the psychiatrist opposite Frieda's Millie. By doing so, she comes to understand the power of acting and the value of theatre; she learns what it means to claim that acting is an art. She also begins to see just what truth can be when it is well performed. These lessons enable Coghill to show us a further truth – that two women artists can come to appreciate and help each other. Theirs is not a game of one-up-man's-ship, of my art and my story are better than yours, or truer, or more important. It is a game of joining forces to tell a joint, mutually informing story of lives lived for art. *Song of This Place*, at least in its premiere, was Joy Coghill's self-portrait as Emily Carr: “a passionate, intelligent, self-centred woman, an [artist] first, a person second” (13, emphasis mine).

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