

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

Canadian Art Criticism

Audrey Thomas

“ART IS ONE OF THE NECESSITIES of life,” says Henry James; “but even the critics themselves would probably not assert that criticism is anything more than an agreeable luxury — something like printed talk.”¹ Nothing more, perhaps, but sometimes something less, a great deal less; or should we say it depends on who is talking? For, six months after undertaking to survey Canadian art criticism both as literature and as a separate literary genre, my first impulse is to confess to the reader that no such thing exists. However, the curiosities which I did uncover, as well as the few articles and books which may only be the exceptions that prove the rule, are too interesting and, in the case of Emily Carr’s *Growing Pains* and A. Y. Jackson’s *A Painter’s Country*, too important to be written off so quickly, simply because there is no real body of Canadian art literature behind them. This article will be a survey then, neither definitive nor particularly comprehensive, of some of the literary curiosities (and some of the literary gems) which I did discover in my search for the still unborn Canadian art criticism as a literary genre.

Let us begin with a curiosity. In the *Canadian Magazine* (“of Politics, Science, Art and Literature”), in November, 1902, a woman named Kathleen Hale recalls a journey to the home of Homer Watson:

It was an amber day in October, when with a sense of adventure we set out for that village [Doon]; the kind of day when, as Mobray says, “Nature holds a bit of yellow glass to our eyes, till, like children, we catch a glimpse of the golden ages.” Doon, nestling near the heart of Ontario, is get-at-able by a “local” train, when it resolves itself into a station house and half a hundred cottages.

This is a feature article, with half-tone sepia reproductions of Watson’s paintings plus a photograph of the painter’s studio — an article intended, presumably, for the well-bred ladies who read the *Canadian Magazine* and saw art and artists

through that "bit of yellow glass" the writer mentions in her opening paragraph. And the leisurely style of the opening to what is in fact a rather brief article, could have been — could it not? — the exact style of the opening of any one of a number of Victorian novels, and in that sense alone it becomes a literary curiosity. And it has its descendants, not only in the interviews with Margot Fonteyn or other illustrious artists on the women's pages of the Canadian dailies, but also in the magazine that was to become the only Canadian Art magazine, or only magazine of "Canadian Art criticism", if one wishes to be magnanimous.

In the 1950 summer issue of *Canadian Art* (née *Maritime Art* and now *Arts-canada*), a reviewer, whom I shall make anonymous, begins her review (again a "feature" on a particular painter).

Like a true artist, [X] is very humble about herself and her work

The romantic conception rides still, or rides again; and here is something written by a man, in *Canadian Art*, Autumn, 1953:

The art of Marthe Rakine, like the personality of the painter, is bright and sparkling.

The leisurely introductions are gone, perhaps, but for some reviewers the romantic attitude remains unchanged, it would seem, since 1902.

Going ahead from 1902 to 1943, we find something of the same attitude in a much more serious *Canadian Art* article by Philip Surrey (then photo-editor of the *Montreal Standard* and also a painter), entitled "Silk Screen Prints Enlist". This article is a criticism of the subject matter of the famous silk-screen prints done by such artists as J. W. G. Macdonald, A. Y. Jackson, Thoreau Macdonald, Lawren Harris, and Arthur Lismer, and sent overseas to the Canadian troops. Surrey maintained that:

Nobody thought enough about the soldiers who were going to look at these pictures. . . . A Raphael Madonna, Botticelli's "Primavera", Vermeer's "Head of a Young Girl"; Degas' ballet dancers or "The Millinery Shop" — all of these, though they have no direct relation to his own background, would have more meaning to a young soldier far from home than stark and stormy scenery.⁵

He regretted there were no paintings of sports, offices, factories, homelife, tea-parties or logging camps, no "pretty girls".

We have tea-parties, night-clubs, logging camps, concerts, regattas, beaches, burlesque-houses, movies, churches, coal-mines, rail-roads, ships. None of these were used.

Presumably all the above would depict Canadians back home smiling as they went about their work and play. The romance and gaiety of Canada's coal-mines and burlesque-houses! That the "stark and stormy scenery" might have been more appropriate does not seem to occur to the critic. And he makes no attempt actually to assess the artists' work as art, rather than as propaganda or therapy.

Yet a genuine criticism of the extensive use of landscape in Canadian art had been made by André Bieler in a *Canadian Art* article of the year before (1942), "On the Canadian Group of Painters".

By crowding the walls of our galleries with pictures showing only the untainted beauty of our land, we have left no room for the expression of that deep uneasiness and sorrow that is in our souls. The depression did not hit us as it did the United States. That sudden bringing-down-to-earth so beneficial to our friends across the border did not occur here.

And he goes on to say he does not suggest "that we should all rush out and paint soldiers and sailors. . . . it is more the general undertone of the pictures that counts. . . ."

The theme of the "lack of humanity" in Canadian painting will be taken up again and again as *Canadian Art* moves towards the present day *Arts Canada*; it is a lack of humanity usually blamed on the too powerful influence of the Group of Seven, who seem to be blamed for almost all that is bad in Canadian painting since 1920.

Bieler's article, a review of a show that was more than what Arthur Lismer castigated as "a popular review",² represents an attempt to make a literate assessment of Canadian landscape painting. But it doesn't really come close to *literature* as such, to James' "printed talk". In the many years *Canadian Art*, or *Arts-canada* has been in existence, it has published very little of that. Among the rare examples, one notices Marius Barbeau's 1946 article on Henri Masson:

On another wall of the same room we recognize samples of Masson's earlier work: the poor folk of Gatineau Point whom the flood is dislodging from their precarious holdings at the edge of the river. Furniture, belongings, even cattle are being salvaged in haste and anxiety. In this chaos even the painter has not had time to set his house in order — the pictures rather lack unity. The eye of the observer scatters its attention upon many details, to the detriment of the whole.

Also Barker Fairley's 1948 article, "What is wrong with Canadian Art?", in which he looks at what has happened to Canadian Art since the Group of Seven success:

Canadian art, after taking a great leap forward, came almost to a dead stop and has never to this day recovered the momentum it had then. Like a man, who, having jumped across the rapids, is so astonished to find that he has landed dry on the other side, say in a clump of juniper, that he does not dare move out of this uncomfortable position.

And Northrop Frye, in the Christmas, 1948 volume, talking of the northern landscapes of Lawren Harris:

In the gauntness of the dead trees, the staring inhumanity of the lonely mountain peaks, in the lowering mists along the sky-line and the brooding confusions of colour in the foreground, one can see what Coleridge meant when he spoke of the poet as the tamer of chaos.

Again, in 1964, I found in *Canadian Art* an article which might be classified as art literature: "Emma Lake Artists' Workshop: An Appreciation", by Arthur McKay. After getting in the usual digs at Canadian art criticism and pointing out that "we accept political coercion, economic domination, Coca-Cola and predigested mass communication, while we resist exposure to the more humane and civilized arts from the U.S.A.," he discusses the paradox of the success of the Workshop:

For some reason unknown to anyone, the artists have co-operated to a remarkable degree with the workshop program. I suppose Westerners have always given ear to the visiting evangelist. There are equal measures of Bible-belt conservatism and radical politics, Presbyterian sabbaths and riotous Saturday nights, wheat surpluses, film censorship and flying farmers. It's the same surreal sub-culture that elected for twenty years the most radical and courageous provincial government in the country.

This is witty, literate writing and the article as a whole is full of the kind of "printed talk" that makes for good art criticism. There is no reason why the reader of art criticism, like the reader of literary criticism, should not want to be stimulated, excited, maybe outraged, maybe amused, by what the writer has to say. Otherwise why not simply publish lists of works currently on display or statistical information about artists and their chosen media? Why try to verbalize the non-verbal *unless* one is going to treat art criticism as something more than lists or bibliographies? We don't have to agree with the critic's point of view but we would like to be convinced that he has one and is not afraid to use it! But many of the articles examined showed the writers to be men and women of no imagination, at least in so far as words are concerned. Oddly enough, this was

more true of critics who were not also artists than of the artists themselves. We shall return later to this point.

Most of the recent art criticism, however new and slick the format of *Maritime Art/Canadian Art/Arts Canada* may have become, is as easily passed over as it has always been. And the new, "international" trend of the magazine, a trend which really got under way in the sixties, will no doubt mean more articles by American and European critics and even fewer by the few Canadian critics: more articles which say "the above is a reprint of an article which first appeared in *Art News U.S.* or *Art International*" — or what have you!

Perhaps it is unfair to treat in such a cavalier fashion a magazine which has managed to stay alive so long. But for literary quality *Arts Canada* leaves a great deal to be desired. It is too serious, thinks of itself too much as "one of the necessities of life", like bread, and not as "printed talk". Thus the really best thing, for many years, is an "occasional piece", a letter written by Hugo McPherson on the royal exhibition in the Chapel at Buckingham Palace and printed near the back of the Nov.-Dec. 1962 issue of *Canadian Art*.

Up a short staircase . . . is a mezzanine gallery designed for an intimate view of drawings. Unhappily two corners of the balcony are occupied by illuminated showcases filled with royal jewelry and miniatures of famous and titled people. The visitors crowd about these cases like moths at the world's last two candles, and the *real* glory of the exhibition — long ranks of drawings by Michelangelo, Leonardo and Holbein — can be seen only by those who elbow their way through the queues packed against the wall.

And the worst thing, also tucked away towards the back, is a newsletter by someone who really ought to have known better:

. . . for sheer talent and saucy gusto the twentyish painters of British Columbia, whether they have a yen for Zen, are plumping for pop or opting for op, are streets ahead of any generation in the province.³

This is the ultimate fascination of the magazine — that one suddenly comes across a perceptive essay like Macpherson's (for the public and what they want are as much a part of the "Art Scene" as the artists and as valid an object for critical appraisal), or equally easily a paragraph of the worst kind of journalese in an unotherwise unremarkable and businesslike article by a man whose name is well-known in the Canadian art world and beyond. I recommend the magazine be read from its modest beginnings to its present rather slick and "sophisticated" state, as a modestly interesting historical document containing a few words of genuine worth and a great deal of banal (if usually harmless) verbal rubbish.

BUT WHAT OF BOOKS? If the one Canadian art magazine cannot truly be said to contain more than the occasional essay, article or review of literary merit, are there not some inspired books of criticism by Canadians, something by a Canadian Henry Adams, or a John Ruskin or even a Henry James? Certainly there are several authoritative books which are recognized as such — *The Fine Arts in Canada* by Newton McTavish, *Canadian Art* by William Colgate, and *A Short History of Canadian Art* by Graham McInness. There are, as well, many studies of individual artists such as Blodwen Davies' 1935 study of Tom Thomson or John McLeish's *September Gale: A Study of Arthur Lismer and the Group of Seven*. There is J. Russell Harper's monumental volume, *Painting in Canada* and a very curious book called *Great Canadian Painting: A Century of Art*. With the exception of the book on Tom Thomson and the book on Arthur Lismer, these are mainly histories, and they are important for their comprehensiveness rather than for their literary qualities. This is especially so of the first three books I mentioned. Even Harper's book, which is written with intelligence as well as knowledge, has only occasional flashes of brilliance (he can be ironic when he wants to) such as his comment on the local reaction to Emily Carr:

Long delayed local appreciation of her one-man shows in Vancouver and Victoria was some compensation for the former days when the ladies of Victoria at their annual exhibitions had hidden her paintings on the backs of screens so that they wouldn't disgrace the pretty flower studies.

Or on the late 19th century vogue for a Parisian "Art Education":

After drawing and painting for long hours they [foreign art students in Paris] had an occasional momentary art criticism from celebrated painters of the world's art capital. They advertised their prowess when they returned home, boasting they had been instructed by various famous artists, and were respectfully stared at by less fortunate fellow professionals who had only managed to receive a provincial training.

But Harper is best when he quotes from the artists themselves, and *Painting in Canada* has probably gathered together more "quotable quotes", more flashes of insight into Canadian art, artists and gallery-going public than any other book now available. Thus, Varley, in a letter to Lismer about the battlefields of World War Two:

You follow up a plank road and then cut off over festering ground, walking on the tips of shell holes which are filled with dark unholy water. You pass over swamps on rotting duck boards, past bleached bones of horses with their harness still on, past isolated crude crosses sticking up from the filth, and the stink of decay is flung all over.

Morrice on Cézanne:

Fine work, almost criminally fine. I once disliked some of his pictures but now I like them all. His is the savage work that one would expect to come from Americans — but it is always France that produces anything emphatic in art.

The acid remarks of Cruikshank in the 1890's:

Canadians won't look at anything small, and anything like crisp, constructive drawing makes them uneasy. But I have decided to do what I know, without being influenced by the opinion of a lot of farmers who can hardly be trusted to go to bed without attempting to blow out the gas.

Or a letter from Douglas Brymner to his son William:

... make one of the best paintings of, say, a girl, and simply call it *a girl*, nobody, a few at best, would care about it. But call it *Mignon Aspiring* or *Esmerelda*, a much worse work than *a girl* would sell. Some little domestic genre pieces, or some touch of humour, with a taking title, or something like *Enoch Arden Watching his Wife*, anything that people can fix a story on. . . .

It is obvious that Mr. Harper knows a well-turned phrase when he sees one and *Painting in Canada* is worth reading for this reason alone. The whole complex and everchanging "art scene" comes alive through Harper's judicious use of such quotations as those above.

Equally worth reading, but for different reasons, is *Great Canadian Painting*, brought out by McClelland and Stewart in 1966. Here we have art history and art criticism as camp literature. The tone of the book is very folksy and often facetious, and it is difficult to take the verbal part of the book seriously. Of Tom Hodgson:

His best paintings have a swashbuckling vitality. This is no more than poetic justice. Hodgson was twice, in 1952 and 1956, an Olympic paddler for Canada.

Of Dennis Burton:

as a boy he had only one contact with art magazines. They were supplemented

once a year by the Eaton's and Simpsons' catalogues. This last fact may do more to account for his later love of pictorialized underwear than all his own explanations.

Of Lawren Harris:

He was a grandson of one of the founders of Massey-Harris Ltd. and *ploughed back* [my italics] the profits from a long line of farm tools into helping painters like A. Y. Jackson get started.

And so on and so on and so on. The editors boast that "there are 106 paintings reproduced here in colour, many more than have been gathered in a single book before". One has no quarrel with this statement. It's a pity the text doesn't live up to such a "grand design". And the comments, although often amusing, are an insult to the painters whose work was reproduced. So far as I can determine this book is an example of Canadian art criticism at its "literary worst".

IS THERE, then, any art criticism here in Canada which could qualify as literature? Yes — and no. Emily Carr's journals and her autobiography *Growing Pains*, are probably the most outstanding literary works to do with art and the artistic process. And because her autobiography traces her formative years, first at Art School in California, then in Europe, and then her struggles with the "cultured" indifference of the West Coast art circles, a great deal of art criticism, in the broadest sense, is included in this book. Take, for example, her comments on European reaction to the Canadian West:

Artists from the Old World said our West was crude, unpaintable. Its bigness angered, its vastness and wild spaces terrified them. Browsing cows, hooves well sunk in the grass (hooves were hard to draw!), placid streams with an artistic wriggle meandering through pastoral landscape — that was the Old World idea of a picture. Should they feel violent, the artists made blood-red sunsets, disciplined by a smear of haze. They would as soon have thought of making pictures of their own insides as of the depths of our forests.

And on the distortion of some of the then "New Art" of Paris:

Indians distorted both human and animal forms — but they distorted with meaning, for emphasis, and with great sincerity. Here I felt distortion was often used for design or in an effort to shock rather than convince. Our Indians get down to stark reality.

She was a fierce woman and sometimes a bitter woman and she had a terrific sense of drama. It is not necessary here to dwell on the reasons for the popularity of *Klee Wyck*, *Growing Pains*, *The Book of Small, Hundreds and Thousands*. These are literature under the special genre-title of autobiography, and they are autobiography at its best. But *Growing Pains* and the journals are also full of intense, original perceptions concerning the artistic process and art in general as well as an account of her own particular triumphs and despairs. Thus they can (and should) be considered in any discussion of Canadian art criticism. Here literature and criticism meet, with the happiest possible results.

The same is true of A. Y. Jackson's *A Painter's Country*. Maybe it is because both Jackson and Emily Carr are "characters" that this is so. In spite of his famous association with the *Group of Seven* and his seeming gregariousness Jackson has always been somewhat independent (not "isolated" like Emily Carr, but "independent", which she also was). And, like Emily, unafraid to speak his mind. His autobiographical facts are very different from hers; but *A Painter's Country*, as well as being excellent reading, is also full of the same critical insights as exist in *Growing Pains*, and stated with the same originality and sometimes in the same ironic tone:

The most popular picture I ever painted was done in Quebec. Known as "The Red Barn", it is owned by William Watson, the art dealer in Montreal. Not very long after it was painted, the University of Saskatchewan wanted to purchase a couple of paintings and asked Dr. McCallum to choose them. He sent them one by J. W. Beatty and my "Red Barn." They bought the Beatty canvas; the "Red Barn" was returned so quickly it could hardly have been taken out of the case. Later the Tate Gallery asked to buy it, and our government wanted to present it to Princess Elizabeth when she was in Canada. Various other people have tried to purchase it but the owner will not part with it.

In a speech on the departure of Arthur Lismer for Africa, Jackson wrote:

The first artist who came to Canada noticed a kind of instinctive antagonism. He was a French portrait painter, who, making a drawing of an Indian in profile, was nearly scalped by the indignant sitter for making him only half a man. Criticism is more enlightened today, but not much.

And indeed it would seem that the only enlightened critics, or the only critics capable of expressing themselves in a perceptive, sensitive, *original* way, are the artists. Perhaps this is only true (if it is true) in a country like Canada where until very recently the Artist belonged to such a minority; and such a minority

in such a vast majority of hills and fields and lakes and space that he was able to observe his fellows from a kind of distance that would not be possible in Europe, say, or even in Eastern America.

Perhaps professional criticism, other than by artists, is a thing which develops slowly — particularly in the visual arts, which comes to the frontiers of literature like electricity and mains water, only after a community of interest has securely been established. At the moment there seem to be just isolated gleams of light, not real “illumination”.

Yet it may come. Jack Shadbolt, combining the roles of Art Historian, Artist and Art Critic all in one, has attempted to gather into one place a book unique I think, in Canada, *In Search of Form* — Shadbolt on Shadbolt. If it is not “printed talk” exactly (the Artist tends to lecture, not to “talk”), it is definitely a step in the right direction. Like *Growing Pains* and *A Painter's Country*, this is a remembrance of things past, but here the memories are concerned *solely* with the painter's own artistic development. What we know about him as a person is incidental, and we have no idea of what he said to anyone or anyone said to him. He presents us with the drawing or painting and then analyzes it, reminisces about it, attempts to fit it in to his general development as an artist. Sometimes he indulges in a formality of language bordering on Jargon:

[the reader] will see that I have had a recurrent pattern of going periodically in one direction toward the cosmic flux of all nature only to switch over for a period to an architectonically designed structure.

Sometimes he is too lyrical, too much the romantic (“I am nature. Nature is *me*”); sometimes too self-consciously literary in his explanations:

the starkness of the black and white statement stirred my Grecian memories where often the chalk-white piers with their white boats stood out so dazzlingly against the dark blue of the water.

He is fond of words like “lyric”, “symbiosis”, flux”.

But nevertheless here is a man who is attempting a whole book of art criticism — not really history in the J. Russell Harper sense, not really autobiography in the A. Y. Jackson sense, not either the quick, slick criticism of *Arts Canada*. That the painter he writes about is himself is probably not a good thing here. *In Search of Form* reaches no literary heights and may prove boring to those not deeply committed to an interest in individual aesthetic development. But it is the only “real” book of art criticism I came across. It is not the beginning of a literary

genre but it might be the beginning of a whole series of longer critical works on Art. Meanwhile Art Criticism in Canada may remain the last of the (literary) new frontiers.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts* by Henry James. Selected and edited with an introduction by John L. Sweeney.
- ² "It is quite easy to write a popular review (of the current RCA annual exhibition in this case). They are already appearing in the press. 'A portrait of Dr. So and So (with his history) shown by the eminent academician with his usual etc. etc. . . .'" ("The 64th Annual Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy," *Maritime Art*, Dec.-Jan. 1943-44).
- ³ Tony Emery, "Letter from the West Coast," *Canadian Art*, March-April 1965.

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