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

publishing record (four books to his zero). They meet, in fact, under circumstances which must have been difficult for his male ego: Michael is a student in her creative writing seminar. But Michael is a Henry Miller fan, a sexual romantic who knows how to make ladies bloom, flower, etc.

Complicating these sexual politics is the fact that Michael is married to Hester, whom he plays off against Rachel with a self-indulgent pretense of tenderness towards both women. Michael occupies the favoured position in this triangle, warmed alternatively on both sides and we wait in vain for the reversal which would have the women take comfort (erotically or otherwise) in one another. It's a fantasy the novel entertains, however — a comic threat hovering somewhere in the background and never put to rest. There are also signs (ominous for Michael) that Hester has gained strength in solitude, a more genuine interest in her own work. Thus, the relationship of Rachel and Hester echoes that of the author and her readers: sisterhood and the pleasures of creative labour are alternatives to absorption in the male, and the Michaels of the world had better watch their step.

The emphasis on setting in *Latakia* makes it also a kind of travel book, and this dimension of the novel works easily with the rest because it shows Rachel in her role as artist-observer. The beauties of Greece are the heroine's consolation prize, both in themselves and because she can write about them. Some of this feels a bit like ostentatious display, I confess. Yet because of the competition with Michael, there is a special poignancy in that display which is perhaps intentional. Their relationship, like the scenery, is grist to the mill: 'And Michael, think on this, dear, you have given me so much material!' That comment is barbed, for the lovers in *Latakia* are as narrowly possessive of their material as Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald ever were. In the midst of the most harrowing personal crisis, Rachel can store away potentially usable details of the scene. The question of which is more important, the experience itself or the possibility of capitalizing upon it in fiction, is close to the heart of the novel. I'm not sure what the answer is, or what Thomas would like the answer to be. But I'm uncomfortable when Michael tells Rachel that her books are 'absolutely self-centred,' when she admits that, and claims 'the point is, I *can* write about other people, I just don't choose to.' For now, it seems, Rachel (and presumably Audrey Thomas) will remain 'self-centred'; certainly *Latakia* is a novel of that kind, a novel concerned primarily with the support of the self in a troubled time. But Michael is wrong, I believe, in thinking that to be the best kind of strength a novel can have.

All three players verge on caricature; all three are created by Audrey Thomas in full awareness (or so it seems to me) of their roles in an extra-literary farce. These people may be absurd, the author implies — I'm certain she wants us to laugh at them. But the pain of the novel is also real. The problems of Rachel are the problems of Audrey Thomas, and may be ours as well.

Crossings, *by Betty Lambert, Pulp Press, 1979, pp. 284, paperback, $5.95.*

Frances Beer

The opening of *Crossings* is not promising: an over-civilized woman ('packing, neatly, like a lady') is headed North ('a shriek of freedom in my head') to a New Life on an Island with her Neanderthal Lover ('Mik's hands were weapons'). Oh, no, you think, Bear Re-Surfacing. In fact, Betty Lambert's novel is much better than that — for one thing she has a great sense of humour — and you have to wonder why she starts here, since it is neither the end nor the beginning of the story of Mik and Victoria.

The setting is the West Coast in what seems to be the early '60s (abortions are back street affairs, diaphragms the progressive form of birth control). Vicky tells the story — she is the writer, a successful playwright — and it has to do with her attempt to find escape, feeling, death, salvation, annihilation and fulfilment through her affair with the ex-con, Mik. Should you wonder why she wants to find all these things, and in this peculiar, violent way, she goes into some scathing detail about her younger years of marriage with Ben, the would-be artist, full of high and fashionable '60s ideals. (Vietnam, jealousy and children are all bad; self-actualization is good.) ' "We should simply pledge ourselves to each other at the top of a mountain," says Ben. The wedding has cost $40 and he is put out about this.' He is a phony, a cheapskate, a parasite, a coward. He lies, he exploits, and he *clings*. It is hardly surprising that Vicky wants a change.

But there are other reasons, more subterranean, why she is drawn to Mik. He is raw energy and a great lover, but in him she also sees a killer. ' "I'm gonna get you alone," he says, "and fuck you to death" '; the pattern of their affair is one of increasing violence. After their first round in bed, they 'lie there like two barbarians who have killed each other on the field. . . . Blood was coming down my thighs. . . . I could hardly walk.' Mik brings her a present (shoes with rhinestones in the heels) at which she turns up her nose ('they're vulgar': she likes a good fight, this girl). And so round two: they wreck the house, Mik pulls the phone out of its socket, tears the door off its hinges. He is a bull and she goads him. He goes on a binge, she hunts him down and brings him home. At strip poker he cuts off her pubic hair; 'he laughs, . . . throws my clothes at me like a guard at Auschwitz.'

It's a fight to the finish, but it's not clear whose finish it will be. Mik boasts to Vicky from the start that he can't be hurt: 'I've been destroyed by experts.' But he buys her a ring, takes her to meet his family, wants to marry her, wants to give her a baby. She, who desperately wanted a child with Ben, refuses to have Mik's. She maintains her middle-class literary-intellectual connections (to whom Mik is like 'a trained ape at Buckingham Palace'). She gives her Siamese kittens clever names like Lolita and Humbert. She has sporadic fits of madness, but her social position and her friends ensure that she will always be looked after. And when she is with them, she denies Mik. He drags her around by the hair, tears the door off its hinges again. But things start to look worse and worse for Mik. He plays Russian roulette and takes an overdose.

Through all this, Vicky visits her therapist, the Nut Lady, and eventually they uncover her trauma. When she was a child her father drowned himself and his lover, Jason. 'Then it comes, in a long howl. "He died. I loved him and he died." It is the first time I have cried.' The Nut Lady argues that if Vicky can get Mik to kill her, this will prove that her father loved her. (If she can destroy Mik, will that prove she loves *him*?)

Vicky's emotional violence and ambivalence are exhausting. She doesn't want Mik, but she won't let him go. Finally she and her prissy aunt call the police and arrange to have Mik committed. (As far as we can tell he is still in there.)

The sexual politics of *Crossings* are obscure. For an early '60s woman, Vicky is independent and successful, but she's not what we'd call liberated now: though a productive author, she shows little respect for her own work; in her relations with men she is abused — psychologically by Ben, physically by Mik; she has friendships with women, but they are not strong; men and sex, not women and work, are the focus of her energy; she tolerates her living mother, but she adores her dead father. You may shake a feminist finger at her but with the other hand you have to take your hat off to her honesty. She's tough and zany, a real scrapper, and a royal bitch, this Victoria; and her story, alarming as it is, deserves reading because it feels like the truth.

Coast of Many Faces, *by Ulli Steltzer and Catherine Kerr, Douglas & McIntyre, 1979, pp. 212, hardcover*

Ingrid Klassen

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