

TRIPTYCH

A POEM ABOUT A PAINTING complicates the mysterious connections between language and seeing. An example which has fascinated me for fifteen years is George Bowering's "The Swing":

Renoir's people
 seem to stand
 on a forest floor
of blossoms.

 The girl on her swing
could be fifteen, her dress
 of new flowers.

 She leans coyly
or thoughtfully away
 from the two men
 with straw hats.

They are artists
 on a Sunday afternoon
 warm in loose clothing,
some kind of wonder
 for the child who
 makes the fourth figure.

She is clasping her empty hands
 in front of her, her head up,
 her eyes the only ones
 looking outward.

Renoir's "La Balançoire" was painted in 1876. Critical commentary has focused on the ways in which the painting defines Impressionism: the intensity of the dark shadow — thought to be bizarre in such an evidently springtime scene; the audacious associations of colours — coral, green-blue, and ivory. In their emphasis, the critics, that is, have largely followed Renoir's direction, emphasizing the way he conveys the visual elements of a scene, and the way he spurns the

tradition of narrative painting. Bowering demurs. The first thing he ignores in Renoir is the play of light and dark. Words, he implies, can't compete with the colours of Renoir's light. Bowering's subject is the people. Language, almost in spite of the poet's resistance, creates a narrative where none exists.

The concept of the ideogram — the word that is painted, the picture that makes a word — is relevant here. The ideogram has been crucial to forms of modern literature, at least since Ezra Pound, and fascinated the poets Bowering once took as guides. The method of the ideogram, as Caszlo Géfin summarizes it in *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method* (University of Texas Press, 1982), is a

juxtaposition of linguistic (or pictorial, spatial, tonal) particulars which the mind of the reader (onlooker, listener) will organize into a coherent whole just as he or she does with particulars in the real world. Not only are connectives relics of an outmoded transitional practice, but they are redundant, in fact, because they are not present in nature.

Nor are they present in a painting. Which may explain Bowering's approach to Renoir. Bowering juxtaposes pictorial particulars — discrete verse paragraphs for the different human figures in the painting — without conjunctions. The narrative is not imposed, or read: the gaps in the narrative are made present. There is no subordination in the poem. Bowering's prepositions signal location, time, spatial relationships, but the verbs (“seem,” “could be”) call into question the implied precision, creating a *verbal* impressionism.

“The Swing” makes a reader think about relationships among Renoir's characters — in the past and potential future. Bowering isolates particulars, inviting the reader to try to organize them into a coherent whole. The method is especially evident in the second half of the poem, where the one stanza which does not close with a full stop promises a syntactical clarity which remains unrealized. Given the poem's interest in absent connections, the phrase “some kind of wonder” seems to me to be the core of Bowering's reading. *Whose* “wonder”? The artists' as they watch the swinging girl? Renoir's? The child's? The girl's? Bowering's? The child “*makes* the fourth figure.” Bowering again disrupts the expectation of the relative clause: the fourth figure is not necessarily the child named in the poem. The wonder may lie in Renoir's reverence for the immediacy of a child's response to the visual world.

Many other verbal-visual connections are hidden in this poem-painting. Renoir's “La Balançoire” is a visual quotation of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's “The Swing” (1766-67), a painting whose ribald comedy makes the social niceties of Renoir's grouping more voyeuristic than first appears. And, as J. Newton showed in a 1967 article, Renoir's painting in turn gave Zola a means of describing his heroine in *Une Page d'amour* (1878): “standing on the very edge of the swing and holding the ropes with her arms outstretched . . . she was wear-

ing a grey dress decorated with mauve bows." That **sense of edge** is intriguing, too, in the visual blocking of Bowering's poem on the page. The pattern of "swinging" lines puts the men and small girls on the left margin, as they are crowded on the left 40% of Renoir's canvas, but the two stanzas describing the girl on the swing begin by leaning away from the left margin, and then further away.

The complexities of words which are at once visual and without visual content are the concern of this number of *Canadian Literature*. The ideogrammic method is, I sense, crucial to this subject (and, to suggest another avenue of enquiry, to the recent literary archaeology of Canada's Asian dimensions). Bowering, in static words, reveals the element that is always there, but never there, in the static painting: the observer/perceiver reading the painting, turning a visual experience into words spoken. You don't want, somehow, to go through an art gallery alone. You want someone with you to word the particulars, to provoke you to make up the story. I taught Bowering's poem before I had seen the painting. When I went to the Galerie du Jeu de Paume, I kept circling back, again and again, to "La Balançoire" because I had read its blanks swinging first in words.

L.R.

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Writing *The Fine Arts in Canada* in 1925, Newton MacTavish showed himself to be like a great many other people: ahead of his time in some respects, behind it in others. His survey did look at Indian art *as art*, for example (rather than consign it to some such category as "folk history"), but on the other hand he also "placed" Indian art in a European frame: the illustrations of totem poles are enclosed by formal portraits of Indian chieftains (by Paul Kane and James Henderson) and by studied representations (either sublime or sentimental) of Niagara Falls and other icons of nature's majesty. Perhaps there's a message here — in the signs of placement as well as in the substance of language (or vice-versa). MacTavish liked categories. Acknowledging the artistic skills of women, he nevertheless gathered them all into a single chapter: "Women Painters" (to be followed by one entitled "Others of Importance"). He gave separate chapter status to Morrice, Cullen, and Suzor-Coté, yet left out altogether Emily Carr (whose work, admittedly, had not yet been widely seen outside British Columbia). While sensitivity shaped some of his judgments, his sensitivity was in turn broadly shaped by current taste: which is to say, his work pushed a little at conventional presumptions about what could be interpreted *as art*, but it shared largely in the prevailing assumptions about what art itself intended and what art criticism might be expected to do. Implicitly, gender and region were not just attributes of person or place but rudimentary filters on recognition (and therefore accepta-

bility). Explicitly, art and criticism were both expected to serve the nation: except that, paradoxically, the conventional idea of nationhood was itself circumscribed by gender, position, and time.

Praising the Group of Seven — thus separating himself from Hector Charlesworth's dismissal of them, and allying himself with the 1920's "moderns" — MacTavish closed his book with a ringing paean to national self-expression:

notwithstanding the hard ways set by the Seven for us to follow, it should not be difficult to convince the open mind that on the whole their work is dynamic and that the arts, especially the pictorial and plastic arts, in Canada are dignified and oftentimes masterly. Here and there, one is tempted to perceive, a national note that Lampman suggests in his line,

"Yet they shall quail not."

But in the general clash it is difficult to discriminate. Later on, in the clear though subdued light of the afterglow, that note and that spirit may be estimated at their true value. Meantime we can only wonder whether they may yet resound, and still resound, until they can be recognized and accepted as veritable interpretations of national characteristics.

The sentiment here is instructive not only for its patent determination but also for the terms of its justifications of value. The critic seems almost to will himself to admire what he sees on Group of Seven canvases, but in order to do so finds a conventional social reason. The justification lies not in colour, texture, medium, or line, but in a critical equation between subject and social desire. While the Group's art is "difficult" — one hears echoes of D. C. Scott's postwar reflections on modern ("wayward and discomfoting") poetry — it can have merit to the degree that the difficulty parallels or epitomizes the "defiant" national spirit. Boldness, beauty, wilderness, and the clarion call for spiritual vigour: it's a familiar set of tropes — defined in criticism and subsequently marketed as a distinguishing national characteristic. What it distinguished most of all, however, was a particular 1920's fashion. In the years following the First World War, there were multiple attempts — in literature, politics, music, and art — to divide Canada from Europe, and concurrently to enumerate the physical symbols of difference. Wilderness was one of these. Roberts and Connor had previously made the wilds respectable; with the Group of Seven, the wilds also became an attribute of citizenship, enjoined to serve the cause of independence.

Criticism, clearly, does not shape art — but it sometimes establishes reputations, by codifying (as reasons for aesthetic approval) a set of social beliefs or desires. Krieghoff's paintings of habitant life, for example, were roughly equivalent in sentiment (for late nineteenth-century anglophone observers in Canada) to W. H. Drummond's pseudo-dialect verse: both reinforced anglophone stereotypes of rural Quebec, hence both were more artistically admired outside Quebec than

within. Within Quebec, they were deemed clichés. The long-pervasive Britishness of anglophone Canadian history and pedagogy, moreover, helps explain why a painting like Benjamin West's "The Death of General Wolfe" should have had so much more apparent a literary impact than Robert Harris' "A Meeting of the School Trustees." (One might add that the Irish poet Thomas Moore's "Canadian Boat Song" was, in parallel fashion, long more popular in English Canada than was Antoine Gérin-Lajoie's "Un canadien errant"; and "The Maple Leaf For Ever" was at least as familiar as "O Canada" to imperial hearts. Politics shaped the familiarity. Today, still, Gérin-Lajoie's musical critique of the government politics of 1837, evocative in Quebec, remains obscure to most anglophones, even to those who know "Un canadien errant" as a folksong.) The contemporary emergence of feminist and regional rereadings of history may well reverse such a tendency. Though Harris' painting still awaits its literary descendants, it is so resonant with the tensions of local power and gender appraisal that the wait may not be much longer. To make such a statement reiterates, of course, the general point being made here about cultural analysis: it uses art as evidence; it finds evidence in artifacts for its interpretations of the networks of social power. Art becomes sign.

That art should be a sign of cultural politics as well as a sign of a political culture should surprise no-one — even Borduas' rejection of political representation, when he and others issued *Refus Global* in 1948, was a deliberate political gesture. Political facts, moreover, are often unpleasantly plain. The Group of Seven was a Toronto group, not a national one: hence its notion of nationhood was centred in the cultural priorities of one region — Emily Carr was seen as an appendage to it, and David Milne (as long as he resided elsewhere) was ignored. Presence on the scene, access to the media, connections with the mercantile establishment, acknowledgement by the gallery: these are powerful agencies of recognition. Such power is not unknown in literary circles as well, and it continues to affect people's image of what constitutes accomplishment. Indian art, it seems, would not be recognized as art until Indians were respected as people. William Kurelek's art would be praised when multiculturalism became a politically attractive notion. Robert Bateman's art is still categorized by many as "natural history." Much women's art is still not recognized, and what does that say?

Some years ago, despite their continuing popular appeal, the Group of Seven went out of critical fashion. The continuing popularity may confirm the effectiveness of the way one image of national distinctiveness was established as well as the quality of Group paintings. The limits imposed on Bateman, however, suggest that criticism itself is still in a post-Group-of-Seven phase, resistant not so much to Bateman as to the Group equation between nature and nation. Rejecting the 1920's version of nation has meant resisting its formal codes, the icons of animals and landscape. What replaces it? Other codes — for which criticism finds

new names — abstract, magic, parodic, urban — repairing history while other changes are already happening. As gestures of analysis, such critical comments cannot escape their social context, any more than comments on literature can. Even when espousing change, asserting the aesthetic independence of line and colour (or character and word) from the controls of creed and state, they walk only slightly ahead of the times they're slightly behind.

W.N.

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In their letters to France in the seventeenth century, the Jesuits requested that along with clothing, tools, and other necessities, they be sent suitable images to help them in their missionary work with the Indians. As fear was considered “the precursor of faith in these barbarian minds,” most of the pictures they used stressed the eschatological theme — whose graphic details continued to haunt both native Indians and French-Canadians well into the twentieth century. (Paralysed by childhood visions of hell, Bérubé in Roch Carrier’s *La Guerre, yes sir!* proposes marriage to a prostitute to redeem himself.)

Yet the Jesuits also unwittingly provided the means that were to destroy this limit on imagination and spontaneity. Always ready to adapt their methods to the requirements of a certain culture, they chose colours and shapes in keeping with the conventions current among their clientele. Thus, as François-Marc Gagnon has demonstrated in *La Conversion par l'image: un aspect de la mission des Jésuites auprès des Indiens du Canada au XVIIe siècle* (1975), Jesus was to be portrayed to the Hurons “without a beard,” the characters “should not be shown in profile but we should see their entire face and their eyes should be open,” “there [should] not be too much shadow on the bodies” nor too much clothing, the hair should be straight not “curly or bald,” and the colours red and blue should prevail over yellow and green.

Effectively puncturing realism and ethnocentricity, these recommendations, formulated to entrench the authority of the Church, anticipate an increasingly deconstructionist dialogue between image and word. (It is probably no coincidence that a major figure in the development of the modern Québec art scene — Rodolphe Dubé, alias François Hertel — was a lapsed Jesuit.) This dialogue takes several forms. The Automatist manifesto *Refus global* draws on the hypnotic anaphoras of religious chant to postulate the creativity of the subconscious. Another member of the Automatist group, Claude Gauvreau, drew on the concept of the baroque for similar purposes. Revisionist history disputes received attitudes by challenging received images: the comic strips in Léandre Bergeron and Robert Lavail’s *L’Histoire du Québec*, for example, explode the religious iconography of Benjamin West’s “The Death of General Wolfe” by suggesting that the General really slipped on a banana peel and that the men propping him up in the posture

of a dying Christ are discussing the relative merits of bananas and steaks. Theatre, too, reshapes visual meanings; Marie-Josée Lanoix's stage sets for *Les Fées ont soif* framed Denise Boucher's exorcism of Marian symbolism with grotesquely enlarged religious paraphernalia, most notably a gigantic rosary.

As in the medical practice of homeopathy, cultural disease is sometimes best combatted with the poison that caused it. But sometimes familiar images and words are so freighted with unwanted connotations that an author, as Patricia Smart suggests in these pages, prefers to draw on "concepts of music and voice" to avoid them. When this happens, the conventional borders between the arts dissolve, and readers are asked to re-hear and re-see what once they thought they knew.

E.-M.K.

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

Rhea Tregebov

This rectangle describes the life of Sir Henry Unton;
 within it everything happens at once over and over again.
 Sir Henry is everywhere within this rectangle a small
 dark crude figure in a smaller ground.
 Within it Sir Henry is being born
 and stays being born while he flourishes
 and dies, winning and losing battles,
 in Italy, in France, in the same dark armour
 with the same dark face, crudely drawn.
 Had his widow seen saintly lives
 pictured with this simultaneous disorder
 or is it just that she remembered him this way,
 all at once over and over?
 For isn't it like this
 that our lives live on in us,
 born and borne and unborn.