RECOVERING THE FICTIONS OF EMILY CARR

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> Try to imagine what it was like to be a woman painter in Victoria, like Emily Carr was. It's important to bring forward these moments from history. . . . It's important for all creators here to discover her, no matter their sex. . . . The solitude of women is something unique, even if men's solitude does exist. It's completely different when a woman is alone in the world. (Marie Claire Blais, *BiC*, Oct. 1991)

Emily Carr is a Canadian cultural icon, a domestic commodity containing some of our "official" responses to things like artistic freedom and integrity, the woman artist as outsider, and white champions of indigenous peoples. A woman who took pride in her difference and ex-centricity, she is often endowed with the stylized heroism that figures prominently in our national self-representations. Her collections of autobiographically-based prose are read as records charting the development of a uniquely Canadian brand of individualism and artistic development. Rarely, and only recently, have her prose works been considered as deliberately crafted fictions. Instead, Carr's writings are regarded as transparent documents unproblematically chronicling her life as a struggling artist in a hostile cultural environment; the story of her life and art sometimes appears to eclipse the woman and her experiences.

However, the paradigms we use to explain our histories may need some fairly extensive revisions when we try to understand this fascination with Carr, since these "chronicles" present multiple (and sometimes competing) versions of a biography that seems to be self-perpetuating. Apparently rejecting the modernist notion of a unified self, Carr opts for polyphonic self-portraiture

in *Klee Wyck* (1941), *The Book of Small* (1942), *The House of All Sorts* (1944), and *Growing Pains: An Autobiography* (1946). Instead of isolating formative circumstances and interpolating a subject from a causal sequence, Carr constructs a series of voices/personae whose historic specificity is uncertain, at best. The stories told by these voices frequently connect with or overlap those in other collections. Only *Growing Pains* makes any pretense of observing a "realistic" or at least familiar depiction of time, and it relies heavily on a knowledge of the earlier texts. Each collection of autobiographical prose fiction constitutes a unique return to and re-visioning of personal history which intensifies the conflation of historical and fictional subjects. Collectively, these works posit multiplicity, fragmentation, and dynamism as answers to the intricately patterned, yet static, models of life writing that translate private action into public product.

Throughout her fictions, autobiography, journals, and published letters, Emily Carr displays her frustration and preoccupation with the public reception of her works. While it is true that not all of the responses to her art shows were negative, she only received unqualified acclaim near the end of her career. The majority of Carr's critics tend to regard her reactions to her public as overstated and interpret this (over)reaction as psychologically necessary: they suggest that Carr needed to regard herself as an unappreciated artist in order to continue her work. If this interpretation is valid, surely Carr might also seek to project a very particular and carefully (re)constructed version of herself to counteract this "unappreciative" public gaze. Women may be especially prone to this variety of deliberate self-fashioning if they believe they address a predominantly "male" community, when an awareness of audience accompanies the self-recuperation and domestication inherent in the autobiographical act:

> Since traditional autobiography has functioned as one of those forms and languages that sustain sexual difference, the woman who writes autobiography is doubly estranged when she enters the autobiographical contract. . . . Since autobiography is a public expression, she speaks before and to "man." Attuned to the ways women have been dressed up for public exposure, attuned also to the price women pay for public self-disclosure, the autobiographer reveals in her

> speaking posture and narrative structure her understanding of the possible readings she will receive. . . . (Smith 49)

Carr's attention to the reception of her work suggests a keen interest in self-disclosure and disguise. The two apparently contradictory impulses, revelation and self-protection, appear in a wide variety of guises in all of her prose. She repeatedly describes identity as something immediately present yet undisclosed and she accentuates this paradox by expressing selfhood metaphorically.

In this light, her most significant achievement is the creation of a character named "Emily Carr" who is multiply-con- stituted, polyphonic, and "lies," according to some who knew her creator. Carr's biographers consistently note what they describe as "mistakes" that she makes regarding dates and events, but fail to consider the possibility that the variety of "truth" that they seek may not be present in "fictions."[1] Carr achieves a paradoxical clarity ("truth") and obscurity ("fiction") by employing anecdote to redirect her reader's attention towards "gaps" in these texts, which are like the hole in the manuscript which perpetually frustrates the biographer/narrator in Woolf's *Orlando.* Even *Growing Pains,* which Carr subtitles "An Autobiography," uses the "fragmented" anecdotal form, and she accentuates its fictionality by assigning a title to each anecdote. Anecdote, by definition, is (individually) intimate and precise while (collectively) fragmented and apparently disorganized.[2] For Carr, then, anecdote ideally presents the unstable collage of self in autobiography that resists (mis)interpretation: "the question of the subject situates itself epistemologically at the point where the epistemic subject, characterized in terms of historical experience, interiority, and consciousness, is giving way to a decentred subject, constructed through signifying practices" (Godard 7). Repeatedly, we are encouraged to accept the plethora of detail offered by Carr's collections of anecdotes, and to resist the temptation to extrapolate a single, consistent subject. Carr posits the fragments as a way to read (as signifying practices) and not just as products that should be read.

The emphasis on the oral qualities of anecdote helps Carr free herself from linearity. Biographers, too willing to reconstruct a chronology and heedless of the effects of Carr's fictional form,

often insist that there be only one "lifeline," whereas Carr denies and resists the equation of identity with individuality, both in the sense of a unique interpretation of a "time/life line" and in terms of her "selfhood."[3] By uniting (and subsequently highlighting) the deliberate "self" preoccupations inherent in the historiographic qualities of autobiography and the consciously "fictive" form of the anecdote, she virtually creates her own mode. Further, Carr transforms an overlooked genre into a vehicle of resistance by rejecting oppressive self-historicizing gestures. In this century, women's autobiographical writings raise a series of questions, such as those posed by Doris Sommer:

> Is [autobiography] the model for imperializing the consciousness of colonized peoples, replacing their collective potential for resistance with a cult of individuality and even loneliness? Or is it a medium of resistance with counterdiscourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography? (111)

Carr subverts the first of Sommer's models (the traditional motive frequently associated with autobiography) in order to enact the second. She both refutes the "cult of individuality" and challenges the exclusivity of historiography, which often incorporates the former by structuring history as the story of the actions of "great men." By adopting the polyphony of multivoiced discourse, she denies the authority of the "male" autobiographical model which has the presentation of a unified "self" as its aim. The "excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power" of the exclusionary "imperializing" model occurs in Carr's refusal to unite and/or priorize the many voices with which she tells her history. Further, Carr's reliance on the anecdotal mode allows her several additional freedoms: she can deflect negative response by repeatedly insisting that she is not a "writer" and that what she writes cannot be considered threatening because they are "only" stories; she can document her changing views of her surroundings and her position as an artist; and she can perpetually re-vision herself.

The anecdotal form is ideal for the retention of multiple voices (or multiple self-histories) because, although echoes and repetitions occur in many stories, each ultimately remains a dis-

crete unit. Carr ensures this by carefully ordering the anecdotes in each volume—rarely does she present her subjects as contiguous. The effect of this alinearity is that the collections are, on the one hand, disjointed and fragmented recollections and reconstructions and, on the other hand, dynamic and fluid representations of identity. Interestingly, while feminist critics of women's autobiography almost unanimously agree with Brodzki and Schenck when they assert that "self-definition in relation to significant others is the most pervasive characteristic of the female autobiography"(8), Carr requires that we take this notion a step further. Like many other women autobiographers, Emily Carr's "significant others" are family, acquaintances, and friends, but some of these "significant others" who help her define herself are the self-created versions of Carr we encounter in her fictions, such as "Small" and "the Landlady." When we read *Klee Wyck, The Book of Small, The House of All Sorts,* and *Growing Pains* as a unit, we discover a mature woman creating and re-creating earlier versions of herself and subsequently interacting with them. With this interaction comes both an appreciation of other identities and a subsequent need to re-visit and re-vision them, in order to comprehend new understandings based on more recent encounters. "Identity," therefore, is never even temporarily static and "knowable."

In each of the texts that Carr supervised to the point of publication, we find multiple versions of "Emily Carr." In *Klee Wyck,* the most pervasive version is that of an artist committed to the preservation of totems and great buildings of the West Coast; in *The Book of Small,* it is the child "Small"; in *The House of All Sorts,* the main character is Carr-as-Landlady. From this perspective, *Growing Pains* is the most fascinating because no single identity asserts itself over the others, although the voice of the mature, frequently bedridden woman frames and often "silently" controls the others. Significantly, *GP* collects all of these voices/ identities without apology or explanation, and thereby most forcefully asserts the viability of each.

Carr also encourages multiple readings of her re-encounters with her past by creating figurative "gaps."[4] For instance, in *Klee Wyck,* Carr-as-young-artist visits a Native graveyard and is puzzled by the characters "IPOO" on each wooden cross that marks a grave. She consults a village woman, asking her to explain the

significance of this "word", and gradually understands that the "P" is a "9" that has been mistakenly transposed. In this tersely-rendered anecdote, the young artist/Carr finds an appropriate metaphor to communicate her apprehension of the differences between Native and white. The anonymous village woman indicates the futility of Carr's preoccupation with both time and individuality by pointing out the value of more inclusive categories, which is why all the graves in this particular cemetery are labelled "1900": "Time was marked by centuries in this cemetery. Years—little years—what are they? As insignificant as the fact that reversing the figure nine turns it into the letter P" (96). Signifiers are not inextricably bound to particular meanings, as whites (represented by the naive, question- ing Carr from colonial Victoria) insist. The present moment, like the individual, is simply a point on a much larger and more expansive continuum. Individual numbers and letters, after all, have "meaning" only insofar as we appreciate the larger contexts in which they occur—a point on an infinite number-line and the English alphabet.

The letter "P," therefore, figuratively expands Carr's text and allows the reader to participate in the dramatization of the interpretative experience of this "isolated" anecdote. Just as the young artist mistakes "IPOO" for a Native word when she judges it by her own cultural standards, so may the reader mistake the incident related here for the cultural commodity that we identify as "Emily Carr." Neither the incident nor the voice which relates the encounter is as easy to "decipher" as might first appear. "IPOO" represents all that is impossible to "translate" for the voice telling this story and, as such, the "P"-as-"9" signifies "gap." In many ways, this brief anecdote focusing on the letter P "stands for" Carr's impressions (as she remembers them) of the West Coast peoples at this stage of her career. Memory's inconstancy requires fluidity in both the experience (or re-experience) and in the interpretation/telling of that experience.

Carr frequently uses the anecdotal form in this way. Its compressed style is ideal to communicate in a kind of "short-hand" which tropes such as metaphors also allow. Whenever character and event are condensed, especially in short fiction, the speaker encourages (and sometimes demands) interaction from the reader. Here, Carr provides us with a means of understanding the

speaker (Carr as young artist), but she also indicates how we might go about understanding her collection of short fiction called *Klee Wyck.*

Other such incidents are prevalent in all of Carr's autobiographical fictions. In *The Book of Small,* where Carr focusses on her childhood and her family, the voice that Carr constructs to re-examine these years is as naive as the one that recounts the graveyard episode in *Klee Wyck.* This apparently ingenuous voice is, however, periodically interrupted by a more mature speaker. The latter allows us to appreciate the misapprehensions of the former more fully, but it never supplants the supremacy of the child-Carr, named Small. Instead, the more nebulous mature voice helps to foreground particular incidents that the elder "Carr" perpetually re-evaluates and re-interprets.

One such incident is related in "White Currants," which, like a number of other pieces in Carr's fictional works, would likely arouse more attention if it were not virtually hidden in a volume of stories. Because Carr "sandwiches" it between two others that are more characteristic of the volume as a whole (since they present Small's impressions of odd or unusual characters), "White Currants" becomes part of the larger fabric and does not draw attention to itself. However, when we look for anomalies in Carr's writings, stories such as this stand out. There is nothing immediately remarkable about the language Carr uses in this anecdote (which mimics the simplistic impressions of Small), nor is there anything surprising about the narrative style, since it maintains the tone Carr establishes in the seven preceding stories. The only clue that "White Currants" differs in any way from the others in this collection is the repetition of the word "it" in the first two paragraphs:

> It happened many times, and it always happened just in that corner of the old garden.
> When it was going to happen, the dance in your feet took you there without your doing anything about it. You danced through the flower garden and the vegetable garden till you came to the row of currant bushes, and then you danced down it. (54)

Even still, one's attention might not be arrested by such repetition because Carr sometimes, especially in *The Book of Small,* affects a

rather mischievous tone and one might reasonably expect more of the same in this case. However, just as in the example from *Klee Wyck,* Carr here inserts an unusual event and presents her subsequent attempts to explain the significance of the event over the course of her life; clearly, this occasion was not only typical in the sense that it occurred over an extended period of her childhood, but represents a reaction that Carr has selected as typical—in the guise of Small—of her youth. The anecdote seems slight in some ways, although Carr habitually situates some of her most poignant remarks (and her most cryptic) about ways of seeing in such places:

> The white currants ripened first. The riper they got, the clearer they grew, till you could almost see right through them. You could see the tiny veins in their skins and the seeds and the juice. Each currant hung there like an almost-told secret.
> Oh! you thought, if the currants were just a wee bit clearer, then perhaps you could see them living, inside. (54)

It is tempting to make an analogy between the comments in this story and Carr's aesthetics, as others have done, by focussing on the "seeing" in such a passage. However, it is also interesting to focus on the "almost-told secret" to which Carr-as-Small refers. Small is tantalized by the potential to see, from *without,* the workings of the white currants. This secret remains untold, although she provides another possible version of events (and another possible parable of perception). She goes on to describe a fantasy she associates with the physical situation of the currant bushes: she invents an unnamed boy who rides a horse and brings one for her to ride. Finally, it becomes apparent why she connects these "visionary" experiences:

> Everything was going so fast . . . that they stopped being four things and became one most lovely thing, and the little boy and the white horses and I were in the middle of it, like the seeds that you saw dimly inside the white currants. In fact, the beautiful thing was like the white currants, like a big splendid secret getting clearer and clearer every moment. . . . (54)

The activity Small describes here is not unlike the revisioning and revising of personal history that Carr undertakes

throughout her short fiction works. She places herself *inside* and fixes us *outside,* in her former position. She is careful to reveal only those parts she wishes the public gaze to fall upon and never allows her readers to do more than "[see] dimly inside." Carr frequently uses such an incident both to encourage reader participation (that is, we half create what we are permitted to see) and to determine the parameters of that participation. Both here and in the example cited above from *Klee Wyck,* Carr draws our attention to what is buried beneath or hidden within, yet only vaguely gestures toward a definite interpretation. Further, because she uses the voices and visions of characters with whom she identifies, but who cannot be mistaken for the Carr who writes while she is bedridden by a stroke, the reader is forced to accept both Carr-as-artist's and Small's renditions and to avoid choosing between the two in an attempt to "unify" the character of Emily Carr.

The same is true of *The House of All Sorts* and Growing *Pains: An Autobiography,* which include many other examples of this use of anecdote. More insistently than in the earlier works, both refer to a deliberate "covering" of whatever it was that Emily Carr regarded as her "true" self and both collections more successfully confuse our perception of Carr. In these texts, Carr re-evaluates incidents and relationships that she has already described and examined in *Klee Wyck* and *The Book of Small.* For this reason, the polyphony of the voices in these books is more pronounced. Carr relies on our acquaintance with "Klee Wyck" and "Small" to fill in the spaces they would otherwise occupy, especially in *Growing Pains.* Carr's autobiography is remarkable because of the great variety of incidents that she has chosen to exclude. However, she also subtly draws attention to the "gaps" in her story of herself. Carr occasionally indicates that she has told a story elsewhere and passes over re-telling the details of those years. This is not the case for other incidents, though. Carr's tendency to revise and to re-cast herself in different poses to better "explain" her relationships with her family is strong in these collections of anecdotes. This desire to explain by adopting masks of herself has a direct effect on our perception of Carr. The ingenuous, naive tone that is the one consistency in Carr's works and her determination to use the anecdote as her form *should* convince us of her sincerity and frankness. The contrary is, however, the case. One gradually real-

izes that the tone and form are the means by which Emily Carr both "recovers" her physical and emotional health and simultaneously distances our ability to comprehend her as a single identity.

As I have already indicated, the examples that I have selected demonstrate that the fictional/autobiographical works of Emily Carr can be read as metaphors of "recovery." Women's autobiographies often capitalize on images of "unearthing" to describe the process of inscribing neglected *her*stories into *his*tory. Carr's works are no exception. *The House of All Sorts* opens with a curious picture of the beginning of this stage of Carr's life—the years during which she painted very little because she devoted herself to earning a living by renting rooms of her home:

> But the foundations of my house were not entirely of brick and cement. Underneath lay something too deep to be uprooted when they dug for the basement. The builders did not even know it was there, did not see it when they spread the cement floor. It was in my memory as much as it was in the soil. No house *could* sit it down, no house blind what my memory saw—a cow, an old white horse, three little girls in pinafores. . . . (3)

Victorian novels make much of the idea of "the buried life" and it is easy to look at this passage in the same way. However, unlike Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, Carr-the-Landlady does not leave part of herself buried and refuse to acknowledge that part as a vital element. If anything, the reverse is true. Carr is more than aware of the part that is "buried." She focuses more on what is not immediately visible and thereby suggests a way of reading not only *The House of All Sorts* but a way of reading (and perhaps writing) her own life stories. By presenting such a wealth of detail in four collections of anecdotes, some of which repeat and elaborate on earlier ones, Carr "covers and re-covers" herself. We *should*, with so much autobiographical material upon which to draw, be able to offer a single, unified "meaning"—we *should* be able to say just what Carr is like, since we have discovered the Jamesian "figure in the carpet."

For the biographer or historian, such a profusion and confusion of detail can be deeply disturbing. But if we can allow ourselves to doubt the possibility of ever finding "the meaning"

in another's life and if we can allow ourselves to perceive personality as something that is not static or the end result of experience, then we have a way to appreciate Carr's apparently contradictory renditions of herself. Instead of trying to fit all the details into a pattern, as leading biographers and historians tell us to do, we must allow that identity is multiple and fluid. It is not necessary to "disinter" the subject or to declare the death of the author; it is sufficient to know that something has been "buried."

The most precise expression of this issue occurs in *Growing Pains: An Autobiography*. Carr describes the non-reaction, though not indifference, of her sister to some of Carr's paintings and sketches:

> "I suppose you thought these were wallpaper?" pointing to my studies on the wall. My voice was nasty. I felt bitter. My sister was peeved. She neither looked at nor asked about my work during the whole two months of her visit. It was then that I made myself into an envelope into which I could thrust my work deep, lick the flap, seal it from everybody. (139)

More than in any other anecdote, Carr's identification here with a secret that has been "covered over" acts as the most succinct statement of the activity that characterizes her autobiographical prose fiction. The envelope, as a vehicle of communication which contains information while withholding access to that knowledge, signifies both her continued acts of self-revelation and her repeated attempts to limit our access to that information. Here, appropriately enough, Carr transforms herself into a container, just as she does (on a figurative level) in *Growing Pains* and her other works. The unique solitude of women that Marie Claire Blais refers to is, therefore, reproduced by the opaque envelope that Carr presents as a metaphor for the autobiographical act. The desire to reveal the private subject rivals the desire to create a public subject safely distant, one that resists conventional methods of interpretation. Writing, in such a context, becomes an activity valued in its own right and not for the product it yields.

By insisting that we recognize and accept the validity of her multiple re-visions of herself (manifested in the polyphony of her prose collections) as "covers" for a variety of self-truths which ultimately can be only vaguely gestured towards, we find ourselves no closer to "understanding" the woman. "My work," in this in-

stance, becomes synonymous with a message that remains tantalizingly present, but infinitely indecipherable. "My work" remains a secret, guarded by the voices that Carr meta-morphoses here into a sealed envelope.

What we, as Carr's readers, are left with is a series of secrets that are almost, but never quite revealed. Like the letters we are never permitted to read in "The Purloined Letter" and *The Turn of the Screw*, we can have access to all of the "facts" without ever approaching a satisfying interpretation. All of the voices that we encounter in Carr's prose fictions can be likened to "containers" that protect their contents. Klee Wyck ("the laughing one") transforms herself into a figure that must be de-ciphered, Small merges with the protected contents of the currants, the Landlady buries herself beneath the drudgery of her housekeeping duties, and "Emily Carr, renowned Canadian artist" seals herself within an envelope. The spaces or gaps that Carr creates throughout her prose writings by way of such voices are not empty—on the contrary, they are so densely filled with potential that they resist our desire to reduce and manage. Furthermore, the envelopes with which Carr confronts her readers are tangible records of her self-creations, just like her paintings, and yet they refuse to define or delimit the woman who constructed them.

NOTES

1 These kinds of prejudices are fairly widespread, and certainly are not confined to Carr's critics. John Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse* has excited the same sort of response. For example, W. J. Keith describes it as "unreliable as literary history, yet unparallelled as an imaginative reconstruction of its period" (203). The assumption that Keith betrays here, of course, is that "memoirs" *should* be "historical," which seems to be synonymous with "reliable." Such distinctions preserve an artificial distance between historians and their histories which elides the acts of interpretation and reconstruction. One of the best examples of this activity by Carr's critics occurs in Blanchard's "Appendix 1." Here, she refutes Carr's claim (in *Klee Wyck)* regarding the date of the important trip to Ucluelet. As evidence of Carr's "error," Blanchard cites several sources, one of which is the tes-

timony of Lizzie Houston Armstrong: "[she] vehemently denied that Emily visited there then, said she had never met Emily and that her Ucluelet stories were 'the darnedest lies I ever heard'" (291). Maria Tippett goes much further, attributing (largely by association) Carr's actions to the pathology of hysteria. Tippett's antiquated application of Freud has been refuted by many critics since the initial publication of her biography of Carr.

[2] Definitions of anecdote focus on its plotlessness, its simplicity in rendering a single event, and its humour. It is generally distinguished from the sketch because of its more overt "fictionality." Like the sketch, the anecdote is usually regarded as a self-contained narrative. My use of the term attempts to avoid the valorizing of those who see the form as a diminutive.

[3] Carr's resistance to and apparent dissatisfaction with such models is not unique. In "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," Susan Stanford Friedman notes:

> The fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity. From both an ideological and psychological perspective, in other words, individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities. (35)

Later in the same article, Friedman is even more precise about the problems for both readers and writers of women's autobiographies: "Alienation is not the result of creating a self in language, as it is for Lacanian and Barthesian critics of autobiography. Instead, alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act" (41). Unfortunately, Friedman simply replaces one version of a public self (male) with another (female). Carr, like other women who insistently inscribe the autobiographical in their fictions, apparently seeks to create/discover a self, but resists the decoding of a life to realize a final static self.

[4] Although Carr's biographers tend to agree with Tippett in accounting for such "gaps" as evidence of memory lapses, I believe that Carr deliberately creates these spaces in an attempt to achieve a "true" (for Carr) picture of the woman she was and the woman she became. Such structural and figurative spaces enable Carr to present her self-fashionings as fluid elements which are innovative adaptations of a static male mode/model.

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