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Selected Examples of the Dialectic between Landscape Painting and Landscape Poetry in Canada (case studies)

Ut pictura poesis.
(As is painting so is poetry.)
(Horace)

Abstract

The close relationship between painting and poetry has been long acknowledged by art historians and literary critics alike. It is not by accident that both painters and poets have responded to the specific nature of the variety of Northern landscapes on the Canadian artistic scene as well. Spatial knowledge has always been part and parcel of "Canadian existence", therefore, it serves as a source of inspiration for artistic expression creating moods in the viewers' psychic and mental responses to the environment. The paper focuses on selected works by the Group of Seven comparing them with a random choice of poems. The case studies are thematically arranged. They illustrate how the brushstrokes and their literary equivalents compose themselves into convincing evocations of landscapes.

Résumé

Le rapport étroit entre peinture et poésie est une évidence depuis longtemps pour des historiens de l'art et des critiques littéraires également. Ce n'est pas un hasard que peintres et poètes réagissent de la même façon aux paysages du Nord du Canada. Le savoir de l'espace faisait toujours partie de "l'existence canadienne" et comme telle serait de source aux possibilités de l'expression artistique. Ces oeuvres créent une ambiance spéciale pour le public, à sa réaction physique et mentale concernant l'environnement. Le présent article est consacré à quelques oeuvres de Group of Seven tout en les comparant à des poèmes choisis arbitrairement. Les études des cas sont groupés thématiquement pour illustrer comment les touches du pinceau et leurs correspondants littéraires font un ensemble de conception de paysage.

Experiencing the idiosyncratic Northern landscape(s) in Canada has been of crucial importance for Canadian artists. In this paper I shall primarily concentrate on five representative canvases produced by the painters of the *Group of Seven* and some poems whose authors were also inspired by their "adventures" with the North. Attention will be paid to similar and different ways of artistic expressions. Based on the combined feelings of "déjà vu" and "déjà entendu", the works have been chosen

on possible artistic dialogues, be it only imaginary if not real. There certainly are “migrations back and forth between literature and the visual arts” (Mitchell, 280). I agree with Ruskin when he says, “Painting is properly to be opposed to speaking or writing, but not to poetry” (qtd. in Landow, “Ruskin’s Theories of the Sister Arts”).

The *Group of Seven*, a school, a “movement” started to work together in the 1910s, and had their first exhibition in 1920 and the last one in 1931. The graphic symbol of the group was designed by Carl Michael.



CATALOGUE
EXHIBITION
OF PAINTINGS
MAY 7th--MAY 27th
1920

PRICE: 10 CENTS

ART MUSEUM
OF TORONTO

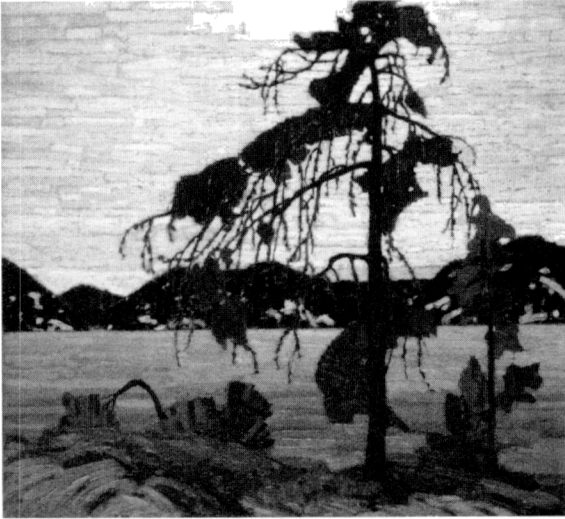
In the forward to the *Group of Seven Exhibition Catalogue, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1920* Lawren Harris says: “Artistic expression is a **spirit**, not a method, a pursuit, not a settled goal, not a body of rules” (n.p). These painters were under the strong *power* of the North that was a source of inspiration for them, but human presence cannot be detected in their paintings. (emphasis added) They were intimately connected to Ontario and were very close to nature; they visited the Algonquin Park, the Precambrian Shield, even Labrador and the Arctic. Only few of them went as far as the prairies and the Rockies. Most of them had literary endeavours, too: they wrote poems, essays criticising and praising each other’s works. The philosophy behind their way of thinking was theosophy; the intuitive knowledge of the Divine. They were admirers of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.

The similarity in spatial composition produced by the members of the *Group of Seven* and some earlier Canadian poets was noticed quite early: “The work of these young artists deserves enthusiastic recognition and support”, wrote the *Mail and Empire*, regarding them as the successors to the landscape poetry of Archibald Lampman and Bliss Carman.’ (qtd. Hill, 82).

In the following I shall make an attempt to point out some possible similarities or differences between the pictorial representation and their literary analogues of certain *moods* related to some of the specificities of the Canadian landscape.

First a painting will be commented upon, which will be followed by matching lines from some poems.

Meditation



Tom Thomson: *The Jack Pine* (1916-1917)

Thomson was an inspiration, a spiritual guide to the Group, never really part of it but has always been thought to be one of them. He died mysteriously in Algonquin Park in 1917. According to Silcox this painting together with his other one, *The west Wind* (1917): “defined the spirit of Canada as ‘Northern’” (11). We see through the delicate branches and leaves of the tree the far away shore of the lake. “Its [the tree’s] shape ... is a poetic metaphor as a harp of the wind” (Murray, 49). It is not only the tree that holds our attention but something mysterious in the distance. The tree is a starting point for further contemplation. The shape of the tree reminds us of a cross.

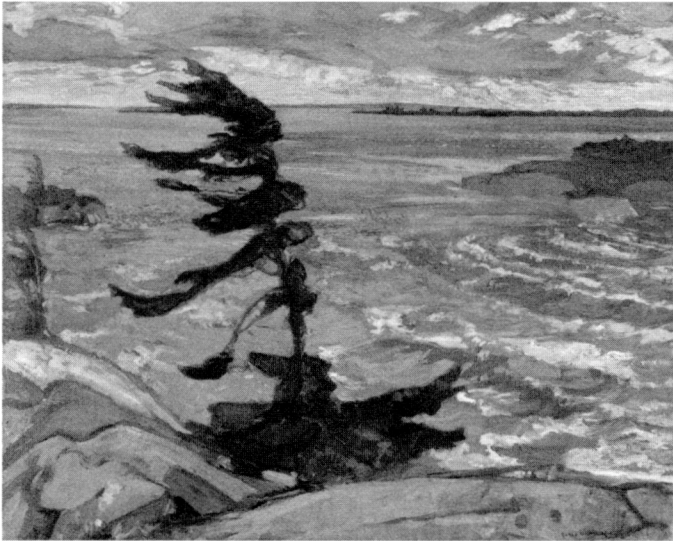
And since - awful silence broods
 Profoundly o'er these solitudes:
 not but the lapsing of the floods
 Breaks the deep stillness of the woods;
 A sense of desolation reigns
 O'er these unpeopled forest plains
 Where sounds of life ne'er wake a tone
 Of cheerful praise round Nature's throne,

Man finds himself with God-alone.
(emphasis added)

From **Susanna Moodie**: *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852)

Thomson and Moodie share the contemplative nature of our existence but in Moodie's case the meditative intensity is not serene but not completely without hope either. The belief in the "beyond" is certainly present in both works.

Kind Roughness



F.H. Varley: *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay* (1921)

In the midst of the bold fights of natural forces the free-flowing waves are in harmony with the bending branches of a pine tree. The foreground painted in thick strokes is in contrast with the much smoother area beyond. The sun filters through the sky, the clouds are far from being dark. "It is a lyrical but forceful statement, and a remarkable achievement for someone who did not consider himself a landscape painter" (Mellen, 130).

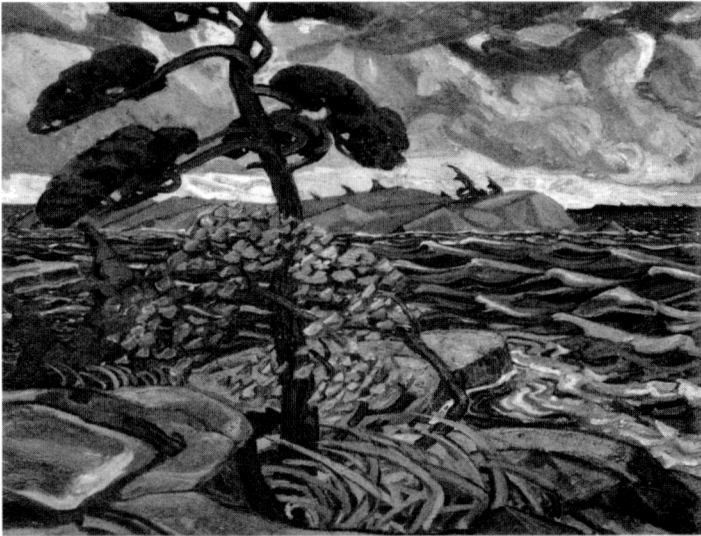
Cedar and jagged fir
uplift sharp barbs
against the gray
and cloud-pile sky;
and in the bay
blown spume and widrift
and thin, bitter spray
snap
at the whirling sky;

and the pine trees
lean one way.

From **A.J.M. Smith**: *The Lonely Land* (1936)
(Originally subtitled "Group of Seven" in the *McGill Fortnightly Review*,
1926)

This stanza captures a vaster panorama than the one in the painting but it conveys the same struggle of natural powers. The impression of roughness and ruggedness even sharpness is more emphasized here, but what the two share is the mix of rugged strength and loneliness. The heightened awareness of the dramatic power of nature can be felt in each of them. The poetic representation of the sky is menacing unlike in the painting.

Effective Contemplation



Arthur Lismer: *A September Gale, Georgian Bay* (1921)

In this picture we can witness how the storm is approaching an end. The pictorial structure is concerned more with the surroundings of the tree: the rock formations, the waves, and the plants all lean out of the canvas leading our eyes towards something unknown. There is a movement from right to left. Each element seems to be controlled and strictly organized in relation to one another. The full impact of the painting may come when the viewer has followed the individual components leaving the painting. The colours are roughly applied thus they almost force us to further thinking.

Be Quiet, wind, a little while,
And let me hear my heart.

Your chiming rivulet, still your chant
And stealthily depart.

You whisperings in the aspen leaves,
you far-heard whip-poor-will,
You slow drop spilling from the rose-
You, even, you, be still.

I must have infinite silence now,
Lest I should miss one word
Of all my heart would say to me-
now when its deeps are stirred.

Hardly I dare my breath to draw
Lest breathing break the spell,-
While we commune, my heart and I,
In dreams too deep to tell.

Charles G.D. Roberts: *Be Quiet Wind* (1934)

This poem could be a follow-up to having been exposed to the visual experience while seeing Lismer's painting. The poet seems to beg for solitude when he can ponder upon the cruel effects of a natural disaster from which he could escape. Seeing the painting and reading the poem, we can say that they both develop a desire in us for being able to reflect upon the vicissitudes in the human condition of life.

Hope



Lawren S. Harris: *North Shore, Lake Superior* (1926)

A.J. Jackson, a member of the *Group of Seven* said:

It shows a big pine stump right in the centre of the canvas and Lake Superior shimmering in the background. Among the members of the group it was known as “The Grand Trunk” I was with him when he found the stump, which was almost lost in the bush; from its position we could not see Lake Superior at all. Harris isolated the trunk and created a nobler background for it. (qtd. Hunkin, 136)

There is a movement in this painting, too, not vertically as in Lismer’s; the eye is forced upwards. This time it is a tree trunk in the centre, and it is not off-centre as the trees are in the other paintings. The painting extends into the distance, however, we are more sure of a sense of endurance. A strong sense of form characterizes the painting, the reduction of forms can be the basis for Northrop Frye’s observation: “The effect of stylizing and simplifying is to bring out more clearly, not what the painter sees but what he experiences in seeing” (qtd. Harris, xi.)

This is the beauty
of strength
broken by strength
and still strong.

From A. J. M. Smith: *The Lonely Land* (1936)

These four lines express a state of mind after being part of an elevation of limitless expanse. A feeling of timelessness, a feeling of survival is suggested in the Atwoodian sense (Atwood, 1972). In a similar fashion to the earlier example, these lines could be read as a verbal conclusion to Harris’s painting.

Colour in the Heart



Tom Thomson: *Autumn Foliage* (1916)

Autumn Foliage holds our attention by its boldness of colours. Thomson painted the spiritual embrace of autumn with great sensitivity. Here the pictorial space is more flattening, it does not want to reach into different dimensions. "Space is of ... decorative concern" (Reid, 134). The intense colours of red and yellow with a touch of blue are combined in a dramatically cheerful way.

Along the line of smoky hills
 The crimson forest stand,
 and all the day the blue-jay calls
 Throughout the autumn lands.

Now by the brook the maple leans
 with all his glory spread,
 And all the sumachs on the hills
 Have turned their green to red.

Now by great marshes wrapt in midst,
 Or past some river's mouth
 Throughout the long, still autumn day
 Wild birds are flying south.

Wilfrid Campbell: *Indian Summer* (1888)

The emotions and intent expressed in Campbell's poem are in accord with Thomson's endeavours. Campbell could be the pictorial narrator and interpreter of Thomson's painting. The deep purplish red colour gives a great immediacy to the rich handling of the landscape. Both artists communicate their feelings with an innate power of expression and with great sensibility.

What holds together the artists talked about is their creative anxiety, their common goals. What was said about the *Group of Seven* is true for a large number of poets as well:

The Group of Seven Artists whose pictures are exhibited here for several years held a vision concerning art in Canada. They are all imbued with the idea that Art must grow and flow in the land before the country will be a real home for its people. (Harris, Forward, Group of Seven Exhibition Catalogue Art Gallery of Toronto, 1920, n.p.)

Through their "journeys outward" and their "journeys inward" (McLuhan, 2) the artistic activity of the Canadian painters and poets looked at keeps radiating out towards a larger and larger audience. As Lessing suggested in 1766 "poetry can come to the aid of painting; in regard to the former, painting to the aid of poetry by illustration and example" (trans. Frothingham, xiii.). The painters' and the poets' aesthetic response to their close relatedness to the Canadian north would support

Lessing's idea that both painting and poetry produce illusions and they are pleasing. (trans. Frothingham, xii.) This statement certainly holds true for the Canadian artistic scene.

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