

CANADIAN ARTISTS AS WRITERS

Peter Stevens

PAUL KANE was probably the first painter to attempt a deliberate delineation of the land and its people, as he makes clear in the Preface to his journals, *Wanderings Of An Artist Among The Indians of North America*. He sees his paintings as having not simply an aesthetic value, but also an intrinsic value to the historian, for he is interested in depicting Indian costumes and customs as well as the "scenery of an almost unknown country." A. Y. Jackson in *A Painter's Country* claims that Kane's paintings "furnish a valuable record of the country and the people but as works of art they are not very important". This view is fairly common: Kane is seen as a mere forerunner of the photographer, not as a very original painter, for his paintings and drawings show no real individuality. The same might be said about the written record of his travels.

For the most part *Wanderings Of An Artist* is written in an unadventurous, anonymous prose but at times there are flashes in it of a more interesting writer. Certainly he writes clearly about the customs, the ceremonies, the songs of the Indians (lacking the understanding and sympathy that the Indian painter George Clutesi shows in his recent *Pollatch* but lacking the overly flamboyant style of Clutesi as well) but expresses, despite his life-long interest in the Indians, a suspicious mistrust of them. He recounts on one occasion how sorry he was to leave a party of Indians for he had "experienced many acts of kindness at their hands, hardly to be expected from so wild and uncultivated a people." He is unrelenting in his description of their filth and ugliness. He finds their language a barbarous splutter, but he does sense something of their doom, even though he has no criticism for the way the Hudson's Bay Company treats the Indians, for he maintains that the Company pursues a "just and strict course . . . in the conduct of the whole of their immense traffic." Yet he sees "that opening up the trade with the Indians to all who wish indiscriminately to engage in it, must lead to their annihilation." Thus, there lurks an elegaic tone behind the records both in the painting and in the writing.

Kane is impressed by the grandeur of the country and includes some descriptive matter about the landscape. He discusses the buffalo herds and the waste involved in their hunting, but joins in the hunt wholeheartedly. Kane constantly understates the rigours of his journey. He underplays the fear and the terror he felt in facing some of the tribes, his tenacity in accomplishing long journeys through western winters, his stubborn courage in pursuing his objectives.

In a sense, then, Kane explored the land physically, captured it and its inhabitants by means of his art and ironically enough gave a kind of immortality to those Indians he himself saw as doomed. He relates the Indian idea that by being painted, a human somehow was drained; painting somehow curtailed life. On one occasion Kane was told this by the mother of an Indian girl he was sketching. Kane replied by "assuring her it was more likely to prolong" her life. He seems rather prosaic at times, for instance, when he listens carefully to Indian legends, then dismisses them with the comment that they are "the fanciful creations of their superstitious credulity."

But an irony, intentional or not, breaks into the flatly straightforward account every now and again to give the reader a fuller notion of Kane's character. He watches a scalp dance for about four or five hours, "seeing no variation in it, nor any likelihood of its termination" and is thus "deeply impressed with the sincerity of a grief which could endure such violent monotony for so long a period." During one journey the travellers find a cache of butter hidden the year before, and Kane laconically remarks, "it proved an acquisition to our larder although its age had not improved its flavour."

After the often painful and terrifying journey across Canada and back, during which Kane tries to keep his civilized demeanour and opinions, at least in the even prose of the book, he finds on his return that "the greatest hardship I had to endure, was the difficulty in trying to sleep in a civilized bed." So he had discovered the grandeur and beauty of the land almost in spite of himself. Perhaps it really had reached under Kane's skin, even if it rarely digs into the staid surface of the prose of his journal.

EMILY CARR was much more sympathetic towards the Indians, and *Klee Wyck* is full of her concern for them, and her willingness to accept their legends and their customs. When she learned that the old Indians in Ucluelet believed, as Kane's Indians did, that a picture did harm to the model, Emily Carr refused to paint the old Indians. She didn't want to damage their

belief, for "down deep we all hug something. The great forest hugs its silence. The sea and the air hug the spilled cries of sea-birds. The forest hugs only silence; its birds and even its beasts are mute." There speaks a much more individual voice than Kane's. Of course, Emily Carr wrote much more than Kane, books devoted to certain segments of her life: her days with the Indians, her childhood, her time as a landlady as well as other collections of her prose sketches. These segments are brought together in her autobiography *Growing Pains*.

She stresses the pain in her career from the early opposition of her family through the misunderstanding of her teachers and her neglect of painting in order to survive, to her acceptance as an artist. There is no question that her whole life was centred around Canada, or at least her idea of the Canadian west, a landscape teeming with power, relentless in its swirling fertility and mystery, just as she portrayed it in her forest scenes. Her autobiography expresses her early interest in, and deep response to the forest, an immersion in the woods "to be felt not with fingertips but with one's whole self." She expresses her first encounter with the forest: "tree boles pillared the forest's roof, and streaked the unfathomable forest like gigantic rain streaks pouring, the surge of growth from the forest's floor boiled up to meet it."

In Europe she feels a great need to return to the west. Epping Forest can sustain her only for a day, for it has no "turmoil of undergrowth." She discovers something of the haunted mysterious quality of her Canadian forest in Treganna Wood in Cornwall but always she is obsessed by the Canadian landscape. Perhaps the best single section of her autobiography is her account of her visit to the Cariboo country, for her writing here is as vigorous as her painting, full of resilient language, a little exotic and quaint, but boisterous, full of life, as she plunges whole-heartedly into tough and rough space after the meekness of England.

Her writing also gives some clear portraits of the people she came into contact with, although at times it seems impossible that one person could meet so many eccentric people in one lifetime. Emily herself emerges as a somewhat eccentric, slightly dotty person but a woman with great tenacity of purpose. Her despair at being unrecognized and at being dismissed as an insignificant artist comes out occasionally in such remarks as this, dropped almost casually into the narrative: "it was then that I made myself into an envelope into which I could thrust my work deep, lick the flap, seal it from everybody."

Unlike Kane, Emily Carr often talks about what she is trying to do in her

painting. She talks of her own ideas in relation to what she is taught, clinging to her own belief in herself. She seems to immerse herself in her art as much as she does in the forest, so that the one becomes the other. It is a total response through art to life in order to get at the essence, such as she recognized in Indian art: "Our Indians get down to stark reality." She wants to express the surge of life, the "continual shove of growing" she sees in the forest and it is no wonder she continually returns to images of water to describe her view of art and of the forest. She sees art as "a fluid process" just as she sees the forest as being "submerged beneath a drown of undergrowth."

Words become for her almost as important as her painting, even though she concentrated on it only during the last years of her life. She had kept a note-book with her when she painted in order to try to express the core of what she wanted to paint and she found that in words she could present "essentials only, discarding everything of minor importance . . . This saying in words as well as in colour and form gave me double approach." Emily Carr, then, comes to terms with the land through a total response and commitment to her own ideas about art, writing and life. Both her painting and her books (despite some over-writing and some sentimentalizing) give a sense of real joy in her work with an underlying bitterness, although this rarely breaks into explicit statement.

A. Y. Jackson has travelled all over Canada and has led a full, active artistic life, yet I find his autobiography *A Painter's Country* a rather colourless book. Certainly the main facts of his life are recorded and some sections rise above the generally flat tone, most notably his accounts of painting trips with Dr. Frederick Banting and Lawren Harris. Often, however, Jackson seems deliberately to miss opportunities. For instance, he dismisses his early European experience simply by saying "we had a most thrilling time" and he off-handedly refers to his involvement in a mutiny in the army without developing it in the narrative. He does not expand on the reactions to the Group of Seven's work shown at the Wembley Exhibition, as he feels most readers will have read about the controversy, not realizing that most readers would be interested in his own personal reactions as one of the painters involved. In fact, Jackson is curiously uninformative about how he became interested in art and gives only the barest details about his painting. He faces the problem of the country itself, the problem of painting a country not "mellowed by time and human association." He recognizes how certain aspects of the country lend themselves to different kinds of painting; he, in fact, suggests how Lawren Harris may have changed to abstraction through contact with the mountains: "The Colin Range was an amazing place, a kind of cubists'

paradise full of geometric formations, all waiting for the abstract painter.”

Of course, Jackson writes of his fellow painters with some insight, so his autobiography is enlivened by his portraits of J. E. H. MacDonald, Lawren Harris and Tom Thomson. He has a somewhat dry sense of humour, especially in dealing with some of the characters he met in his travels. However, I think a reader would do well to consult *A. Y.'s Canada* as well as the autobiography for a clearer picture of Jackson. Unfortunately, the text by Naomi Jackson Greves is by turns excessively cloying or self-consciously literary, but it contains passages from letters and journals by Jackson which expand parts of the autobiography. At times Jackson puts his reaction to the landscape into words in his unpublished journal: “It is a bleached out landscape, bare of vegetation, shale beaches strewn with debris, pieces of boats, canvas, pulleys, and Franklin’s water barrels grouped round the roofless house, many of the barrels full of water. Some bore great rips of bears’ claws on them.” He sees the country as giving “a prodigious cosmic thrill” but is not swamped by it. He feels the artist is finally responsible to his art, not simply to a recording of the country:

The artist is not dependent on old houses and barns. The old and the new are all grist to the artist’s mill. There are colours and forms, and lines of movement and varying effects of light, and if there is less ready-made stuff then it is up to the artist not only to observe but to emphasize and create and to give his own interpretation to what he sees.

Jackson’s writing is a kind of compendium of camping hints, with some portraits, told in a simple if somewhat flat style, lightened occasionally by laconic humour that breaks out at times into critical comment on Canadian neglect of art and of the country. He complains that we are still locked in philistinism and that we have given over too much to the Americans. Nowadays, he says, the Canadian Arctic “has become as remote as Wall Street. If a Canadian wishes to visit the Canadian Arctic, he has to get permission from Washington.”

THERE IS A poetic streak in Jackson which manifests itself in his colour notations. One of his drawings has this reminder of colouring written on it: “water warm silver; reflex green; willow bright orange; old fireweed; dwarf birch” — almost a plain imagist-like poem.

Of course, some of the Group of Seven painters wrote poetry: J. E. H. MacDonald wrote some nature poetry and light verse and in 1922 Lawren Harris

published a collection of free verse pieces, *Contrasts*. This poetry in general consists of descriptive catalogues in somewhat stodgy and artificial language. The volume expresses a Whitmanesque optimism, embracing all humanity (later Harris was to say that his creed was "art for man's sake"). Harris in his poetry and in his art is a great Yea-Sayer; he considers it blasphemy "To say nay, nay, and smile at aspirations, dreams and visions". He believes in no system and wants man to respond freely to external reality to reach some transcendental quality.

These ideas crop up in Harris' essays as well as in his poems. A beautiful volume of Harris' paintings published by Macmillan is garnished with statements from Harris' writings assembled by R. G. P. Colgrave, and Harris' ideas about the transcendental qualities of Canadian landscape are expressed here explicitly. Harris acknowledges the effect of the North on his paintings but its grandeur is deeper than a mere surface presentation in painting, for the North is "a source of a flow of beneficent informing cosmic powers behind the bleakness and barrenness and austerity of much of the land." Harris finds the land "mostly virgin, fresh and full-replenishing."

One remembers that Emily Carr dedicated her autobiography to Harris and certainly her idea of art as a "fluid process" seems close to Harris' notion of art as a total response in each individual, "an urge to inner activity". Art is "a dynamic bridge between opposites". Harris reaches beyond Emily Carr's insistence on stark reality to "the idea of a universal order achieved by giving oneself fully to the particular." Art's function (and this sounds very modern and psychedelic) "is to enlarge our consciousness" so that it "leads us both to find ourselves in our environment and to give that environment new and more far-reaching meaning." Harris insists that we should react to life around us "in terms of direct, immediate experience." All these expressions about expanded consciousness and the going through a directly perceived object to some cosmic revelation without being trapped in a systematic approach is related to his move into abstract painting, for he once suggested that the abstract expressionist manner in painting was "an extension of experience beyond the range of realistic painting."

Harris' poetry contains at times some implicit condemnation of modern civilization and industrialism, but in general Canadian painters until recently have not indulged in written social criticism. There is no equivalent to Borduas' manifesto in English-Canada. Jackson complains in his autobiography of Canada's neglect of culture. Greg Curnoe sends out occasional anarchic blasts from London, Ontario, even including written messages in some of his paintings. The nearest we come to a painter as social critic is Harold Town in his statements made on

various TV and radio shows and especially in the prefatory essay to that strange series of drawings, *Enigmas*. These drawings are full of Amazonian women subjugating, trapping, humiliating man, although the final drawing, three black shapes (presumably men) standing on some of these Amazonians, may give rise to a vague optimism.

The prefatory essay does not explain the drawings, but is a rambunctious attack on things Canadian. He fires at the usual targets: erosion and pollution (our foremost national products), the Canada Council ("relentlessly dedicated to the discovery and deification of mediocrity"), the Senate, the discrepancy between law and justice, Americanization, Canadian womanhood, and Puritanism.

Canadians have no real concern for themselves as Canadians nor for the country. They love sports and spend more money on them than on culture and the curing of disease. They see no potential in their resources: "We possess sweeping forests, consequently we insist on importing furniture from the little country of Denmark, made from wood grown in Africa, and held together by paltry platitudes of design."

What saves this essay from being merely a rather hysterical destructive denunciation is Town's obvious concern for and love of Canada. He comes back to the land, suggesting that Canadians need "a proprietary interest in topsoil, a sense of place, an urge to challenge the present, and rush to the future." Somewhere there must be "an indigenous self." So, just as the drawings end on a hint of optimism, Town finds some slight reason for optimism in the fact that we have "an aggressive creative community." And always there is the land, "a geographic complex of stunning grandeur, with a violent, yet surprisingly poetic climate." The essay closes with a tempered, almost ironic hope: "We are, in fact, savagely self-repressed, nevertheless ours is the only nation seemingly steeped in a consistent sort of idiocy."

Town's writing at times shows a real if somewhat flamboyant flair and wit, and exists in a poetic atmosphere. Some Canadian painters have experimented with writing poetry. I have already mentioned Curnoe's use of words in his paintings. The London group cohere to some extent around the literary magazine, *Alphabet*. This periodical often includes graphics and on one occasion printed a concrete poem (James Reaney, the editor, preferred to call it an illuminated poem) by London painter Jack Chambers. Reaney has recently been writing some emblem poems. The sculptor, Florence Wyle, published a volume of poems in 1959 and Roy Kiyooka has written some interesting poems. There

has been a cross-breeding of art and poetry in the realm of concrete poetry in which we find writers taking over some of the graphic effects of art.

THE SMALL GROUP of writers of concrete poetry in Canada show a great deal of variety in their methods. Some have used the typewriter as something akin to the painter's brush. David Aylward in his *Typescapes* deliberately avoids using the letters on his typewriter; he makes patterns down the page with the symbols of punctuation and abbreviation, and these patterns are off-centred as another device to separate his work from 'normal' poetry. The effect is to take the poetry out of the realm of word-meanings into a realm of shape-and-space relationships close to a mechanical calligraphic pattern. Hart Broudy in a recent set of 'typewriter-drawings' for *GrOnk* uses type for sharp-edged design and by close clusters of letters achieves effects of light and shade. Bill Bissett also uses the typewriter as a precision instrument in order to gauge exactly the stresses and pauses in some of his poems. He strives for a musical notation, and the repetitions of lines one after the other, the spacing altering slightly every now and again, words merging at some points, are meant to suggest the pacing of the chant-effects within a poem. This writing can work but I find little relation at times between the design of words on the page and the actual chanting of the poems by Bissett himself. The flat even quality of the typewritten lines does not suggest the rhythms that Bissett's voice puts into the poems. Some method of heavy and light emphasis (such as Broudy uses) might give a more precise rhythmic effect. Bissett has probably gone farther into the mixing of art and poetry than anyone else in Canada, in such a book as *The Jinx Ship Nd Other Trips*, for instance, a meld of graphics and drawings (to me these are crude and generally undistinguished), lettering and typescript as "illuminations" of poems and prose, and typographic design, the whole book interleaved with collages, abstract paint patterns, random pages of ads from glossy magazines. The reader must immerse himself within the book, not trying to extract a literary meaning but rather to involve himself in a total response. I do not find the book successful, because some individual parts are more approachable than others, some parts have a too juvenile tone, some pages are too haphazardly smudged, so that a totality of response is not really possible. Nevertheless, it is an interesting, if finally unsuccessful attempt to extend the concept of concrete poetry beyond the framework of the single page.

Individual concrete poems are what stay in the mind. Earle Birney has experimented with shape in several poems. In one he attempts to turn the non-verbal ideogram of constancy into words, retaining ideogrammatic shape. The word **ROCK** is the centre of a swirl of words representing water around the rock but the line of words, however much it eddies within the space of the page, heads eventually to the rock. Jane Shen has attempted to transliterate Chinese ideograms, using the images implied by the ideogram to give the abstract 'meaning'. Lionel Kearns has an intriguing design of zeros and ones, a large figure one (made of zeros) enclosed within a large zero (made of ones) to depict "The Birth of God". Although the design is precise, defined and almost mathematical, the nature of the one emerging from nothing implies an expansion of all the contradictory tensions and opposing forces within the universe.

Ian Hamilton Finlay, while admitting certain limiting factors in the nature of concrete poetry, maintains that whereas "normal" poetry is circumscribed within society, concrete poetry is confined only within space. Space, then, a concern of painting, is an essential part of concrete poetry and, apart from Bill Bissett, the most consistently adventurous poet of this nature, a poet trying for total involvement with language in space, is bp Nichol. His *Journeyings And The Return* contains a package of cards, small booklets, cardboard designs: all manner of shapes and sizes of paper and card which the reader has to manipulate in order to sense his relationship with the words or patterns printed on them. Nichol has extended his interest since then into the nature of seeing. He seems to be questioning the very act of reading itself, apparently wanting the reader to go beyond a literal meaning in order to weigh, independent of meaning, the nature of lettering itself. If a letter can be seen in different ways, even though it lies flat on the page, he seems to suggest, a word will yield different "meanings" if we can be made to see its variety of surfaces and perspectives. His series "Eyes" suggest this insistence on close looking.

The typewriter has helped in the design and shape of poems but more than a typewriter is necessary. One of the most interesting continuing experiments in poem-drawing is the comparatively unnoticed work of Judith Copithorne, especially in her two books *Release* and *Runes*. The poems in these books are calligraphic designs, words and pen-strokes held together in one design on the page. The words may at times be in a linear sequence surrounded by rhythmic calligraphy, but more often the lines are looser, veering off in all directions but held within the fluidity of the calligraphy, giving an impression of spontaneous and inner organic growth. The shapes and lines that Judith Copithorne "illuminates"

her poems with seem firstly to control the words, hold them within the space created by the calligraphy and secondly to free the words and lines because there is no necessity for the pen to keep to a rigid pattern. She achieves a taut equilibrium between freedom and control, and the words themselves are suspended in free space, their meaning coming across in sections as the eye follows the pattern. But the eye is also always conscious of the whole pattern of the poem-drawing as an object enclosed by the frame of the page. Sometimes the calligraphy becomes too fussy, sometimes the words merge too obscurely with the design but in general Judith Copithorne's attempt at calligraphic poetry seems to me a very interesting and worthwhile experiment in mixing art and poetry.

Many of the poems and poets I have mentioned in this brief survey of concrete poetry are included in *the cosmic chef: an evening of concrete* edited by bp Nichol and published by Oberon Press. This is a boxed folio showing the variety of Canadian concrete poetry, full of sharp design, typewriter sequence, calligraphy, comic strip experiments, extensions of language and sound. The editor defines this area of cross-breeding of art and poetry I have tried to give a short account of here:

everything presented here comes
from that point where language and/or
the image blur together into the
inbetween and become concrete objects
to be understood as such.

THE MIXTURE OF ART AND POETRY is a growing concern in Canada. More and more books of poetry are being published with illustrations. Eldon Grier's *Pictures On The Skin* is a splendid book to look at, poems carefully arranged on the page, interleaved with collages, silhouettes, photographic negatives, drawings, colour designs. Unfortunately the poetry does not live up to its presentation. The poems, which include some about various other artists and musicians, are rather fuzzy in outline. Grier's painterly interests do not really work in this book. The poetry has little visual quality and not much of the hard-edged clarity one might expect from a painter. Grier acknowledges the influence of a "chaotic permissiveness" but the poems do not have much spontaneity or outrageousness. They exist in a kind of controlled blur. His poetry is much more successful in his earlier *A Friction Of Lights*, particularly in the opening poem

“An Ecstasy”, a collage of segments about growth in metamorphosis, illogical yet cleverly juxtaposing ideas, suiting the notion that real creation is an overgrowth that breaks limits. There are several poems in the volume about art and artists — two very good poems about Marini, for instance. He also suggests the quality of Apollinaire by using the notion of one of the poet’s typographical experiments as an image of its influence on him:

I am almost asleep
but I feel a transfusion of fine little letters
dripping slantwise into my side.

P. K. Page is another painter who has written poetry. She sees both poetry and painting as an organic unity in her creative life, and although she has concentrated on painting for much of the time since the 1950s, her selected poems, *Cry Ararat!*, include some later poems, and some, particularly those in the first section of the book, seem very painterly. The hieroglyphic shapes in “Bark Drawing” are visually presented and the poet, aware of the connection between words and sight, talks of “an alphabet the eye / lifts from the air.” Throughout the poems she sees words as somehow deadening. They have power, for the act of naming is a making, as she suggests in “Cook’s Mountains”, but these same mountains are entities in themselves and before being named “they were not the same.” Still, as she is told that they are called the Glass House Mountains, “instantly they altered to become / the sum of shape and name.” Words set a limit but also connect with the visual response: “two strangenesses united into one”. Nevertheless, a gap exists between the senses; in “This Frieze of Birds,” she feels the frieze can be made into “an intricate poem, neat”, but for real birds we can “find no words”, though the poem tends to offer a contradiction to itself in the exact descriptive detail in the closing stanzas. The idea is repeated in “Only Child”, where a too scientific knowledge or naming takes away life:

Birds were his element like air and not
her words for them — making them statues.

The poet-painter demands a sensuous response to life, an openness of spirit, for definition and limitation wreak violence on spontaneous existence, an idea that seems to be expressed in “Leather Jacket” published in a recent *Canadian Forum*. Perhaps this idea is related to the drawing of the perky, intricate bird entitled “And You, What Do You Seek?” that appears as an illustration in *Cry Ararat!*

P. K. Page's poems contain very clear visual pictures but she tends to push the images towards abstraction. The details of the garden in "After Rain" move into a simplified "primeval" atmosphere. She sees a snowman as a primitive figure merging with the landscape, just as the man in "Journey Home" becomes the landscape, the transformation being a continuous, growing process. She reduces the knitting women in "The Knitters" to rather abstract monolithic figures "by Moore". This merging towards abstraction arises from detail, giving large shape to small particularities, just as the insistence in whiteness in much of the poetry seems to gather the diffuse prismatic colouring of her world. Her world is often chillingly abstract (notice how much snow there is in P. K. Page's poetry), but she may be trying to express a large order and pattern in the world in which we are involved; however, perhaps the somewhat cold and psychological analysis in some poems prevents the reader from participating in an involvement in the world she presents.

The best book of poetry devoted to the process of painting itself is *The Danish Portraits* by Heather Spears. This slim volume evokes a sparse and rather harsh Scandinavian landscape in some poems, but the poems dealing with painting are not self-conscious or narrow, as they are not simply discussions of aesthetic problems. These problems are related to her own personal life, and her attempts to catch and hold a real person in portraits become mirrors for her own effort to discover her own reality in relation to the models and in particular to the man she loves who serves as a model for a portrait. Thus, the poems are expressions of two sides of her personal life, preventing them from becoming mere artificial or transcendental exercises.

"no ideas" expresses her dissatisfaction with her recent paintings but by the end of the poem we find the dissatisfaction arises from the absence of her lover. If he were to return, she could perhaps paint again, make her eyes focus to catch a real presence — "I could wear / out the two of us just looking" — but she recognizes that his reality as a lover would be a barrier to her painting, and she complains, "you'd interfere." The poem is a presentation of the problem of relationships both in art and life: the artist wonders about her relation to the object to be painted but the artist as human being wonders how this can exist within a human relationship of love.

She encounters the power of paint to have an independent life of its own when she paints a portrait of her son. He had burned his arm and as she sketches the pose, the burned arm "wants to remake / my picture for its own sake." It is difficult to know whether it is the pose arousing pity in the painter, the arm itself as

focus or the painter's own memory of the day on which he burned his arm which causes this emphasis. All these layers are brought together in the concluding lines:

a wound
radiating into sound
skin, radiating into sound
how he screamed then.

So again the painter is faced with the problem of the discrepancy between art and life and the difficulty arising from her own knowledge of that discrepancy, for she herself is "still precisely aware / of the gap between the imagined and the real."

This discrepancy is at the centre of the dozen poems which make up the opening sequence, "The Danish Portraits." The poems are notations about her attempts (usually failures) to capture the likeness of her lover in a portrait. The poems give some of the visual detail but somehow she feels her portrait must catch more than she can see. When her lover has gone, his presence "untames" the room and "creates its own wilderness its own forms / At the very margins of the visual." This presence is beyond her control and in other poems she senses that a painting is somehow a confinement, a narrowing down, something that cannot live up to the form in her imagination. Yet a portrait can exercise its own control, can lead the viewer into the painting and evoke its mood within the viewer. The painter's failure to paint her lover's portrait is counterpointed by two or three poems which suggest that she can include more than reality within a painting. The opening poem, for instance, details something about the sitter's real life which the painter regrets she has not experienced first-hand but the artist says she catches something beyond the knowledge of the sitter's character within the town. In another portrait of a girl "exposed and unsure", the painter pushes "the encroaching shadow back", makes

Light of your frailty and dismay
On the dark primed passive canvas.

But the poem also carries the idea of control and confinement. The painter "contains" the sitter in her portrait. And this is her problem with the portrait of her lover and accounts for her ambivalent attitude, for she likes his "untamed" quality. He recognizes something in her eyes when she looks at him in terms of a portrait. He sees her eyes are "almost crazed" and he is afraid of "the look that smites [him] selfless." He cannot accept this as part of human love, although the

painter herself says that such a look in her eyes "could prove / The exact equations of a close embrace." Time and again she finds herself lost in merely looking. She wants emphatically to "do this marvellous thing", which amounts, I suppose, to a picture of real human love but to do it may result in the destruction of that love, so she continually draws back:

I will do it
Like plunging my hands into blood
But I could not touch you, even if I could.

She also feels that this fixing of her love would in a sense control her lover, and yet his character is unfixable:

I will make you enter this narrow dwelling
Because there is no telling
Where you would go, could I not confine
You here in my craft.

But the portraits fail; the drawings lie unfinished (or even unstarted) with "regret and rational rage / Folded like tissue paper between each page." And her love has failed — "The truth is you will never come again."

The poems in *The Danish Portraits* are subtle and uncompromising in their honesty about the life of art and its relation to human love. Art and love are constant counterpoints, a kind of interchangeable objective correlative. Perhaps the poems remain a little obscure in places because the details of the paintings and the personal lives are not given fully. Seeing the portraits might help, but one can understand why she would not want them reproduced, as she thinks most of them are failures. But these obscurities do not detract from the real insight into art and love contained in the twenty-six poems in the volume.

THESE THREE POETS have all spent a good deal of their time outside Canada, so that the Canadian scene and Canadian concerns do not figure largely in their work. The same might be said of Jack Shadbolt who has spent some years in Europe, but he has himself acknowledged the effect of the Group of Seven on his work as well as the especial influence of Emily Carr and Frank Varley. Shadbolt has detailed this in what I consider to be the best prose book by a Canadian artist, *In Search of Form*, a book in which he describes his artistic

development, illustrated at each step by many of his drawings and paintings.

Shadbolt sees art as a continuous process, layers of trial and error, revelations by spontaneous response, refinements, extrapolations from reality in an interaction between the imagination and the intellect. Creation, for him, "starts in the preconscious and works through to final intellectual recognition". The artist works towards a total structure, a form which may be inherent, but which will emerge only through a sequence of parlaying possibilities of varying relationships between and within objects. These objects may be seen in various gradations from minute particularities to symbolic abstractions and all the degrees lying between may be released by breaking open the object to take account of its (and the surrounding space's and object's) "rhythmic proliferation."

Within the work of art itself or within the process of its creation Shadbolt sees a tension between the form of the object (the thing being painted or drawn) and the energies within seeking to destroy the form. Art seeks "a planned spacial equilibrium." He makes it clear that he has never been afraid to allow spontaneous happenings to occur in his drawings to release the inner energies of form, so that "form creates its own images." These become part of his own style (a word he does not like to use) and he defines his own artistic process as a "dialectic of opposites" in which "improvisation [is] resolved by structure."

He likes to work from reality but strives to re-create it in as many authentic ways as possible in order to understand it thoroughly. Only then can he work with the constituent parts, try to loosen them into abstractions and symbolic simplifications or to see the emblematic disposal of parts. Form may emerge from these drawings, for "drawing is idea more than fact." He suggests that "form also finds the experience," although perhaps this happens because the experience is working within, searching for the form. Thus, there are connections between the psychic and the physical without the intervention of the intellect. An artist may learn rationally about composition and colour but nothing can change his own individual brush stroke, his own personal physical experience of the medium itself.

All this sounds very much like a discussion of certain ideas current in modern poetry. Shadbolt's discussion of his own artistic creation sounds at times close to notions of the deep image, composition by field, concrete poetry and organic form. Certainly, Shadbolt's seems a very poetic temperament and he makes great use in his book of words associated with poetry: image, metaphor, rhythm et al.

In case I have made this book sound too theoretical by concentrating on the ideas about the creative process (and perhaps the last third of the book does tend

to emphasize the solution of some of Shadbolt's artistic problems too specifically), let me hasten to add that the book includes some autobiographical detail as well as some evocative descriptive details — such as descriptions of Victoria and its surrounding district, and the fishing fleet at Coullioure, for instance. But even if the emphasis is on the problems of artistic development and creation, the book remains a completely fascinating study of one artist's sincere concern to understand his own art, the motives and springs of it and his recognition of his "sensuous involvement with form."

Like Kane, nearly all these Canadian painters who write see the land as something they have to return to and come to terms with, but they do not see it as something by which they necessarily feel dominated. There is more evidence of love than subjugation in their attitudes. This brief survey, I hope, gives some sense of the ways in which Canadian artists specifically express their concern and love for both their art and Canada.