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Plays about Passionate Painters

Les pièces ayant trait aux peintres passionnés

Katalin Kürtösi

Abstract

The “(auto)biographical turn” of twentieth-century art has been the subject of scholarly research in various fields. This paper concentrates on stage representations of two iconic Canadian painters: the eccentric Emily Carr, who inspired plays with widely different dramaturgical approaches by Herman Voaden, Jovette Marchessault (in French) and Joy Coghill; and Tom Thomson, who is the main character in Jim Betts’ *Colours in the Storm*. The plays themselves were written over many decades, ranging from the interwar period to the second decade of the twenty-first century. I propose that these works, together with the biographies, contributed to the mythicization of Carr and Thompson.

Keywords: Emily Carr, Tom Thomson, Herman Voaden, Jovette Marchessault, Jim Betts, biographical plays

Résumé

Le « tournant (auto) biographique » de l’art du XXe siècle a fait l’objet de recherches dans divers domaines. Cet article se concentre sur les représentations scéniques de deux peintres canadiens emblématiques : l’excentrique Emily Carr, qui a inspiré les pièces avec des approches dramaturgiques très différentes d’Herman Voaden, Jovette Marchessault (en français) et Joy Coghill; sans oublier Tom Thomson, le personnage principal de *Colours in the Storm* de Jim Betts. Les pièces ont été écrites sur plusieurs décennies, entre les deux guerres et pendant la deuxième décennie du XXIe siècle. La thèse proposée par l’article est que ces œuvres, avec les biographies, ont contribué à la mythisation de Carr et Thompson.

Mots-clés : Emily Carr, Tom Thomson, Herman Voaden, Jovette Marchessault, Jim Betts, pièces biographiques



“Whether they know it or not, Canadian artists are supposed to ‘paint Canadian’.”
(Mavis Gallant)

Life stories

Portraying artists by other artists in verbal or visual forms has had a long tradition in Western culture. Let us just remember, for example, Giorgio Vasari’s *Le Vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* from the mid-16th century or the various paintings portraying Goethe. Biographies by and about famous people, including artists, have also been popular for many centuries. The last few decades, however, have manifested not only a renewed interest in the life stories and eccentricities of well-known or almost forgotten artists, but also the appearance of new genres/sub-genres that can be linked with life-writing or – to borrow Sherrill Grace’s term – AutoBiography. I wish to position the stage representations of two iconic Canadian painters in these contexts.

As Susanna Egan and Gabrielle Helms point out, “The last quarter of the twentieth century has been a profoundly autobiographical age ... Narratives, productions and performances of identity have begun to permeate and transform Canadian culture in every medium. ... life writing is now recognized as preeminent among the genres” (216). They define life writing along a “broad continuum” ranging from “writing about the self (autobiography) to writing about another (biography),” noting that it has been “associated with the written word, in particular with the genres of memoir, autobiography, diary, biography, letters, and travel-writing” (216) – even if this type of representation has spread in directions toward the film, installations, drama, or the website as well (217). Considering that Canada defines itself as a multicultural country, special features of life-writing can be distinguished. As Alfred Hornung observes, “the practice of life-writing has become a form of intercultural negotiation with the goal of realizing a transcultural form of existence. ... Transcultural life-writers challenge beliefs in national allegiance and geographical boundaries” (536, 537).

Although life-writing started its ascent in Canada in the 1970s, it had been present since the early days of Canadian writing. Our attention this time reaches back to the early twentieth century when Canadian artists were markedly preoccupied not only with their own self-definition but also with a search for cultural identity:

A review of early twentieth-century prose reveals a rich array of modernist forms, more specifically the exuberant play with self-portraiture and multiple selves found in the life-writing and fiction of numerous Canadian authors who lived during the modernist era. Their works may well constitute the most central and experimental articulation of



Canadian modernism in prose, allowing authors to stage cross-cultural, controversial, and even conflicted identities – personal and public, sexual and political, regional and national. ... These authors play with hybrid genres, as well as exploring modernity at the interface of the textual and visual. (Gammel, 247)

During the first years of the history of the Governor General's Award, two prizes in the category of non-fiction went to works featuring life-writing: *Klee Wyck* by Emily Carr (1941) and *In Search of Myself* by Frederick Philip Grove (1946). Both authors were actively 'staging' themselves for the outside world: Carr posed as the neglected female painter 'on the edge of nowhere,'¹ while Grove established a new identity for himself in Manitoba in the mid-1910s.²

In parallel with the growing popularity of life-writing,

both autobiography and biography have acquired a position of unprecedented importance over the past thirty years ... because we live in a culture of *me* or *I*. ... AutoBiographies satisfy our desire for story at the same time as they promise to give us *truths* (if not Truth) ... the autobiographical voice and eye/I are available to minorities and to groups, such as women, who have been excluded from the dominant discourse and whose stories have been dismissed as worthless. (Grace, 13, 14).³

Stories based on real lives – in any genre – satisfy “a basic voyeuristic impulse” and, at their best, they can be “profoundly philosophical” (ibid., 15). Anne Nothof sums up the main components of plays about artists as follows: “The dramatic portrait of an artist assumes an attempt at accuracy and authenticity, or at least at a recognizable likeness; it typically includes iconic anecdotes and demonstrates a creative genius in formation and in action. Too often portraits of artistic genius succumb to clichés and exploit the eccentricities and ‘abnormalities’ of the artist” (137). It is a slippery terrain; the sources at the disposal of the author (letters, diaries, journals) often offer one-sided versions of important events in the artists' lives or of the critical reception of their work – and, at the same time, it is very rewarding, since people are eager to know the ‘secret’ of the artist. Staging a life story involves several layers of artistic self-consciousness. The ‘raw material’ in our

1) Carr's 'self-definition,' cited by Newlands, 4.

2) For a more detailed analysis of Emily Carr's life-writing, see Katalin Kürtösi *Modernism on the 'Margin' – The 'Margin' on Modernism. Manifestations in Canadian Culture*. Augsburg: Wissner Verlag, 2013. 87–139. On Grove's self-staging, see “Modernist masquerades: F. P. Grove” in Gammel (248–255).

3) Grace (2006) does not fail to mention that plays with heavy autobiographical content had been written in earlier decades, too: *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *Long Day's Journey into Night* (first performed in 1956, though written in 1941), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *After the Fall* (1964), and *Betrayal* (1978) are her examples, adding that Albee, Adrienne Kennedy and Michel Tremblay also included events from their own lives in their plays (15).



case is the career of artists made into stage dialogues and scenes by another artist, the playwright, staged by still another artist, the *metteur-en-scène*, and finally, acted out by an actor/actress, but we should not forget about the set, costume and make-up designer or the sound effects. In a live show it is practically impossible to draw the borderline between these markedly different forms of artistic expression. Since this paper focuses on plays about painters, we will not deal with the last layers, i.e. the staging and acting concepts.

To situate the painters and the playwrights, a brief introduction of these artists might be in order. Emily Carr (1871–1945) was active as a modernist painter for almost half a century in Victoria, B.C. She studied in San Francisco, London and Paris, was determined to ‘domesticate’ new viewpoints (e.g. those of French ‘*fauve*’ painters and of Cubism) to match her paintings about totem poles, Native villages and the rain forests on Vancouver Island. She gained national recognition and established close ties with members of the Group of Seven after her pictures were shown in the National Gallery, Ottawa, in 1927. The Group of Seven itself was a loosely knit association of painters who “banded together in a desire to develop a new style of Canadian painting based on the land. ... these artists saw in the untamed terrain a reflection of the country’s spirit” (Newlands, 6).⁴ Tom Thomson (1877–1917) – like most of the Group of Seven painters – was a commercial artist and became an emblematic figure of the Group, although he died under mysterious circumstances three years before the foundation of the Group itself. As Lawren Harris, the founder and leader of the Group, put it, Thomson was “as vital to the movement, as much part of its formation and development, as any other member” (qtd. in Silcox, 20). Harris is a character in plays about Carr and Thomson alike. Other Group members evoked in the plays are Arthur Lismer and A. Y. Jackson; so is their patron, Dr. James MacCallum. The playwrights to which I am referring are Herman Voaden (1903–1991), a contemporary of Emily Carr and pioneer of theatrical modernism (particularly of Expressionism) in Canada; Jovette Marchessault (1938–2012), of mixed French-Canadian and Amerindian background, herself a painter, sculptor, writer and playwright, exploring the work of female artists; Joy Coghill (1926–2017), an actress, playwright and theatre director in Vancouver; and Jim Betts, a writer and composer.

4) They had regular group exhibitions in the 1920s, then served as the foundation stone in 1933 for the Canadian Group of Painters, a bigger association of painters, including Emily Carr and abstract painter Bertram Brooker, among others.



Plays about Emily Carr

Emily Carr is introduced in the Foreword to her *Complete Writings* as “a great painter, certainly one of the greatest women painters of any time. It has been said that for originality, versatility, driving creative power and strong, individual achievement she has few equals among modern artists” (Shadbolt, 17) She commented on her own life, including her trips within Canada and the United States, as well as her lengthy stays in Europe (London, Paris), and her struggles in artistic expression, both in pictures and in words. One of her best-known paintings is a self-portrait (made in 1938–39 – on display at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa). Her sketch-books and journals were published years, sometimes decades, after her death. The latest one, *Sister and I in Alaska*, came out in 2014 – the editor David Silcox defined it on the inner cover as “An Illustrated Diary of a Trip to Alert Bay, Skagway, Juneau, and Sitka in 1907.” *Growing Pains. An Autobiography*⁵ was published a year after her death – she dedicated it to Lawren Harris, the founder of the Group of Seven, a decisive figure in Canadian art history, and a close friend of Carr. *Hundreds and Thousands. The Journals of an Artist* came out in 1966 – it covers the last seventeen years of her career in two hundred and forty pages. As Grace observes, “Carr wrote her own autobiography and maintained a jealous control over her life story” (19). Two volumes of her correspondence were published in 1990 and 2006, and some previously unpublished journal entries and letters came out in 2003. At least half a dozen biographies were written about Carr (in 1979, 1987, 1990, 1996, 2003, 2008) and the several albums and catalogues of exhibitions also help readers appreciate her art. Egan and Helms are not exaggerating when they state that “No Canadian ... has received more attention than Emily Carr” concerning biographies (234). We can add that she also inspired other artists with both her artistic struggles and her eccentricities: she has served as subject matter for novels, poetry cycles, ballets and several plays.

Herman Voaden was active on the theatre scene of Canada as early as the 1920s. His use of autobiographical references and his nationalistic convictions, idealism and the interest in abstract and symbolic ways of expression coincide with Carr’s endeavours. Indeed, both Carr and Voaden were fascinated by the pictures of the Group of Seven and they “developed an essentially religious, communal conception of art as a substitute for conventional Christian dogma” (Wagner, 189); also, they thought of art as a quest. In the Introduction to *Six Canadian Plays*, published in 1930, Voaden as editor outlined his expectations toward genuine Canadian drama by creating

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

5) It is a series of episodes from her life – in the *Complete Writings* its length is over 200 pages.



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. (4)

It was three decades after editing the anthology, and a decade and a half after Carr's death, that Voaden made the first version of his play about Emily Carr; and he kept working on it for several years thereafter. The still unpublished text of *Emily Carr. A Stage Biography with Pictures* is available online. In terms of both structure and dramaturgy it is closer to traditional, realist drama than to the experimental expressionist plays of Voaden's interwar period. In the Acknowledgements before the play, the playwright underlines that it is "stage biography, not a documentary" (4), although he used Carr's autobiographical writing as starting point. The plot is divided into three acts and revolves around phases, turning points in Carr's life from her teenage years through her stay in London to her mature period and finally her death in Victoria. In this play two of her sisters, Alice and Edith, are among the characters (while Marchessault chose Lizzie, another sister, to 'counterpoint' Emily) and a suitor is present in each act. Voaden offers two options for the first scene of Act II: in the first version the dialogue is between Emily and Mayo, her visiting boy-friend in London, while the second version includes Alice, too, beside Emily and Martyn, Emily's suitor.

The basic tension in the play is arranged along two axes: one is Emily's dilemma between pursuing art or getting married and becoming a home-maker, the other is her childhood 'epiphany' in the lily-field presented as a deep secret in the drama. As a traditional symbol, the lily stands for purity, innocence, and virginity in Western culture (in medieval paintings, held by Gabriel, it is often the attribute of the Annunciation scene), but in Voaden's play this purity aspect is not wholly evident.⁶ Voaden creates an Emily character somewhat different from her own 'self-portraits' in her writings: although the Emily of Voaden's play is also rebellious and sometimes hysterical, her conflicts with her oldest sister Edith are softened in the play, sometimes verging on sentimental scenes; the other aspect of the protagonist is also different from what we can read in *Growing Pains*, or *Hundreds and Thousands*, namely, Voaden's Emily flirts more with her boyfriends than in the source materials.

Voaden envisioned a stage harmony of verbal, visual and audible elements, relying strongly on Carr's published work (taking passages from it), to be supported by

6) Carr's texts often recall the wild lilies on their property – the erotic implications of lilies, above all, of cala lilies, are markedly present in the paintings of Carr's contemporary, Georgia O'Keeffe.



projections of her paintings and by music – as Nothof puts it, he was striving “to produce a kind of Bildungsroman of Wagnerian proportions” (86). The first staging in 1960, however, could not live up to these high aspirations. Instead, it turned out to be a sequence of episodes chronicling certain (sometimes pivotal) moments in the artist’s life (ibid.). Carr’s artistic struggle, attacks on the patriarchal system, and isolation were not turned into a convincing stage figure of the experimenting and fighting female artist – mainly because there lurks a melodramatic undertone in crucial situations, be they her resistance to her oldest sister’s arrogance or to the traditional expectations of saying ‘yes’ to a suitor and leading a life of conformism. Carr’s language in her writings is very visual, evocative, sometimes even poetic – Voaden’s dialogues are in a different tone and his traditional (occasionally drawing room) dramaturgy means a rupture from the possibilities Carr’s life and her texts offer. This cannot be bridged by staging solutions in the realistic vein: as Nothof mentions, in Victoria, in 1966 they even put some of Carr’s original furniture on stage as part of the set (88) – a non-realistic (symbolist or expressionist) approach might offer the audience a more suggestive picture, but Voaden’s mainly prosaic dialogues cannot really invite it. This can be a result mainly of the radical change Voaden’s concept of the theatre and drama went through after 1943: the war deprived him of his idealistic outlook, so he could no longer believe in the fusion of visionary, poetic and aesthetic elements on the stage with music and stylized dance. Obviously Voaden was not ready for a move in the direction of an existentialist (or even absurd) drama, and therefore he reached back to the tradition of the drawing room play in the realistic vein. For this choice, however, neither the personality nor the artistic convictions of Emily Carr seem to be suitable.

Jovette Marchessault’s artistic career and life experiences manifest parallel elements with those of Carr: she, too, was active in different artistic media – painting, sculpture, writing, playwriting. Like Carr, Marchessault relied on her own lived experiences for her novels, and refused the traditional patriarchal order, finding the Catholic Church to be one of its embodiments. Marchessault devoted much attention to women artists in her stage work: she wrote a play about Violette Leduc and another about Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein, before turning her attention to Emily Carr, as an outstanding female artist from Canada. While Carr’s parents moved from Great Britain to Victoria not long before her birth, Marchessault was of mixed French-Canadian and Amerindian parents, so she had first-hand personal experiences about Indigenous life and people, with whom Emily Carr felt so close.

Le Voyage magnifique d’Emily Carr (1990) uses the motif of travelling on various levels – travelling was, as we have seen, crucial for Carr’s artistic development, be it to the centres of art life in Europe and North America, or the Native villages and rain forests of her sketching tours. Marchessault herself had her ‘nomadic’ years,



making an initiatory voyage across the central and northern part of the American continent in her thirties, searching for her roots. The voyage has traditionally been conceived as life-metaphor, and is present as such in her play, which won the Governor General's Award for French-language Drama for 1990, almost half a century later than Carr's award for *Klee Wyck*.

Marchessault's play is a flow of poetic images in ten scenes with Emily Carr in her late fifties as protagonist. The other characters are her sister Lizzie (four years older than Emily), Sophie, her Indigenous friend, who also embodies the mystical figure of the goddess D'Sonoqua, and Lawren Harris, appearing also as 'L'Accordeur d'âmes,'⁷ a go-between with spiritual capacities connecting earthly life with that beyond. Most scenes strongly rely on Carr's life writing, but there are inconsistencies as far as the age of the characters is concerned: Harris in the play is in his thirties – in reality the age difference between Emily Carr and Lawren Harris was fourteen years. The scenes with Lizzie serve to establish Emily's character as extravagant, different from everyday people, and to demonstrate her protests against paternal authority; as Nothof observes, Lizzie "articulates a doctrinal social and religious point of view" (13). Her second voyage to the world of the past takes us to the world of the totems in the forest, based on Carr's story about D'Sonoqua: the painter is here surrounded by a group of cats, evoking the cat as mythological figure in Egypt, Persia and the Himalayas. The stage is dominated by the deep greens of Carr's paintings supporting the transition from life to the world of the souls – here her obsession for expressing movement in her pictures appears together with her self-doubts. Marchessault makes conscious use of typically female elements: cats, the Moon, the house, cows, these latter two suggesting the image of maternity. The gender aspect is present all through the play – with a special stress in scenes⁸ IV and V when she gets an invitation letter for the National Gallery exhibition addressed as Monsieur Emily Carr, Victoria, confirming the general belief that 'serious' art can be produced only by male artists.

The climax of the play arrives in another of Carr's voyages into the world of the past with all the crucial characters present: Carr's dedication to the Indigenous cause (evoking the injustices the Indigenous Peoples were exposed to) and to art embrace each other by 'interior labour' (65). The character of Harris fully appreciates Carr's imagery and colours (65). The two artists here reach a state of exaltation, defining what is important in art for them and what they refuse. Harris – as in reality – provides ample energy for Emily Carr to face the lack of understanding back in Victoria, where she has a reputation of being an aberrant, foolish woman, one who calls her caravan an elephant (82) and prefers the smoky huts of "Indians" (Carr's term) to the houses of white people, as Lizzie observes (91). In the final scene – after Lizzie's death – Emily

7) In the English translation of the play this figure is called "The Soul Tuner."

8) Marchessault calls the scenes 'tableaux' – in French this also means 'pictures'.



occupies her father's armchair, thus gaining authority, and soon after that L'Accordeur produces her 'little book,' so Emily Carr the writer is presented as well, declaring that whatever she writes will only be fragmentary in comparison with what she has lived through (108).

The dramaturgy of Marchessault's play is in line with Modernist views of the theatre: instead of a linear story offering 'beginning, middle, and end,' it is a sequence of images, visions, blending biographical events with dreams, evoking real life and spiritual characters alike, discussing everyday events and supernatural capacities. "Like many expressionist plays, *The Magnificent Voyage of Emily Carr* is loosely structured as a journey to a 'New World,' in this case one in which feminist values and aesthetics will be recognized and celebrated" (Nothof, 14). The essential questions of birth, life, art, death are present all through the play, with a special emphasis on the division line, the 'threshold of the uncertain' (35). The voyage for Emily is the voyage to complete her mission in art – for Lizzie it is but the road to death. Self-reflection is present on multiple levels: it is a play about a female artist, introducing other artist characters, like fellow painter Lawren Harris and Sophie, the basket maker, who can give supernatural power with her massaging hands (while Lizzie's hand could 'smoothen the nerves and calm down the tensions' (55)). Art is often the subject of the dialogues and the protagonist achieves mythic dimensions. The poetic power of Marchessault's text facilitates the transitions between the two basic worlds – the everyday and the spiritual – of the play. As Nothof records,

For the premiere production in French by Le Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui (1990), as Natalie Rewa explains, Augustin Rioux's scenographic design "made fascinating connections between the surface of a picture hanging on a wall and that of the rectangular playing area. [...] Rioux framed the acting area by arranging seating on all four sides, leaving a small aisle around the stage [...] This 'performance canvas' was bisected by a totem pole reminiscent of the many images of D'Sonoqua painted by Carr." (97)

Like Marchessault, Joy Coghill also chose to "dramatize the fragmented internal life of an artist, and the soul-making/soul-destroying forces that condition this life; their plays also present their own struggles as artists" (Nothof, 143). Coghill was the very first female director of Vancouver Playhouse and it was she who commissioned George Ryga to write *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, a milestone in the history of English-language drama in Canada. She founded professional theatres both for children and for senior performers. Coghill was the recipient of a Governor General's Performing Arts Award in 2002. *Song of This Place* (2003) has the forest as central motif: it evokes not only the location of the rehearsals in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also the forest as a symbol of spirituality, of the Jungian unconscious. It is generally regarded



as a female symbol and is related to man's voyage towards death. The forest as site for Coghill's play offers a link between the real and the imaginary, and evokes a favourite motif of Carr in her paintings throughout her career.

In line with the traditional rules of biographical works, the playwright evokes Carr's eccentricities⁹ as well as well-known episodes from her life, trying to get closer to her personality – she uses puppets and masks to 'act out' people playing a role in Carr's life (e.g. Alice, Sophie, Harold): all these are voiced by Frieda. As Zimmerman points out, "because Coghill wanted to do in the theatre what Emily did in her paintings, that is, capture the inner spirit, and because the central action of the play is internal and hence difficult to develop dramatically, she called upon the sister arts – music, puppetry, mime, dance and song – to share in the enterprise" (vii); as Coghill reveals, she chose to use puppets to tell her story "because they are intensely theatrical" (314). The two main characters – Frieda, "a passionate, intelligent self-centred woman, an actress first, a person second" (7) and Millie (i.e. Emily) – are doubled: both have a 'Small,' childhood self. The play itself is about artistic struggle, particularly at a relatively old age and about how Frieda moves on to understand Emily. The key to it – as she says, "the missing link" – is to evoke their childhood selves. Coghill is convinced that "an artist must retain her/his child self or the work becomes artificial and lacks a rooted truth" (315). The playwright also relied on the similar elements in their life and artistic endeavours: "Born and bred in the west. Forced to study abroad. Pioneers in art. Women in a man's world. And now I'm fifty-seven ... no, my God, fifty-nine" (20). (Carr achieved national recognition at the age of fifty-seven – Coghill's Frieda is an actress of fifty-nine.) Coghill admitted that the "interesting thing about biography/autobiography and writing plays is that it is all, surely, autobiography. [...] It is a great responsibility to bring alive on the stage a person that existed and was famous" (316) Nothof also underlined these special aspects of writing plays about painters:

Plays that attempt to perform creativity cannot be too literally grounded. Like a portrait painting, they are interpretations of a life – an imaginative construction, not the thing itself. [...]

Theatrical representations are further complicated when they base their dramatic portraits on an artist's autobiography and pictorial self-portraits – representations of self that are also imaginative constructions. [...] Dramatized biographies of artists are interwoven with

9) FRIEDA To be honest [...] in the beginning all I wanted was a part to play. And your name was good box-office.

MILLIE Box-office?

FRIEDA Yes. The public would certainly pay to see the lonely misunderstood little lady, the feisty oddball who swore and smoked and flipped chairs to the ceiling. (23)



portraits of the playwright in these cases: the portrait of the other becomes to some degree a self-portrait. (Nothof, 138)

The two-act play has a complicated structure, involving several meta-theatrical layers – Frieda,¹⁰ the central character, is an aging actress who wants to play the role of Emily Carr and takes her young company to work on the project in a forest where “one [...] is faced with oneself, and where the spirit of Emily Carr can be found” (Coghill, 3). The process involves several moments of crisis and self-doubt for the actress: Millie is not always supportive, she is convinced that “theatre is ... second-hand living” (23) and wants to be master of her own life, while for Frieda her life “is just the inspiration [...] You just inspire. You don’t start interfering and making strange noises and actually appearing” (23). Millie tests Frieda and orders her to play Alice: Millie at this point in Act I replaces the Millie puppet to help the actress overcome her despair at the difficulties of staging Emily Carr. The scene involves multiple layers of theatricality: an actress playing the role of a painter instructs another actress who plays the role of an actress trying to impersonate an aging painter to act out the role of this painter’s sister.¹¹ Artistic self-consciousness is present throughout the play – Millie reveals to Frieda that “to be an artist, my dear actress person, means discipline and work, work and discipline” (23) and speaks about the “unutterable, inexplicable, complete loneliness” (24) of the artist. They also discuss how true acting can be:

MILLIE [...] It was convincing, but that wasn’t Alice. [...] It wasn’t Harold or Sophie either. It was you. You made it up. It’s you who think all that is true. But I say it is all a lie! [...] Is acting true? How true? What kind of true? (44, 45)

Coghill freely adapts passages from Carr’s writing for the dialogues of her play; even the title is Carr’s phrase in *Hundreds and Thousands*. Finally Millie accepts and acknowledges Frieda’s efforts and declares that they are sisters in art. We can agree with Nothof when she says, “although a fragmentation of the psyche of the artist is at the centre of the play, *Song of This Place* is very much about self-realization through empathy – between the actor and the painter, between the painter and her world. It is a play that enacts autobiographics” (148).

Carr’s personal struggle for art and recognition, her extraordinary character, invited several contemporary and later artists to make her a mythic figure, something

10) One cannot help remembering Frida Kahlo when faced with this name.

11) Carr’s disdain for theatre and acting is reflected at various points in the play, for example, in the dialogue between Millie and Small:

SMALL [...] Millie, is that Alice?

MILLIE No. Her name is Frieda. She is an actress.

SMALL Actress! (*She stares.*) She’s not an artist then, is she. (39)



Canadian culture was in great need of for self-confirmation and for showing heroes of its own as part of the process of creating the country's cultural identity.

A play with music about Tom Thomson

Tom Thomson's life story and his role in the development of painting in Canada offers a rich terrain for representation. In a chapter entitled "Performing Tom Thomson," Sherrill Grace (2004) writes about three films and four plays featuring this artist. Since the 1930s several monographs, biographies, collections of essays and poems have appeared about him – his life events, but particularly the mystery around his death, inspired many authors to speculate about his story.¹² Only two letters by the painter have been made public so far (published in 1946). Similarly to Voaden's play about Emily Carr, Jim Betts had been working on his musical about Thomson for almost a quarter of a century before its publication: as the playwright's note says, it was first workshopped by Michel Ayoub and the Muskoka Festival in the late 1980s, followed by many revisions in subsequent years. *Colours in the Storm: A Gallery of Scenes and Songs on the Life of Tom Thomson* had its first edition around 1990, before being published by Playwrights Canada in 2000, and finally by Scirocco in 2014 (omitting the subtitle and basing itself on the 1998 performance by Theatre Aquarius). As Grace writes, The playwright strived to show "the search for artistic perfection" (17).

The two-act play takes place in Algonquin Park. Some characters belong to the world of art (Thomson, Lawren Harris, Frances McGillvray and Dr. James MacCallum) and some to the world of the bush (poacher and guide Larry Dixon, park ranger and diarist Mark Robinson), while others represent the small community in remote parts of the Park (the Trainor couple with their daughter, Winnie, who befriends Thomson; the Frasers, the wife taking drawing lessons from Thomson; and Martin Bletcher, who "considers himself Thomson's rival for Winnie" (9)). There is also an "uncontrolled spirit of the bush" called Wild Mary who knows a lot about life in the wilderness – sometimes she appears like a ghost. As Winnie comments on Wild Mary's visit to Thomson's tent, she is a "Bit of a local legend. Lives in the bush, exactly where nobody seems to know for sure. Most people seem to think she died years ago" (70). Grace finds Betts' play "especially fascinating for its embodiment of Algonquin Park ... in the figure of Wild Mary" (138).

The two acts are of unequal length: Act I is divided into three parts with 18 scenes, taking up two-thirds of the play, while Act II offers 14 more scenes. As the author says,

12) The first biographies were written by Blodwen Davies and Albert H. Robson (1930 and 1937, respectively). During the past twenty years others appeared by Joan Murray (1998), Sherrill Grace (2004), and Waybe Larsen (2011). In addition, there has been David Silcox's monograph (2002) and a collection of essays (edited by D. Reid, 2002). Some Canadian poets were also inspired by the painter (Arthur S. Bourinot in the mid-1950s, George Whipple at the turn of the millennium, and Kevin Irie in 2012).



“Because the story moves quickly through many different locations, the set needs to be as flexible as possible” (15) For the backdrops and two side-screens, motifs from Thomson’s painting entitled *Northern River* could be seen. In the scenes involving painting activity by Thomson, real working boards and facsimiles of his paintings were also used. The play text itself contains dialogues in prose and songs in verse. The basic tension among the characters results from the differences between people living their whole lives in the wilderness and Thomson, the newcomer from the big city – the first group knows the forest, the lakes and rivers, the men care more about drinking than culture, while the women are open toward the arts and are ready to help the painter in skills like paddling or fishing.¹³ Winnie Trainor, who is a few years younger than Thomson, divulges the secret of where he can catch trout; they paddle together in the rapids – eventually they fall in love, and Scene Two suggests that she was pregnant with his child when Thomson drowned in Canoe Lake.¹⁴ According to the play, there were rumours about the painter committing suicide or being murdered by his rival.¹⁵ Fifteen years after Thomson’s accidental death by drowning (as the coroner concluded), Lawren Harris, “a more spiritual man than some” (22), is convinced that he can see the spirit of Tom Thomson (22).

The thirty-two scenes evoke the widely spread stereotypes and features of modernism and modernist artists. Thomson frequently seems to have visions and “stare(s) up at the sky, distracted” (39), one of his obsessions being to catch the grey of the sky before a storm.¹⁶ Some of the people around him (Annie, Winnie and

13) The real-life Tom Thomson could hardly be pigeon-holed as a big-city person: Roy Macgregor’s *Northern Light*, a book about “Tom Thomson and the woman who loved him” (as the subtitle says), provides the reader with credible data on Thomson’s childhood years in rural Western Ontario, pointing out that “Young Tom spent considerable time fishing on nearby Georgian Bay and on the sound heading into the Owen Sound harbour. He became a fine fisherman and quite an accomplished swimmer ...” (16).

14) Seventy-seven-year-old Winnie in Act I Scene 5 hints at this possibility: “The children call me a witch. To their parents ... I’m just – ‘Wild Winnie’ – that crazy old spinster who lost her last chance at a man in the waters of Canoe Lake. But to the writers, the busybodies, the ‘journalists,’ it’s: “Is it true you were engaged to him, Miss Trainor?” “Is it true that when he died you were pregnant with his child?” ‘Care to comment, old woman, on the rumours that he committed suicide rather than marry you?’ ‘Tell us, Miss Trainor – who really killed Tom Thomson?’ ... they so desperately want to know what I know.” (26).

15) HARRIS After Thomson’s death in 1917, the park wardens and guides searched every inch of Canoe Lake for Tom’s hand-painted canoe and paddles.

ROBINSON They were never found. (Act I, Scene 2, 23) ...

SHANNON ... It was me reported having seen Thomson canoe off that last morning – last man to see him alive. But it was also me got accused, by my own wife no less – o’ havin’ murdered Thomson myself. (Act I, Scene 7, 29)

16) Act I, Scenes 9, 10 and 11 are the best examples for this.

Another crack of thunder; THOMSON again eyes the skies. ... (41)

THOMSON sees his pack and scrambles to open it. He pulls out a “board” and paints. As the storm continues, He starts to sketch. (43)

THOMSON enters, staring intently at something. (45)



Dr. MacCallum) appreciate him being an artist, while Winnie's mother and the men find him "Suspicious looking" (DIXON, 45), a city person who "can't paddle a canoe" (BLETCHER, 27) and take his sketches for "Hot Mush," "a gargle, or a gob of porridge" (SHANNON, 31), or kindling (DIXON, 112).

MARIE ... that man's demented. ...

DIXON Pixilated.

ROBINSON Moonstruck ...

MARIE Crazy as a North Bay coot. (47)

ROBINSON Possessed! The man's blessed possessed! (Act II, Scene 25, p. 105)

These pejorative comments highlight the general image of the misunderstood artist, so common for experimenting, particularly modernist painters.

Some characters can be viewed as audience or consumers of art: frequently they comment upon the pictures – sometimes with a bit of irony.¹⁷ The material and financial aspects of creating and selling artwork also becomes the subject matter of dialogues in Betts' play. Hugh Trainor wonders how a painter can support himself.

HUGH So, Tom, much money in painting? ...

THOMSON No. Not much.

HUGH No. Wouldn't have thought so. I expect you have to be dead first. ...

WINNIE I'm sure Mr. Thomson isn't concerned about the money, father. He's interested in the art.

THOMSON I'd love to make money at it. Some people do.

HUGH So, how do you make a living?

WINNIE He draws pictures for the Eaton's Catalogue. ...

MARIE But we *love* the Eaton's Catalogue! You must be very talented!

(Act I, Scene 9, 39)¹⁸

17) WINNIE You're the painter, I expect. ... You're not going to cut off your ear, I hope? (Act I, Scene 6, 28) Scene 13 – Larry Dixon Splitting Wood

DIXON ... *bends over in the pose of Larry Dixon Splitting Wood*. [title of a painting by Thomson – KK]

... if I hadn't been in a private collection all of them years I guess I'd be as famous as them jack pines he kept doin'.

... And one day, when I guess this Lismer was tired o' trampin' through the woods fightin' 'squitters, he sat down and done this picture o' my shack. He actually took the time and painted a picture o' my shack. ...

Then a couple o' months later I heard he'd sold the damn thing for four hundred dollars. Four hundred dollars for a picture o' my shack. Well, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Some jack-ass city-slicker pays four hundred dollars to put a paintin' o' Larry Dixon's shack – oh, sorry, "The Guide's Home" – on their wall. Hell, I woulda sold 'em the whole damn shack for less than that.

Never did make much sense to me ... (Act I, Scene 13, 53)

18) The last part of this short dialogue evokes another typically modern attitude, namely, catalogue-shopping and women as keen consumers.



Dr. MacCallum represents the small group of art collectors – he mediated between Thomson and Lawren Harris, sent Thomson’s *Northern Lake* to the exhibition of the Ontario Society of the Arts. The painting was purchased by the Government of Ontario. MacCallum offers to guarantee Thomson’s expenses for a year on condition that he devotes that year to painting. In the doctor’s view “This isn’t charity. I consider it an investment” (65).

The songs offer a different, more poetic and transcendental dimension in the play. They are in verse and deal with various aspects of nature and the landscape. The title of the play appears in a key song by Thomson (right after the dialogue between the painter and MacCallum):

THOMSON Standing in the shadows,
 Looking towards the light
 Wondering where the river goes.
 Hovering on the water
 Trees and sky unite
 Flowing where the river flows.
 Northern River
 Can we ever know
 Where these Northern Rivers
 Go? (Act I, Scene 15, 65–66)

Most characters in the play have songs, and there are dance scenes, too. At the beginning of Act I, Scene 14, “A waltz is playing” as Annie and Shannon prepare for his birthday party (54). Later on, in the same scene, Thomson dances with Winnie, making Bletcher jealous:

The dance becomes increasingly uninhibited as THOMSON becomes the exuberant focal point with both ANNIE and WINNIE whirling around him. Both BLETCHER and SHANNON watch the joyful and sensuous dance with growing anxiety. (62)

The stage directions make it clear that the dance becomes more and more exalted, moving toward an ecstatic state – and suggesting a *dance macabre*. A waltz tune can be heard at the beginning of Act II, Scene 21 when the Shannons arrange a show of Thomson’s paintings (hoping to attract guests to their lodge by giving them a picture by Thomson for free). It is in this scene that Bletcher announces himself to Winnie as a suitor and she refuses (89). The painter fails to be present at his own show – the title of the next scene is “Painter Goes Mad.” He has grave doubts about the worth of his own work, sings a song about the colours in the storm, followed by a song by



the Company, then Thomson collapses to his knees (100). The last scenes of the play sum up the mysterious conditions of his disappearance and repeat key phrases from earlier scenes.

The fact that there are only scarce documents about the life (and death) of one of the best-known painters in Canada offers artistic freedom and means challenges for the author. Jim Betts chose a solution of film-like dramaturgy, using Thomson's paintings to evoke the location and some of the characters in his play. He blends romantic elements, like the idea of idyllic nature, a love affair with a young woman living her whole life in Algonquin Park with features of modernist art (misunderstanding, the contrast between commercial and 'true' art, the artist as exalted/passionate person). The songs form an integral part of the plot, while at the same time perhaps nodding to the Brechtian effects viewers know from such plays as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, elevating the story almost to a metaphysical level. The songs are often sung by the COMPANY, prompting Grace to see a suggestion of a Greek chorus (137).¹⁹ By naming some of the songs after Thomson's paintings, these songs "suggest that the power of music can transcend both the visual and verbal arts to provide the most fitting celebration of Thomson's creative spirit and, by extension, the creative spirit of all artists" (141).

Conclusion

In the period leading up to the end of the Millennium, stories about real people – be they politicians, artists or everyday characters – attracted the attention of readers and theatre audiences. Biographies, autobiographies, journals, life stories, life writing fulfil a thirst for information. In the second part of the twentieth and first years of the twenty-first century – as if to offer a testimony of Northrop Frye's ideas about a 'new' culture becoming 'mature' (a phase that arrives "when the artist enters into a cultural heritage that his predecessors have drawn from" (23)) – several Canadian authors chose famous Canadian artists as subject matter for their work. The four plays examined here manifest a wide range of possibilities as to how art, artists and works of art can be represented live on the stage. The life and work of two emblematic Canadian painters – one female, one male – active in the early twentieth-century can serve as a starting point for reflections about the dilemmas artists face (e.g. Carr's choice not to marry) and the struggles they fight in order to achieve perfection in their work (e.g. Thomson's search for the perfect shade of grey). Concerning the

19) Grace mentions other parallels with ancient Greek tragedy: "Betts is telling an old familiar story with a tragic ending in mysterious, premature death. ... His hero must be significant enough, charismatic enough, for us to watch the replay of his approaching death with horror." (140)



dramaturgy, a traditional, realist approach seems to be less promising than sequences of scenes with visionary elements, integrating tools from other forms of artistic expression like puppetry and music, benefitting from the new technical possibilities and approaching the idea of multimedia art-forms.

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