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The “confluence of spirit, idea, and image”: The North in Canadian Culture in the Interwar Period

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Abstract

This article looks at examples from literature, drama and painting to see how representations of the Canadian North contributed to defining the cultural identity of the nation. Well-known paintings by the Group of Seven inspired poems, novels and plays offering a uniquely Canadian atmosphere in the interwar period, and a recent exhibition confirms that curators show an interest towards these works even in the new millennium.

Keywords:

Group of Seven, Arctic Expedition, Hermann Voaden, wilderness, Bertram Brooker, *Think of the Earth*

Résumé

L’auteur de l’article étudie, à partir d’exemples puisés au domaine de la littérature, du théâtre et de la peinture, la manière dont les représentations du Nord canadien ont contribué à la définition de l’identité nationale. Les œuvres bien connues du Groupe des Sept ont inspiré aussi bien des poèmes que des romans, voire des pièces de théâtre, proposant une atmosphère particulière du Canada de l’époque de l’entre-deux-guerres. Une récente exposition témoigne de l’intérêt porté à ces tableaux, même de nos jours.

Mots-clés :

Groupe des Sept, expédition dans l’Arctique, Hermann Voaden, nature sauvage, Bertram Brooker, *Pense à la Terre*



“It was a veritable paradise for the creative adventures
in paint in the Canadian North.”

(Lawren Harris, 29)

In this article we wish to evoke some cases to help understand how arts and artists contributed to highlighting the North as decisive element of Canadian identity. Although the process started already at the end of the nineteenth century, it is still relevant in the new Millennium: in October 2015, *The New York Times* had an article about a new exhibition of seldom-seen paintings by Lawren Harris to be opened in Hammer Museum, Los Angeles on October 11, 2015. “The Idea of North: The Paintings of Lawren Harris” would later be on display in Boston and Toronto (in the Art Gallery of Ontario, July 2 – September 11, 2016), as well. The originator was award-winning American comedian-playwright-actor-banjo player Steve Martin, himself an owner of three canvasses by Lawren Harris, who simply wanted to give more recognition to the Canadian painter in the U.S. The article quotes Andrew Hunter of AGO saying that Harris’s paintings “were so tied to an idea of Canada that we didn’t see them as paintings — they were icons” for Canadians in the 1960s and 1970s. How could these pictures about cold, isolated places in the North become national icons half a century later?

If we cast a quick glance at the work of ‘Confederation Poets’ we can see that they were moving in this direction already in the early 20th century: several poems by Duncan Campbell Scott and Charles D. G. Roberts are located in the North¹. Popular culture in the early 20th century also found the North as the site for stories or novels attractive for a wider readership, e.g. *The Prairie Wife* (1915) and its sequences by Arthur Stringer, adapted to film in the mid-1920s. Speaking of films, Melnyk (38) points out that

[T]he Hollywood representation of Canadian subjects as a sub-genre of the American western captured certain aspects of Canadian identity, however inaccurately. ... it described Canada as a northern country defined by snow and cold. ... If nothing else, Hollywood films gave Canada a distinct identity ... An excellent example of how non-Canadians were able to make a mark for themselves using Canadian material was the 1922 classic *Nanook of the North* by Robert J. Flaherty.

Some of these themes appeared even earlier in the new painting style and choice of topics introduced by the Group of Seven artists, who liked to glorify Canada’s “virile

1) E.g. “The Forsaken” (1903) by D.C. Scott takes place “In the heart of the north-land” (272); in his “The Height of Land” (1916) he mentions “The lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams” (278); in 1931 Roberts published “The Iceberg” (218–226), a long poem about his experiences in the Arctic region.



natural beauty” and “offered wild, windswept wilderness as a metaphor for the hardness of a ‘northern’ people” (Melnik 40).

Lawren Harris, who studied in Berlin and first painted streets and industrial plants in Toronto, claimed in 1928:

Our art is founded on a long and growing love and understanding of the North in an ever clearer experience of oneness with the informing spirit of the whole land and a strange brooding sense of Mother Nature fostering a new race and a new age. ... So the Canadian artist was drawn north. (quoted by Silcox, 30)

The first step in this direction was in 1921 when Harris and Jackson discovered the north shore of Lake Superior as a “perfect painting country” (Murray, 31). Concerning locations further north, Silcox explains that

[o]nly Jackson, Harris, and F. H. Varley travelled to the Far North and the Arctic and painted there. ... the idea of ‘North’ itself, for Harris, was first a spiritual truth, then a concept, and finally a visual experience. The farther north Harris went, the closer he seemed to get to the ideal confluence of spirit, idea, and image. (Silcox, 37)

Harris and Jackson actually even joined the Government Arctic expedition where they “painted a large number of sketches ... (and) learned to explore each region for those particular areas where form and character and spirit reached its summation” (Harris 1984, 30). Harris started to paint bare Northern landscapes around 1922 – these landscapes offered him a possibility to move in the direction of abstraction around 1930 and to express a divine presence in the mid-1930s.

Harris’s snow-capped Arctic mountains were symbolic of a remote, pure region of light from which Canada’s spiritual energy came. ... The power in Harris’s Arctic paintings reflects the conviction he had about this and also provides a dimension to the basic idea that the Group of Seven advanced in their missionary idealism: that the North was strong and true and free, and that Canadians were a northern people. (Silcox, 380)

It was not only the topics and paintings of the Group of Seven, and particularly Lawren Harris, but his figure lay behind some literary works, as well. As Betts suggests, “the protagonist of Brooker’s acclaimed novel [*Think of the Earth*, 1936, KK] has many loose resemblances to Harris. The character is a mystic who looks to the mountains, the Canadian mountains, as the icon of northern spiritual intensity and purity, as a metaphor for the spiritual impulse in his mind” (in Harris 2007, 86). A few years later, Mrs. Bentley in *As for Me and My House* by Sinclair Ross evokes in her journal



entry that Philip makes sketches during their visit to the farm that show “just the hills, the driftwood logs, and stunted trees” (132) as if she wished to sum up *North Shore, Lake Superior* by Lawren Harris.

There was, however, a totally different Canadian North along the Pacific coastline: when Emily Carr returned home from France in November 1911 she was fully determined “to picture totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as I could.... With this objective I again went up north next summer and each successive summer during the time I taught in Vancouver” (Carr, 427). Her pictures of the early 1910s show not only totem poles and native villages, but also thick foliage.

As Northrop Frye, himself a great admirer of painting in general and of works by members of the Group of Seven in particular (as were other theorists, including Hugh Kenner and Charles Taylor), emphasizes, “It is not always realized how closely analogous the developments of modern literature are to those in the visual arts” (Frye 2003, 53). And indeed, in Canadian art of the 1920s we can find a great number of examples both for the close collaboration of artists in different fields (e.g. Group of Seven painters like Lawren Harris, Arthur Lismer and A. Y. Jackson were working for Hart House Theatre with stage designs) and for influencing one another. The theatre being a forum par excellence for artists of different genres, their reflections on the idea of the North in the late 1920s and early 1930s can prove how important it was for suggesting a new element in the cultural identity of the nation. Sherrill Grace, in the “Introduction” to the anthology *Staging the North. Twelve Canadian Plays*, offers insightful remarks after a short survey of men of letters in Canada dealing with the challenge of the North, starting with founding member of the Canada First Movement R. G. Haliburton, who in 1869 had a public lecture on “The Men of the North and Their Place in History”, and mentioning examples from the 20th century, as well².

In the interwar period, Herman Voaden was a pioneer in the field of drama and theatre, together with Merrill Denison (even if the latter’s volume was entitled *The Unheroic North*, 1923) and Gwen Pharis Ringwood. Voaden himself dedicated *Six Canadian Plays* (1930) to the north – by ‘north’ meaning north of Lake Superior, just like the Group of Seven painters. Of their work Grace also emphasizes that they served as “icons of cultural identity, using powerful images of a deeply felt nordicity” (xi), but she stresses at the same time that “this North is a southern construction” (x), adding that “to the southern mind, the North is a paradox: it is at once empty – with noth-

2) “Haliburton’s North of white racial purity, romantic idealism, spiritual inspiration and masculinist adventure is fundamentally the North of Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven, of Herman Voaden, Grey Owl, and Stephen Leacock ... There have always been other Norths ... Quebec has a long cultural and literary tradition of North as *le pays d’en haut* ... and the Norths of the Klondike Gold Rush, of oil and mineral exploration ... and of ‘Eskimo’ art from Baffin Island have steadily expanded the parameters and the images of where and what *North* is and means.” (Grace, x)



ing but lakes, rivers, forests, muskeg, taiga, tundra, and ice – and full – full of exotic peoples, caribou, mineral riches, unsolved mysteries and ghosts” (xi). For Voaden the Group of Seven painters could set the tone for other forms of art as to how to view the ‘new country’ and how to turn these new visions into artistic expression. His objective was to create a tradition in the staging of plays

that will be an expression of the atmosphere and character of our land as definite as our native-born painting and sculpture.... If the strength and individuality of the work of our painters — their artistic achievements in form, rhythm, design, and colour, and their spiritual contributions in austerity, symbolism, and idealism — if these can be brought into our theatre and developed in conjunction with the creation of a new drama that will call for treatment in their spirit and manner and be closely allied to them in content and style, we shall have a new theatre art and drama here that will be an effective revelation of our own vision and character as a people. (Voaden, 4)

And indeed, Voaden’s own plays of the late 1920s and 1930s attempt to move beyond the traditional possibilities of a mainly verbal form of expression and invite musical and visual elements to produce a complex stage image, most often about the experience of the Canadian North. He claimed to be a follower of German expressionist theatre:

The challenge to our dramatists is to seek an ever varying expression of our life, in poetry and symbolism as well as prose and realism; and to join hands with our painters, sculptors, dancers, and musicians to create new combinations of the arts, lifting them all to inspired levels of beauty and significance in which they may be universal, being the reflection of the vision and beauty of a new people in a new land. (Voaden, 5)

In 1929 Herman Voaden argued that

our native playwrights should discover new materials in character, motive and action, particularly in the direction indicated by our painters.... [W]hat we need above all is courage: the determination to be no longer merely imitative, but to proceed with originality and imagination, knowing better what is being done outside Canada, and striking out along new paths in stagecraft, with a firmer will to recognize and develop our own native drama. (Quoted in Rubin 1996, 87)

Wilderness. A Play of the North was the first step toward finding his own voice in drama. It is also one of the first examples of a “southern tradition of plays about the Canadian North” (Grace 1999, xv) that can be linked with the artistic efforts in painting



and film to identify Canada as a country of the North. As the author points out in the introduction to this short one-act play, “It is realistic – traditional in form. ... Of all my plays, *Wilderness* owed most to the Group of Seven.... Of all their paintings, I liked best MacDonald’s ‘Solemn Land’ (Algoma) and Harris’ ‘Above Lake Superior’, with its mood of austerity, loneliness and peace” (Voaden 1930, 4). The play, which had a studio production at Yale in 1931, shows the strong influence of *Riders to the Sea* by Irish playwright J. M. Synge, as well as evoking a motif of *Maria Chapdelaine* by the ‘tourist writer’ Louis Hémon, the best-known literary representation of rural life in Québec to that date (which Voaden adapted to the stage in the 1930s). Voaden used the North as a setting where the sea, the source of danger in Synge’s play, is replaced by the blizzard, which is equally perilous. As the playwright insisted, “the North possesses unique vitality – and elemental strength which uplifts and sublimates the strong and those who give themselves to it gladly, while it warps and beats down the weak and those foreign to its spirit” (Voaden 1930, 5).

Wilderness is set in the “kitchen-living room of a small frame house in a fishing village on the rocky north shore of Lake Superior” on a “late afternoon of a warm April day, 1930” (Voaden 1980, 88), with two main characters: Ella Martin, in her sixties, and Mary Brown, a young teacher who is a newcomer to the settlement, rents a room from Mrs. Martin and falls in love with Ella’s son, Blake. Ella Martin reminds one of Maurya in *Riders*: she lost her husband the previous year, and now her son perishes in the blizzard. She does not like the North and is tired of life. The setting is realistic, though many elements in it have a symbolic function: in the gloomy room, the red blanket on the couch and the white oilcloth on the table offer a contrast of colours, which is further accentuated by the semi-darkness indoors and the bright sunshine seen through the open door. The late afternoon soon turned to sunset: the coming of the night that suggests death, while April evokes Easter and its mystery. The only ‘event’ in the monotony of the sparsely populated settlement is the train crossing it four times a day – its noise giving a rhythm at the climax of the play – which only makes Mary lonelier than ever as Voaden makes use of expressionistic sound effects on the stage:

The sound of the train is now distinctly heard. It began as a faint murmur – a low pattern of sound in the sombre silence of the wilderness, and gradually increased until its thrum is now ominous and insistent. During the following speeches it mounts to the proportion of thunder, with Mary’s gathering terror, coming suddenly to a stop with her sharp realization of what may have happened. (Voaden 1980, 94)

The train refers to technical modernization and to the possibility of leaving the place, but it is also the vehicle of communication with the outside world since it brings letters into the community. Mary feels utter abandonment under these conditions



but is ready to accept what Blake told her, namely that “there’s a great future for the north country – ... it won’t be long before there’ll be mines and railways and water-power dams and roads and cities everywhere” (Voaden 1980, 90). As Mary remembers how they enjoyed spending time in the wilderness, Blake shows the same character traits as Tavistock half a decade later in Brooker’s *Think of the Earth*:

MARY: ... On the big hill I’ve known him to get very solemn and quiet: “Sometimes I’m afraid of things,” he’d say, “they seem to come flaming on me too brightly. God’s to be seen in the silver and gold of dawn – in the crimson and purple of sunset,” and he’d lift his arms as if he was worshipping.

...

Sometimes he’d forget I was with him and his eyes would be strange.
(Voaden 1980, 93)

What looks like an exalted state for Mary is simply “bush-craziness” for Blake’s mother, who states that “He liked the woods more’n he like you ‘r me” (Voaden 1980, 93). Finally the young woman has to realize that no hope is left; Blake disappeared in the snowstorm: his comrades could not even find his dead body. His mother summed up what might have happened to him: “The snow kept gettin’ deeper and deeper an’ the blizzard blinded him. ‘N he fought on an’ on til he come back on his own tracks. ‘N then the darkness set in - ‘n he give up – ‘n the snow was warm” (Voaden 1980, 96). For Mary, the tragic turn of events means an epiphanic moment:

Then he’ll live as he said in the woods and the rocks and the skies – and in my heart too.... I begin to understand his faith. It will be my faith.... I too shall hear the wilderness calling, calling my life into a great adventure. It will be my land. I’ll belong to it. I’ll be part of its winds and woods and rocks – part of its flashing Northern Lights. (Voaden 1980, 96)

For the mother, the loss of her son means that there is nothing left in life for her. She utters the last word – “Rocks!” – “[w]ith loneliness, bitterness, and great finality,” while Mary pronounces the same word “[a]s if whispering a magic charm” (Voaden 1980, 97) after “the shadow of a night hawk swoops by” making her feel as if Blake’s soul were passing by her. The two women seem to embody the duality of the Northern experience seen from the South: the mother remembers only the negative elements, she is not enchanted by the bitter conditions and blames the North for losing her husband and her only son. For the young teacher, on the other hand, staying in the North becomes a mission: she is ready to realize Blake’s romantic ideas and expose herself to the call of the wilderness. And for Voaden, the playwright, the North seems to offer a starting point for theatrical experimentation in the vein of expressionism, implying



that the visual and acoustic elements of the performance are as important as the dialogues themselves.

As a conclusion, we can state – on the basis of the above examples – that the North became an important subject matter in various genres and forms of artistic impression in the first three decades of the twentieth century: the artists’ fascination with the North helped them offer a clear cultural vision for the nation in this period. The North for them was not a geographical unit or a special climate, but a metaphor for transcendental visions, a symbol for overcoming hardships as well as for becoming victims of Nature’s powers. Several decades had to pass, however, before the indigenous inhabitants of this North would enter the stage and offer their versions/visions of the North based on the traditions of several generations and on their own first-hand experiences.

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