Book Reviews

Emily Carr: A Biography, *by Maria Tippett, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 314, hardcover $15.95.*

Jeanne Cannizzo

For many years there has been considerable interest in, if variable appreciation of, Emily Carr's work. Most recently, Doris Shadbolt's much-acclaimed and profusely illustrated study, *The Art of Emily Carr,*[1] has again focused attention on Carr's paintings. But, as Cindy Nemser in *Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists* has suggested, 'art is a synthesis of the artist's multiple characteristics: physical traits, race, class, ethnic background, social circle, philosophical milieu, as well as gender, are all inseparably intertwined in the finished aesthetic product.'[2]

Nowhere is this more demonstrably true than in the life and work of Emily Carr. Although she has been described as coming 'as close to artistic genius as any Canadian woman has ever done',[3] it is only with the appearance of Maria Tippett's biography that we are offered a full, scholarly examination of the sources of this artistic 'near' genius.

The author, a cultural historian who has also written about pictorial perceptions of the British Columbia landscape, presents a carefully detailed account of Carr's life. She has thoroughly documented her subject's experiences, from her childhood in a typical, middle class, late Victorian family, quietly pursuing its parochial path in the provincial capital, to her death in 1945 in the same city, surrounded by a number of partially self-generated myths popularized in her autobiography, *Growing Pains*. This research is illustrated by a fine collection of photographs of Carr, and accompanied by colour plates of some of her paintings.

Carr's personality, emotional development, and sexuality is an interesting subject that is well-presented and analyzed by Tippett, whose interpretations in some instances must remain conjectural but are nevertheless convincing. Equally engaging are Tippett's explanations of the nature of the relationship, both in her life and in her art, between Carr and the Native peoples of B.C., and her discussion of the attraction, both psychic and aesthetic, which the forests held for the artist. The book successfully explores Carr's troubled relationship with her father and her ambiguous feelings towards her several sisters, her disinclination to marriage and childbearing, the roots of her fervid regionalism (expressed in a glorification of the West and in her self-conscious nationalism), her constant desire for recognition counterbalanced by a certain need for a self-image as a neglected and isolated artistic heroine, her empathy with (and occasional sentimentalization about) the animal kingdom, her affinity for the world of nature and her disdain for the conventions of the cultural sphere, and her literary projects which drew, in part, on her perceptions of her own past.

This biography, refreshingly, removes us from the realm of hagiography. The work of one of the few women 'to have reached the front ranks of Canadian painters on an equal footing with men'[4] can now be assessed with knowledge of the particular social, psychological, and physical environment in which Emily Carr's art is so deeply rooted.

Notes

1. Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr* (Toronto and Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin/Douglas & McIntyre, 1979).
2. Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975).
3. Sandra Gwyn, *Women in the Arts in Canada* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1971).
4. Dorothy Farr and Natalie Luckyj, *From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1975).

Latakia, *by Audrey Thomas, Talonbooks, 1979, pp. 172, paperback $7.95.*

Constance Rooke

Latakia is the post-mortem of an affair, necessary and yet somehow futile as such post-mortems often seem in life. Why analyze so relentlessly something we know to be dead? The answer, presumably, is that to do so may help us to understand the disease which led to death and thus to avoid its recurrence. Another answer is that to exorcise the pain of loss, one must wallow in it for a decent interval; these things take time, as everybody knows. The pain of immersion in a love which is over, where the ending is written and cannot be changed, is successfully communicated in Audrey Thomas' new novel. The structure of her novel reflects this dilemma: she avoids telling the story in order, she keeps backing up and she denies us the usual climax. The big scene never really happens — or, to put it another way, it keeps on happening. The pain of that moment of separation, when the lover's body gets unstuck and you know that it (or he) is never coming back — that is the moment which Audrey Thomas contrives to give us over and over again.

Perhaps the novel is therapy, then. The press release from Talonbooks tells us that *Latakia* is autobiographical fiction, and it certainly feels like it. In one sense, that is utterly beside the point. What matters is whether it means anything, does anything, makes any difference, to the reader. But the impression, at least, of autobiography is important if *Latakia* is to be seen as part of that sisterly exchange of information and insight which is one dimension (mistrusted by some, vaunted by others) of feminist literature in our time. The book is explicitly addressed to Michael and is described by Rachel, the narrator, as an 'imaginary monologue,' — which acknowledges that she is writing and not speaking it, and acknowledges also that Michael is not there to hear it. The original of Michael will, however, read the book now that it is in print; we feel sure of that, knowing Michael as we do. Thus, Rachel (or Audrey Thomas) has a pleasing advantage over other jilted lovers in that she has both the leisure and the power to say her piece. Her audience of one is guaranteed. 'And remember,' she says in the final line of the book, 'the best revenge is writing well.' That parting shot is, of course, a play on the claim that the best revenge is *living* well; this opposition of writing and living is central to the relationship of the lovers in *Latakia*. On another level, the novel seems directed mainly towards other women. Tacitly, it assumes for an audience something like a group of women friends (perhaps with a scattering of males) who will commiserate with the narrator, share her anger, and rejoice in her shows of strength — an audience, in short, who will be *on her side*.

Certainly I was on Rachel's side, except that I couldn't bear Michael. That, however, may be part of one's duty as confidante — it's hard to tell. Michael is something of a sexual exhibitionist, interested particularly in his own penis. What complicates our response is that Rachel is interested in his penis too, and she can't quite sort out whether Michael himself is nicely bawdy or repulsively so. At this distance I'd vote for repulsive, although Rachel informs us that he is a tender and considerate lover. His power over her is that he enters her life at a time when her waistline is gone, when she has been without a serious lover for a couple of years, when her body is lonely. He is younger than she is and excessively attractive. That puts her at an unfair disadvantage, which she makes up for with a superior