

Through the Leaves to the Trunk: Emily Carr's Invention of Nature

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RÉSUMÉ

Emily Carr (1871–1945), a été l'une des premières artistes d'importance nationale à émerger de la Côte Ouest. Avec le Groupe des Sept, elle est devenue une figure majeure de l'art moderne canadien du vingtième siècle. Elle passa une grande partie de sa vie à Victoria où elle vivait et où elle travaillait, et où elle dut se battre pour être acceptée par la critique. Elle est surtout connue pour son œuvre qui recense les totems des peuples des Premières Nations de la province de Colombie Britannique, et pour ses paysages de forêts, peints à l'huile et décrits dans Klee Wyck (1941, "The Laughing Woman" ["La femme qui rit"], nom que les autochtones de la côte ouest lui donnent en tant que jeune femme intrépide. Dans mon article, en lisant certains de ses tableaux à la lumière de ses écrits, j'essaierai de démontrer comment, derrière les détails microscopiques, dignes d'une naturaliste amateur, ses œuvres sont dominées par des plaisanteries rococo sublimes, par des forces inconnues, des provocations audacieuses et de soudains traits d'intuition, qui révèlent, au-delà de la "peinture de genre," le fonctionnement d'un esprit vif, éveillé, toujours en activité, et un désir de connaissance qui, à travers sa perception de la forêt, devient plus métaphysique que physique.

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THIS is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
 Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
 Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,
 Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline*¹

The mighty link between art and land is as ancient as humanity. The first "artistic" sketches left by our ancestors depict natural subjects, such as the stylized animals in the cave paintings of Chauvet, Altamira or Lascaux. The scenes represented on the walls of those "caves of forgotten dreams" imitate and, at the same time, invent nature. The "creative" aspect and "narrative" potential of archaic, manufactured articles are especially noticeable in the hybrid figures from the period of the so-called "*Upper Paleolithic Revolution*," that unite anthropomorphic and theriomorphic characters, and testify to an advanced degree in cognitive development.

The representation of nature has brought together mimesis and invention, the human and the animal from time immemorial, involving opposite affects, which are implicated with one another: fear and dominion, veneration and control.

The same elements and the same tensions have continued to this day to sediment and to deposit in the relationship between man and land, finding in various forms of art the ideal ground for their representation.

In this essay, I would like to point out the exemplary dimension of Emily Carr's artistic work: it doesn't represent a part of the literary history of the landscape, neither does it provide an outlook on nature. In her works, both in prose and in painting, she gives an account of the relationships that unite individuals and the landscape in which they live. The land is a part of this system of relationships, but it is often modified by the work of men and, in Emily Carr's case, it is this relationality that constitutes her representation of Canadian landscape.

If we look at her in the famous daguerreotype portrait² that shows her

¹ Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry, *Evangeline. A Tale of Acadie*, 1893.

² The Studio Portrait of Carr and her sister (Clockwise from the left: Lizzie, Edith, Clara Emily and Alice. Photograph by Skele Lowe, c. 1895) can be seen on this web site: search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/emily-carr-lower-right-and-her-sisters-

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as a seventeen-year-old girl, together with her four sisters, it is impossible to recognise her; it's not her, Emily Carr. Nothing in her real image confirms the myths of imagination: not the slim body in the austere grey dress, or the dark bandeaux pulled out flat over her pale, frightened face, or the swollen lips, tortured by the lengthy torments of the pose. The modest girl, with her insignificant tenderness—"Father's grim and stern religion operated through the Presbyterian church and Mother's gentle religion through the Anglican"³—evokes ideas of cloisters and home-made jam, of the province and lilies of the valley, rather than Genius. And the reaction is almost one of indignation, at the thought that photography, an art that is as recent, pedantic and brutal as many others, should dare to contend with Art for the privilege of Truth.

The prejudice is so strong that the spectator has an irresistible impulse to search for confirmation in other indications, in signs that have been overlooked: the restlessness of the beautiful hands, the white lace shawl displayed with an ostentatious coyness over the impeccable dress: above all, the eyes: enormous and green, like those of a swallow caught in a snare, myopic and visionary, expressing all the suffering and the defiance of intelligence, in the face that shrinks from revealing itself. In the end—as often happens in life—we come to a compromise with reality: Emily, we are convinced, was, and at the same time was not, this woman.

And, in fact, it is on this opposition—Surface and Being, Appearance and Truth—that Emily built up her universe of imagination and morals, the paradox that helped her to live. While she was still very young, she chose to believe that privation meant wealth, that shadow was light, that defeat was a triumph, and that humility was a sign of Election: the ethos of the Beatitudes of the Gospel, combined with a touch of Cinderella, thus creating an irresistible private mythology—the parable of the humble gentian that aspires in vain to become a rose, and one fine day, blossoms and sets the world on fire with its beauty.

We do not know whether, at the basis of Emily Carr's *Amor Fati*, there was more imagination, or perhaps more love: what she did was to transform destiny into a choice, she lived, wrote, and painted with the implacable seriousness and the total engagement of a person who is sure that the real and the ideal coincide, that the Absolute passes through the relative: her

clockwise-from-emily-small-alice-middle-lizzie-big-edith-elder-and-clara-mrs-johnny-nicholles

³ Gowers, Ruth, *Emily Carr*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 31.

concrete daily experience with the Indians and their culture provided her with a great opportunity of access.

It is already possible to see, in her early sketches (ca. 1890), in her letters, and in the pages of her Diaries compiled in those years, equally as rich in expressive vitality as her paintings, the certainty that beyond the domestic horizon, and the limited circle of her house and garden, beside her, at Beacon Hill Park, there is enough beauty and dignity to contain *in nuce* the whole universe, with all its breadth and its contrasts, with all that rich vegetation, the cliffs, the beaches and the imposing panorama of the American Olympic Mountains.

Her juvenile works are tiny masterpieces of descriptive precision and impressionistic subtlety: the scenes of nature, the cycle of the seasons, the changing of light, all find in Emily Carr an exceptionally attentive observer and interpreter. Witty, innocent, and graceful—but at the same time ironic, humorous, sophisticated and ever-changing—Emily reveals, from her early steps in the world of art, an instinctive passion for life and an infallible flair for the rhythms and the language of representation.

Behind the microscopic detail, worthy of an amateur naturalist, her painting and her writing are pervaded by sumptuous rococo witticisms, by unknown forces, bold provocations and sudden glimpses of intuition, which reveal, beyond the "genre painting," the workings of a lively, restless, sharp mind, and a desire for knowledge that is more metaphysical than physical.

Her authoritarian father, Richard, and his Presbyterian family, described with subtle humour in *The Book of Small*⁴ and in the first few chapters of Emily's autobiography,⁵ preach that Nature is Harmony, the correspondence of Laws, the triumph of Order and the Spirit, and that religion is to be inflexibly put into practice. Emily, who feels conflicting emotions for her father, or rather, has a love-hate relationship with him, to a certain extent believes him, but then she starts flirting with shadows, and courting them with an insistence that is not appropriate for a respectable girl. Her Puritan forefathers would undoubtedly have disapproved of the frequency with which, as a young girl, she used to walk all alone through the

⁴ Carr, Emily, *The Book of Small*, Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1942. Repr.: Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1951, 1966, 1972; Toronto: Irwin, 1986; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004 (intro. by Sarah Ellis); partial repr. as Carr 1951. French trans.: Michelle Tisseyre, Montreal: P. Tisseyre, 1984.

⁵ Carr, Emily, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr*, Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1966. Repr.: Toronto: Irwin, 1986; as *Hundreds and Thousands: The Autobiography of Emily Carr*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006 (intro. by Gerta Moray).

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forests, and the unprecedented familiarity she showed towards bears, crows, wolves, Indians ... From her childhood, Emily showed the promise of a somewhat incongruous flower in the austere garden of Victoria: like a showy orchid that blossoms in a pine-wood, or like the dazzling whiteness of the slender little Indian church, suffocated by the oppressive greenery of the wilderness that she painted in 1925.

Emily Carr travelled widely: her canvases are alive with memories of both the New World and the Old Continent: San Francisco, London, and Paris, in particular. These are, for the most part, recollections and impressions of places and environments which deeply attracted her, but which, however famous they may be for us spectators, did not impinge on, or disturb, her inner world. All these experiences remained external to her, like parts that Emily rehearsed and re-rehearsed, waiting for her debut: at Paris, during the performance, she sat in the front row taking notes, but the sketches that she absent-mindedly scrawled on the sheets of paper reveal her nostalgia for her home in Western Canada.

Her return to her homeland perhaps meant that she was taking up the thread where she had left it, at the furthest point, but it also meant, with hindsight, putting her prior existence to the test: a return to her origins in order to challenge the perfect obscurity or the unimaginable nothingness that precedes the emergence into existence. Whatever her reasons were, the return to the origins took place in the way that it necessarily was bound to, that is to say, through the primitive; and the whole world of consciousness is primitive when first it interrogates itself, or begins to reflect itself; the fascination for the primitive lies in things, the open form denounces a reduction to elemental particles; and the pictorial language, which is displayed in the elementary, crushed, inarticulate structure ... One element of this territory—perhaps its rocky foundation—is the theme of Indian society (fig. 1).



Fig. 1- Emily Carr, *Totem Mother*, Kitwancool, 1928, oil on canvas, 109.5 x 69.0 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.20

The artist's development to maturity was rapid, starting from 1907, her richest, most productive, and most inspired year: her interest soon shifted from the spectacle of nature to the fascinating countryside of Indian civilisation, first in Alaska (1907) and later in remote First Nations villages on Vancouver Island, Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands) and the Skeena and Nass Rivers, where she sketched villagescapes, totem housefronts and canoes. "This is my country. What I want to express is *here* and I loved it."⁶

In her awareness of her artistic and moral mission—"The totems I painted were real art treasures of a passing race"⁷ for this woman called to

⁶ Carr, *Hundreds*, 40.

⁷ Emily Carr, quoted in Stewart, Jay and Macnair, Peter "Reconstructing Emily Carr in Alaska", in *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*, ed. Charles C.

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work for History—Emily revealed an entomologist's precision in her exploration and cataloguing of totems, Indian houses, cemeteries, canoes, Ucluelet, Skedans, Kitwancool, coasts and forests, and people, "Wash-Mary" and "Sophie"—these are all titles of the chapters that make up her *Klee Wyck* collection of stories—the abysses, the lacerations: she records, like a perfect seismograph, every slightest oscillation of the Great Spirit, both in her water-colours and in the tiny notebooks she carried with her: "This saying in words as well as in colour and form gave me a double approach."⁸ The ambition of this modest inhabitant of the province is to circumnavigate the whole range of Indian culture. "Everything was part of everything."⁹ And in the meantime she chooses her brushstrokes with millimetrical precision, combines them with refined alchemy, and paints and repaints with unexhausted obstinacy, experimenting with variants, eluding primary colours, and provoking chromatic and grammatical short-circuits. Such an explosion of imagination, such lucid intelligence on the page, had never been seen since the period of the Metaphysical Poets. The fusion of "thought and sense" is perfect: beneath the elementariness of the forms, Emily thinks and writes in dazzling paradoxes, she loves and paints in impeccable pictorial syllogisms, she translates the most abstract concepts and the most unfathomable emotions into sharp, unforgettable images: despair is "Tree Trunk", death is "The Big Raven" (fig. 2), the loss of happiness is "A Young Tree."

Hill, Johanne Lamoureux and Ian M. Thom, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006; Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006, 27.

⁸ Carr, Emily, *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr*, fwd. by Ira Dilworth. Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946, pp. 264-65. Repr.: Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1965, 1966, 1968, 1971; Toronto: Irwin, 1986; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005 (intro. by Robin Laurence). French trans.: Michelle Tisseyre, Saint-Laurent, Que.: P. Tisseyre, 1994.

⁹ Carr, *Hundreds*, 190.



Fig. 2 - Emily Carr, *Big Raven*, 1931, oil on canvas, 87.0 x 114.0 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.11

Emily is little interested in fame: she considers exhibitions vulgar, like public confessions—and she would never exchange the integrity of her imagination for the applause of others, or of "academics". Her water-colours possess the almost unbearable frankness, cruelty, boldness, and intensity of a person who is talking to herself and to the few friends that she shows them to. The more certain she is that she does not want to be "a painter", the more freedom of imagination and of expression she acquires. She opposes the Truth of metaphor to the impeccable "mathematics" of her bourgeois universe: "A picture equals a movement in space."¹⁰

The oil paintings and portraits that she produces in this period vibrate with a restrained power; other images take the place of the faded daguerreotype portrait that depicts her as a girl: the terrible D'Sonoqua,¹¹ so

¹⁰ Carr, *Hundreds*, 231.

¹¹ Carr describes the encounter in her book *Klee Wyck*: "There we were—D'Sonoqua, the cats and I—the woman who only a few moments ago had forced

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female and yet so savage, and then the vulture, "the Sisteult", the mythical sea-serpent with two heads, the earthquake, "A Rushing Sea of Undergrowth," "Wood Interior."



Fig. 3 - Emily Carr, Zunoqua of the Cat Village, 1931, oil on canvas, 112.2 x 70.1 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.21

herself to come behind the houses in trembling fear of the 'wild woman of the woods'—wild in the sense that forest-creatures are wild—shy, untouchable." (<https://www.aci-iac.ca/emily-carr/biography>).

Behind the tranquil surface of graceful gestures, and the domestic routine made merry by the presence of Ginger Pop, the dog, a Javanese monkey, Woo, and lots of other animals, lurk separation, deception, and the explosive potential that has been hidden for too long.

And so we come to the years of the mythical encounter with the painting of the Group of Seven,¹² the large white dresses, the enormous, extravagant hat, the friendship with Lawren Harris in front of the famous "Above Lake Superior" and the acceptance of theosophy.

But perhaps too much has been said about this. Emily's lexis, which has always been extraordinarily rich, now draws on the most widely varying fields of meaning: science and philosophy, heraldic imagery and, above all, religion. She explodes her painting, interrupting the discourse, and connecting it to the rhythm of breathing, in a silence that resounds with echoes: a long breath vibrating among the leaves of "Cedar" (15). And at the same time, she adapts the harsh Anglo-Saxon monosyllables to the theosophical cadences, bending the vocabulary of mysticism to outbursts that are thoroughly human:

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 ... until my vision is clear enough to see, until I have learned and fully realise my relationship to the Infinite.¹³

Carr's writings reveal a powerful sense of God in nature, but not in some mimsy pre-Raphaelite way. The divine is not in the perfection of a single dewdrop or leaf (there are no individual leaves) but in the cosmic power that gusts through the landscape.

¹² As Lizbeth Goodman and Stephan Regan emphasize, the influence was two way. See "'Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky': Emily Carr's Double Approach to First Nations Canadian Landscapes and Images in Her Paintings and Writing," *Journal of Gender Studies* 7 no. 2 (1998): 157-79.

¹³ *Hundreds and Thousands*, 68.

After a few years of intense, vital transport, the Group of Seven was no longer sufficient for her. The theoretical nature of theosophy was clearly incompatible with her loves (I decline to define them as literary or pictorial), which are equally as eternal, exclusive, rebellious, imperial, and sublime as the impossible, atrociously authentic loves of one of Racine's heroines, or Guido Reni's Dido: the tree with the shape of an eye, or perhaps a mouth, or a navel, which she painted in "Grey," represents her final tribute to the great spiritual debt she owed to Harris.

And then come the years of reading Walt Whitman, the departure from the Indian theme, great renown and her mythical isolation. Which was eccentricity, alienation, Life imitating Art. Rather than shutting herself up in her house, Emily shut the world out, showing a tenacious consistency in her cultivation of her garden, which had now become geometrical, almost cubist. For the next five years, no distraction disturbs her perfect concentration on the Authentic, the intensity sharpened by self-auscultation.

The death of Emily's last sister, Lizzie, inaugurates a series of heart attacks: the first of these provides her with the time and space, on an interior level, to devote herself with renewed attention to her writing, in an attempt to prolong the memory of her travels among the Indians: in one year, she finished the composition of *Klee Wyck*, and she wrote a large part of *The House of All Sorts*.¹⁴ Her last heart attack is fatal. Faced with the experience of pain and death, she refuses to grow, rejecting the easy compromises of logic, departing from the totems, and penetrating, in her paintings, into the forest, its mystery. She clings obstinately to this mystery, interrogating it with an almost blasphemous intensity. The painting that best exemplifies this moment is "Forest, British Columbia" (fig. 4).

¹⁴ Carr, Emily, *The House of All Sorts*. Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1944. Repr.: Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1967, 1971; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004 (intro. by Susan Musgrave); Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2004; "Bobtails" repr. as Carr 1997.



Fig. 4 - Emily Carr, Forest, British Columbia, 1931–32, oil on canvas, 130.0 x 86.8 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.9

The composition and the space recall those of a studio, the narrow passages between the trunks of the old grey and brown trees lead to wings that open out on both sides; large curtains of heavy, sombre foliage float in pompous rhythms, letting a thin ray of grey light pass and penetrate into the obscurity. The light has the task of restoring a sense of expectation, a presage, suffering, and the infinite play of the imagination after death.

The most atrocious and cruel mechanisms of reality—the forest that "just for fun" decapitates the tree in "Strangled by Growth," the cats that drown in the sea of greenery in "Zunoqua: The Cats' Village,"¹⁵ arouse in her

¹⁵ This painting distinguishes Carr from her eastern contemporaries with its vibrant representation of the elimination of First Nations people in British Columbia. Carr's painting does more than record an individual experience. It preserves the moment of

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a dilated, appalled attention. A sense of uneasiness and foreignness in the face of nature now dominates her sallies into the physical universe. Suffering digs down into the recesses of the soul, and the sounding mechanism goes deeper and deeper.

Consequently, the analogical texture of painting appears to be richer and more compact, until its eclipse into obscurity. More and more frequently, thought attempts the unspeakable, condensing in abstract geometries of frozen beauty an emotion which is all the more sensitive, because it is more rarefied, and almost disenchanting.

Emily passed over the long-desired threshold of Knowledge in 1945. The others, "the race that remains on earth", as Emily Dickinson put it, are sorry for her, rather than mourning her passing: they believe she received so little. They do not imagine that for her, the vibrant sovereign of a world of primitive, gigantic shadows, everything was, on the contrary, *too much*.

Her trunk, which was opened five months after her death by her friend Ira Dilworth, revealed more treasures than all Montezuma: her autobiography, *Growing Pains*, *Pause*,¹⁶ *The Heart of a Peacock*,¹⁷ the Diaries, *Hundreds and Thousands*. The world of literature and painting is no longer the same after this discovery. Twentieth-century Canada, slightly embarrassed by the disjointed hymnology of Walt Whitman, by the conjuring tricks of E. J. Pratt, and by the painting of the National Gallery of Ottawa, tries to find an alibi and a past in the art of Emily Carr. While her painting represents for all of us a wonderful, unique, mythical archive of Canadian memory, her sense of humour and her verbal acrobatics can be seen in Bp Nichol, her exquisite arabesques in the bestiaries by Joe Rosenblatt, her passions and her silences in Dorothy Livesay and subsequently in Susan Musgrave, her cries of despair and ecstasy in Margaret Avison.

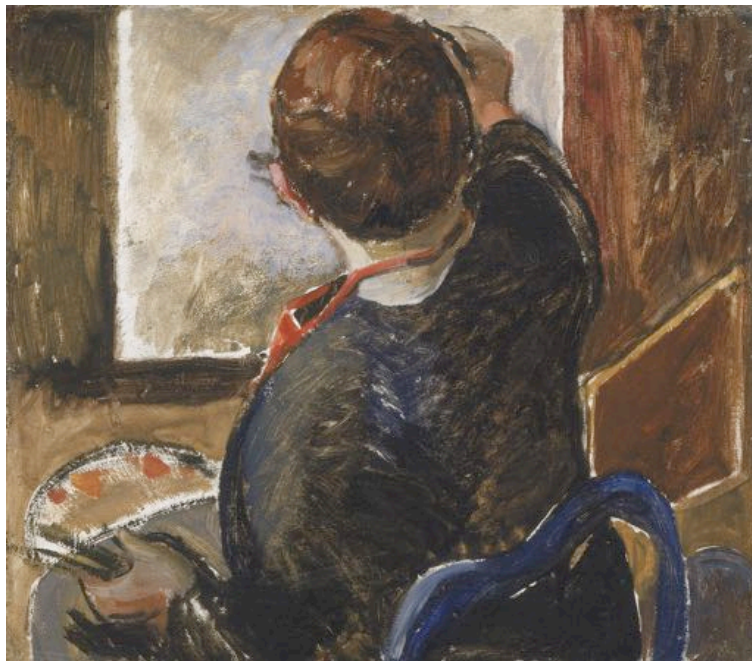
It thus appears that "Klee Wyck," the laughing woman, has obtained what she really desired: not immortality, in some improbable Other World, but presence. Anybody who still dares to face the forest and its inhabitants,

destruction of First Nations culture as a result of white colonization in British Columbia.

¹⁶ Carr, Emily, *Pause: A Sketch Book*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1953. Repr.: Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1972; Toronto: Stoddart, 1995 (fwd. by Maria Tippett).

¹⁷ Carr, Emily, *The Heart of a Peacock*, ed. Ira Dilworth, Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953. Repr.: Toronto: Irwin, 1986; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005. (intro. by Rosemary Neering).

in Canada, must come to terms, nowadays more than ever, with her intolerable inheritance.



Emily Carr, *Untitled (Self-portrait)*, 1924 - 1925, oil on paperboard, 39.4 x 44.9 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.50

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