

“Stretching Up, Longing for Something Beyond What [She] Sees”: Belief, Metonymy, and Emily Carr’s Northwest Landscapes

Robert Thacker
St. Lawrence University

“Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had.” (Willa Cather, *The Professor’s House* 55)

1. PRELIMINARY: EMILY CARR, SUBJECT AND OBJECT

Among Canadian artists, Emily Carr (1871–1945) most completely embodies a “spirituality of western place” that whether traced through her paintings of Northwest Coast landscapes, forests, Native villages, and totems, or through her extended writings that gloss those images reveals a person ever engaged in spiritual quest. In 1933, during her most productive period as a painter, Carr wrote the following passage in her journal:

Once I heard it stated and now I believe it to be true that there is no true art without religion. The artist himself may not think he is religious but if he is sincere his sincerity in itself is religion. If something other than the material did not speak to him, and if he did not have faith in that something and also himself, he would not try to express it. Every artist I meet these days seems to me



Fig. 1: Emily Carr, *Big Raven*, 1931, oil on canvas, Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust VAG 42.3.11

to leak out the fact that somewhere inside him he is groping religiously for something, some in one way, some in another, tip-toeing, stretching up, longing for something beyond what he sees or can reach. (683)

For Carr herself, such “tip-toeing,” such “stretching up,” such “longing” was ever directed toward the landscapes, as she found them, of her native British Columbia coast: seemingly overgrown forests, always threatening to overwhelm, replete with the totemic presences left by and still lived among by Northwest Coast Natives. As an artist, Carr produced hundreds of images from her tip-toeings, landscape scenes that, collectively, have taken on iconographic dimensions among Canadians (see, for example, Fig. 1, *Big Raven* [1931]). They led Doris Shadbolt, the leading authority on Carr the painter, to write in 1979 (with perhaps forgivable hyperbole) that

Carr is in the strongest sense regional. In one sense those forests, the carving in their settings, giant trees, sea and beaches did not exist until she painted them. She gave form to a Pacific mythos, a form so carefully distilled in her imagination that even though we never visit the West Coast, we know it. (*Art* 195-96)

And along with these powerful, affecting images, Carr also left a body of writing: six books, a journal (both in manuscript and in an uncertainly edited form), and hundreds of letters. The published material has been called autobiography, fiction, and life-writing, but there is little doubt of Susanna Egan's recent assertion that Carr's “writing in the end is about how to free herself of her own limitations, her own failures of receptivity, and to identify both how and what she wanted to paint” (173). Thus the problem posed by Emily Carr, subject: What to make of a provincial eccentric from colonial Victoria who produced a succession of images of power and effect, an artist who, outwardly, displayed almost none of the characteristic attributes of artist as a type? This question has been the nub of what might be called the Carr problematic.

It is still. Stephanie Kirkwood Walker has recently written that “Few women artists and few Canadians have received as much

biographical attention as Emily Carr.” Walker’s *This Woman in Particular* (1996) is a metanalysis that tries to define the “*role of Emily Carr in cultural knowledge*,” and comprehensively details the myriad biographical constructions of Carr that have appeared through the early 1990s (13, 14; italics in original).¹ Positioning herself, as this suggests, as a scholar primarily concerned with the constructions of Carr—as artistic genius, feminist *manqué*, nationalist icon, woman of her (or our) time—Walker probes the numerous Emily Carrs that have been offered, recognizing that “she splinters into a gathering of versions of herself” (19). Carr does so, Susan Crean has maintained, partly because of the “‘discomfort’” of art experts “with Carr and her genius”; the matter comes down, Crean writes, to a biographical question: “‘How could that batty old baglady who lived on the fringes of late Victorian Victoria, who was well past menopause and probably still a virgin, be credited with such a vision [of genius]?’” (128).

How, indeed? But Carr represents just that question, signifying a life lived in the pursuit of the spiritual essences she felt in her Northwest Coast forests—through painting, mostly, but also tantalizingly through the books she published toward the end of her life and, once she was gone, through the other words she left behind, both posthumously pub-

¹In many ways, Carr’s image comes down to a statement made by William Closson James in the foreword to Walker’s book, where James asks “Who could not be fascinated with the life of Emily Carr?” (x). That has proved to be a central question of Carr’s reputation. Walker makes a compelling case that Carr as a Canadian icon may be quite effectively compared with the mystic Métis leader Louis Riel or Canada’s longest-serving prime minister (and singular eccentric) William Lyon Mackenzie King. More than with them, though, she seems in a league with Sitting Bull, Billy the Kid, or George Armstrong Custer—her mystique resided in her person while she was alive and has continued, more alive since her death, to appeal. Mythic in a way very different from such American figures, yet displaying the same malleability each of them has shown, she has been a vessel into which meaning has been poured—Canadian meaning. As the multiple versions of Carr continue to appear and continue to appeal, she remains a figure sought, alive yet still elusive. For a brief and readable introduction to Carr, see Newlands, and for an overview of the versions of Carr’s biography Walker details, see

lished and made available in archives. Through-out, Carr's imaginative quest, what she characterized as a "tip-toeing," a "stretching up," was essentially a spiritual one, the definition of which even yet eludes critics, despite the frequent and extended analysis Carr, her painting, and her writing have received.

2. SHAPING CARR'S SPIRITUAL QUEST: AN EXAMPLE

To compound this, the exact nature of Carr's spirituality is itself problematic, as Walker recognizes: "She was not a systematic thinker. Emily Carr could as easily imagine herself as a channel to God as she could insist on the priority of form" (16). What this has meant, as Walker details amid the myriad "Emily Carrs" constructed by scholars, is that the Carr who emerges from any critique depends on the values and emphasis brought to that analysis. Like Walt Whitman, one of her great enthusiasms, Carr is well able to contain contradictions—she too contains multitudes. A good example of this process is Roxanne Rimstead's 1991 essay on the regionalism of Carr's first book, *Klee Wyck* (1941). Rimstead argues that Carr, "as an isolated woman painter, and then much later as a writer without an explicitly feminist agenda," found "a sense of community and belonging . . . outside of her culture in a new symbolic order" (31). That is, Carr found what she sought by identifying with the physical world she found around her in the forests of British Columbia. "Oh, I wanted my West!" she writes in her posthumously published autobiography, *Growing Pains* (1946), of her time in London where she was studying art (372). Rimstead continues, "She developed a love of region and sense of bonding by reaching into a space beyond the exclusionist reality of patriarchy—into nature and native civilization, and her own female subjectivity" (31). That region, of course, was as much "Cascadia"—the region defined by the ecosystem of the Northwest Coast—as it was British Columbia. As she painted it and, moreover, used her writing to define what she sought in her paintings, as Rimstead asserts, Carr was more concerned with capturing her subjective and personal response to her place, to get at what she herself found in her landscapes. Thus as another commentator writes, "Carr

draws our attention to what is buried beneath or hidden within”; she “only vaguely gestures toward a definitive interpretation” (Elderkin 22).

Meaning resides in Carr in the experience of the texts, in their envelopment, one that surrounds like a forest. To illustrate, take *Klee Wyck*, for which she won the Governor-General’s Award for nonfiction. Even with the increased attention the writing has received, Carr the writer has remained something of an anomaly—embedded within her primary role as painter and (more recently) as biographical subject, her writing has illuminated these other issues but has remained subordinate to them. This is not to suggest that Carr’s writing has not attracted critical scrutiny; it has from the outset and continues to do so. Indeed, the Carr bibliography reflects regular and ongoing interest. Nonetheless, and doubtless owing in part to generic singularity—what Rimstead sees as its being disparaged as “naive autobiography” (29)—Carr the writer has achieved only a qualified presence among Canadian writers in English. Noting how that book has usually been seen, Rimstead uses *Klee Wyck* to assert “the power of this text to challenge dominant values” (29). She begins by disputing the underlying view of Carr the writer which has gained prominence: “that Carr’s deceptively simple style is naive and artless—‘natural’” (29).

Yet, as we attempt to situate Carr, a key problem remains in such analyses as Rimstead’s, a problem with elaboration. It is illustrated in the following passage:

By choosing to articulate the story of many, the marginal ones, over the usually told story of the dominant, Carr challenged white male dominance while she affirmed feminist, cross-cultural, and naturalist values. In order to register this challenge, however, and to acknowledge the stylistic adaptations Carr used to voice it, readers must consent to read her prose as a product of her convictions rather than as mere landscape. For example, Carr’s intense love for the natural features of the west coast region has given nature its own voice in her narrative. Yet this naturalist voice, which I hear as the most important in the work, is generally rushed over, abstracted,

or sentimentalized in critical discussions. There are no characters in *Klee Wyck* more memorable than the forest and the native art carved from it. (32)

Ultimately, Rimstead argues, “‘Wilderness,’ in this explanation of region, expands beyond the function of setting; it becomes frame, spiritual character, and voice” (32). This reading is generally compelling, but I find myself wondering what “mere landscape” is—as if it can be abstracted from a writer’s use of it. Equally, how has Carr’s subjective challenge to “white male dominance” supplanted the autobiographical? I do not think it has, nor can I accept the notion that nature has “its own voice” in Carr’s narrative, whether *Klee Wyck* or any of the other books she published. Rather, by focusing upon her own self as both autobiographer and biographer in her writings, Carr created personae—for clearly, as Walker and others have argued, there is more than one Emily Carr—who bear the relation to her Vancouver Island and coastal mainland place that Rimstead sees. Doing so, Carr engaged in a process which, at its core, had both self-definition and a desire to articulate—in paint and through words—the spirit she felt in the Northwest woods. Wilderness does do what Rimstead says it does in Carr’s work, and the voice Carr hears in the woods does speak to readers as Rimstead says it does, for at bottom it is Carr’s spiritual quest that is paramount; in *Klee Wyck*, as in her other volumes, Carr both explains herself and—through distancing—creates for herself a version of herself which is borne of, and symbiotically linked to, the natural world which so enveloped her and from which she drew inspiration.

This matter has been put another way by Pam Houston, when writing of metonymic meaning created by the narrator and the protagonist in Alice Munro’s story “Meneseteung”: “Does the landscape, then, exist separately from the way these women see it?” And neither woman can answer. The two women have momentarily become one voice, bound together by the metonymic qualities of language, and by the inability of metaphor to speak to them” (89). It is metonymy, of course, that Shadbolt finds in Carr’s images when she writes (in the passage quoted earlier) that Carr’s landscapes “did not exist until she



Fig. 2: Emily Carr, *The Little Pine*, 1931, oil on canvas, Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust VAG 42.3.14

painted them." That is, Carr's landscapes do not exist separately from Carr's sense of them and from Carr's ability to articulate that sense.

3. THE GOD QUALITY IN ME, THE GOD QUALITY IN THE FOREST

Arguably, Maria Tippett remains Carr's leading biographer—her early *Emily Carr: A Biography* (1979) has not really been displaced, despite subsequent full-length studies by Paula Blanchard and by Shadbolt. Tippett has remained active in Carr studies, and recently she reasserted her "belief that the driving force in Carr's life was her concern with her inner spiritual condition" (Review 292). In 1991 Tippett expounded this same point:

From 1933 to 1936, between the ages of sixty-two and sixty-five, Emily came to terms with God, the forest, with her enforced landlady chores, even with her friends and sisters. As a result she created some of her most innovative paintings. Working in the oil-on-paper medium she developed a visual vocabulary which sorted out the chaos of the forest growth and gave the landscape an underlying structure and order. Using the full sweep of her arm she struck out[,] rendering the foliage in S-curves, chevrons, and interlocking rings. Through a series of short vertical strokes she rushed her viewer from the foreground to the centre of the picture. By alternating the curves of the trees she created a surging rhythm. And in order to link all of these things in one sweeping movement thereby achieving the unity about which [another critic] Mary Cecil Allen had written, she integrated each brush stroke. This infused the sky, the trees, and the earth with an energizing force that expressed one thing: God in all. ("Art" 96)

Visually, Tippett is speaking of a painting like *The Little Pine* (1931) (Fig. 2). Carr began as a postimpressionist, taking both vision and technique from Europe, but she ended her active career as a painter offering images that are at once singular, demanding, and revealing. During the 1930s, Carr's most fertile period, such paintings as *Forest, British*

Columbia (c. 1931–32), *Red Tree* (c. 1938), or *Above the Trees* (1939) replicate the effects of *The Little Pine*.²

But such a thumbnail sketch does not really capture Carr's singularity: hers was a life devoted to an aesthetic search, ever seeking the secrets held by the world spread before her; she pinpoints her search in her journal on June 17, 1932:

I am always asking myself the question, What is it you are struggling for? What is that vital thing the woods contain, possess, that you want? Why do you go back and back to the woods unsatisfied, longing to express something that is there and not able to find it? This I know, I shall not find it until it comes out of my inner self, until the God quality in me is in tune with the God in it. (674)

This seeking had its beginnings in a childhood of most conventional Protestant religiosity. Her English-born father, Richard Carr, saw to it that his family followed all the forms equivalent to his status as a leading figure in late-Victorian Victoria. "Sunday," a wry and humorous sketch included in Carr's second book, *The Book of Small* (1942), catches that ritual from the detached point-of-view of Small-Emily, the youngest child:

Family prayers were uppish with big words on Sunday—reverend awe-ful words that only God and Father understood.

No work was done in the Carr house on Sunday. Everything had been polished frightfully on Saturday and all Sunday's food cooked too. On Sunday morning Bong [the Chinese houseboy] milked the cow and went away from breakfast until evening milking-time. Beds were made, the dinner-table set, and then we got into our very starchiest and most uncomfortable clothes for church. (91)

²While almost any overview of Canadian art will include Carr, the two volumes by Shadbolt offer the most thorough overviews; though brief, New-

While ironic, "Sunday" makes Richard Carr's religious values quite clear, and Emily Carr's critique of them (and him) is devastating—the family merely followed the forms of religious practice, she asserts, as a means of demonstrating Richard Carr's prominence in the community along with the patriarchal sway he held over his children.³

Richard Carr died in 1888, when Emily was sixteen, following his wife who had predeceased him in 1886. Left under the care of her older sister, Edith, with whom she was not compatible, Carr spent a difficult few years before she began her formal art studies at the California School of Art and Design, San Francisco (1891–93). These studies, punctuated by periods of teaching art in Victoria and Vancouver, were followed by others in London (1899–1904) and France (1910–11). Taken together, they gave Carr significant exposure to and appreciation of both formal technique and contemporary trends in painting (see Thom).

More important, after she returned from San Francisco, Carr began venturing away from Victoria into the coastal forests of British Columbia. In 1941, when she published *Klee Wyck*, the seventy-year-old Carr memorialized her first visit to Ucluelet, a Native village on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Doing so, Carr also memorialized the young person she was then—"Klee Wyck," the name the Natives gave her, means "laughing one"—and she recreates herself as an innocent, a naif: "Everything," she writes of Ucluelet in her first paragraph, "was big and cold and strange to me, a fifteen year-old school girl" (23). This moment, which occurred in 1899 when Carr was twenty-eight, not fifteen, may well be seen as Carr's rendering of the moment of her real birth—it was then that, previous forays notwithstanding, she first confronted the massed bulk of the British Columbia wilderness and, through the name given

³One of the key details of Carr's biography is her relationship with her father; as a child, and as the youngest, she was his favorite. Owing to an incident when Emily Carr had reached puberty—probably a too-graphic explanation of the mechanics of human reproduction—"Her love for him turned to hate," as Tippet writes (*Emily* 14). Indicative of the traumatic nature of this incident, Carr did not share the source of this change until a few

her, felt and acknowledged the Native presences there.⁴ It was through this confrontation with her most indicative landscape that Emily Carr, like her almost exact contemporary and parallel student of landscape, Willa Cather, “made herself born.”⁵

While the processes of this confrontation are complex, Carr’s search for spirituality in the Western landscapes she identified with—and considered her own—are central to it. “That is the third time,” she writes in her diary in early 1931,

I have seen pictures in my dreams, a glint of what I am striving to attain. Perhaps some day I shall get things clearer. Every day I long for the woods more, to get away and commune with things. Oh, Spring! I want to go out and feel you and get inspiration. My old things seem dead. I want fresh contacts, more vital searching. (671)

For Carr, this search began in the conventional Protestant religion she was raised in but, as she developed as an artist, became more mystical. Writing in *The Logic of Ecstasy* (1992), Ann Davis, one of the best art historians to examine Carr’s development, has asserted that

Initially, Carr’s search was for God, an other-worldly power, and overlord. Her definition was vague and general. At one point she defined a picture as “a glimpse of God interpreted by the soul.” Her Superior Being had traits comparable with Christian ones

⁴I thank Sarah Dumbrille, one of the students in my 1997 Carr seminar, “Imagining the Northwest Coast: Emily Carr as Painter, Writer, and Icon,” for suggesting that the sketches in *Klee Wyck* are Carr’s memorials to particular places she had visited on the coast.

⁵This is a paraphrase from Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* (1915), where Thea’s piano teacher, Harsanyi, tells her that “‘Every artist makes himself born. It is very much harder than the other time, and longer. Your mother did not bring anything into the world to play piano. That you must bring



Fig. 3: Emily Carr, *Indian Church*, 1929, oil on canvas,
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, AGO #69/118

but did not possess those that would disqualify him from being at the head of any monotheistic religion. (11)⁶

Davis continues to note that while Carr “was exploring the nature of God and the methods of capturing that nature in paint,” she produced *Indian Church* (1929; Fig. 3), a painting that shows “a very simple, white Indian Christian church emerging from an impenetrable wall of verdant forest” (11). In it, Davis maintains, “there is accommodation between nature’s house and God’s house. Neither one entirely overpowers or dominates the other. There is a symbiosis, even if its nature is mysterious, awe-inspiring, almost forbidding” (11).

As she continues her discussion of *Indian Church*, Davis notes that “[f]or a while Lawren Harris owned this painting, being convinced that it was one of Carr’s most demanding” (12). Harris, scion of the Massey-Harris farm implement fortune, was the leading figure in Canada’s nationalist Group of Seven, and much more than its other members he reached out to Carr as a kindred spirit once her work was taken up, during the late 1920s, by Canada’s eastern artistic establishment (see Hill and also Thacker). More than this, Harris was engaged in his own spiritual quest and was particularly attracted to Theosophy. While Carr investigated the philosophy’s possibilities, she ultimately took her own path, saying

I don’t follow all the theosophy formula but the substance is the same as my less complicated beliefs: God in all. Always looking for the face of God, always listening for the voice of God in Nature. Nature is God revealing himself, expressing his wonders and his love, Nature clothed in God’s beauty of holiness. (684)

What these realizations wrought, critics agree, was a different, expansive Carr. Davis writes that Carr’s paintings had from now on “what Doris Shadbolt calls ‘a new integration.’” Davis continues:



Fig. 4: Emily Carr, *Totem and Forest*, 1931, oil on canvas
Vancouver Art Gallery, VAG 42.3.1

In them Carr fused her erstwhile formal interests, her growing awareness of nature, her new oil-on-paper technique, and her Christian philosophy. Now she rejected Harris's "vague" and "vapid" theosophical beliefs, though not some of the concepts, including painterly ones, she had gained along the way. More than even before her work was based on intuition; Shadbolt has defined it tellingly as form following feeling. Yet this feeling . . . is consistently defined in spiritual terms. (15)

Carr's spirituality was manifested, as art historians have maintained, by changes in her technique—the "sweeping movement" Tippet defined in her 1991 essay, for example, or the rendering of foliage in "S-curves, chevrons, and interlocking rings" ("Art" 96)—but selection of subject enters into this too. From her earliest visits to Native villages, Carr depicted totems—but as the evident spirituality in her work increased, their depiction changed from totems in a village scene to much more individuated renderings (Fig. 4, *Totem and Forest* [1931]). Complementing such treatments, Carr also changed her approach to landscape. In January of 1936 she wrote in her journal:

Over and over one must ask oneself the question, "What do I want to express? What is the thought behind the saying? What is my ideal, what is my objective? What? Why? Why? What?" The subject means little. The arrangement, the design, colour, shape, depth, light, space, mood, movement, balance, not one of these fills the bill. There is something additional, a breath that draws your breath into its breathing, a heartbeat that pounds on yours, a recognition of the oneness of all things. (810)

Carr continues this passage by seeing her own hand in terms of its connection to all life. Such writing in the diary, as Davis and other commentators have shown, glosses the images Carr produced at about this same time. Davis, for example, finds confirmation between this diary passage and *Edge of the Forest* (c. 1935; Fig. 5); she holds that in this image

Carr depicts the 'oneness of things' in a way that includes that



Fig. 5: Emily Carr, *Edge of the Forest*, 1935, oil on canvas
McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario

newer, wider, space-filled vision that she dreamed in 1927. She also introduced a new component of that vision: a poignant combination of verdant mountain and line of uncut trees, the first tree of which was animated by a vibrating aura, dynamically uniting the now-active sky with the powerful growth below. (16)

In that “powerful growth below,” the Northwest Coast forests of her native Vancouver Island, Carr found metonymical meaning as she pursued through a lifetime a single-minded “more vital” search. And while the biographical Carr—whether made iconic or disparaged—continues to attract analysts, there is little doubt that Carr’s vision of her place is “rooted in” what W. H. Auden once defined as “imaginative awe” (60). Faced with “her West,” driven by the awe she felt, Carr sought to render its inchoate immanences, and, in so doing, she transformed the Northwest Coast forests into powerful, discerning images and “gave form,” as Shadbolt asserted, “to a Pacific mythos” (“Art” 195–96). And those images, affecting and imaginatively challenging, are buttressed and elaborated by Carr’s writing, although they certainly are not equaled by it. That writing, while not merely as one art critic would have it, “pious twaddle on the subject of God or ‘nature’” (Mays C11), is much more a mapping of Carr’s imaginative search as a person and especially as a painter. But this is because the desire of critics to differentiate the various Carrs—painter, writer, biographical subject—collapses in any single rendering. Hers was a lifelong imaginative, spiritual, and aesthetic struggle, a groping for something beyond reach, and the Northwest Coast forest—filled with choking growth, abandoned totems, and singular trees—was the site of Carr’s metonymic spirituality. Throughout the painting, the writing, the life—all of a piece—we can yet see Emily Carr, “tip-toeing, stretching up,” seeking God in all.

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