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**Review of the Crisis of Abstraction in Canada Exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada**

The occasion of the exhibition The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada offers an occasion to consider the parallels between the period covered in that exhibition, the 1950s, and the present. Doing so is valuable both as a way of better understanding the perils for thinking in own time and for knowing more precisely the character of that crucial decade in Canadian history that was the decisive decade in the surrender of the autonomy of the Canadian intellectual tradition. The most obvious, and perhaps basic, comparison between the two decades that one would wish to draw would be between the theses of Daniel Bell's The End of Ideology, a book that perhaps more exactly than any other reveals the sanguine spirit of the age, and Fukiyama's The End of History. Both books celebrate the triumph of Western capitalist democracy as the final, because ideal, form of social organization. Both writers propose that the final, ideal form of social organization will be a universal, homogeneous state. The contours of development towards the universal, homogeneous state that the two thinkers describe appear different—Bell's being the rise to ascendancy of liberal ideas of individuality and democracy from the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment and Fukiyama's being the Hegelian saga of Reason's self-realization through a series of conflicts of Its Other. I believe, however, that the apparent differences between the two slighter than they first appear, for the armature of both developmental theories is the belief history plots of progressive, moving through stages of increasing enlightenment—a progressive movement that is essentially the rise of reason. To transform the Hegelian saga into the epic that the Enlightenment thinkers told, one need only drop all the dialectical elements from the Hegelian account. For one thereby eliminates Reason's dramatic struggle with an antagonist whose nature is, as often happens with drama, contained within that of the protagonist and so has the power to transform the protagonist internally; and if not Reason's internal struggle with some alienated aspect of its own nature that turns the motor of history, then it must be some factor extrinsic to reason that accounts for the changing status of reason in history. The most obvious candidate is society's acceptance of the principles of reasons The course of history is the course of reason's finding increasingly widespread social acceptance. This is the fundament of the liberal, Enlightenment account of history that provides Bell's book with its armature, but it is also the account that Fukiyama's book ultimately provides. The point of both stories is to celebrate the coming forth of the universal homogeneous state, founded on universal principles of reason. The idea that the bases of community are rational, not affective, is peculiar idea, it seems to me, but it tells us much about the World-Picture that liberals hold.

That these ideas seem remote from art criticism I acknowledge. However, they are worth recalling as we consider the subject of this show. For one fact that the exhibition catalogue fails to acknowledge is that the decade the exhibition covers was crucial for Canada, for it was a decade in which Canada risked surrendering its national culture, certainly—and perhaps actually did surrender it. The story of the development of abstraction in Canada is partly the story of abandonment of the Hegelian conceptions that were a staple of Canadian intellectuals.

As the United States became an Imperial power, in both economic political and artistic realms, intellectuals, artists and academics—some enthusiastic about the shift of power to the New World and their proximity to power, others sickened by the regimes that had in the space of forty years created two episodes of mass death in Europe and excited by the prospects of change, and others, like the vast majority of academics of our time simply alert to the to the possibilities of hitching their wagons to a rising star and of profiting thereby—tossed their lot in with that of "our neighbour to the south." The conception that an art object is an isolated,

autonomous and autotelic material construction that provides an occasion for the exercise of the perceptual faculties is a conception that most eras in history would have found extravagant, but it was widespread in centres in the United States where advanced ideas in the arts had won the allegiance of many artists. It is the correlative in aesthetics of the empiricist doctrines in epistemology.

Political thinkers often forget the origins of Hume's description of the causal relation. His depiction of atomistic events coupled in causal relation only by the mind which makes an easy transition between those events we label cause and those we label effects and his failure to discover any feature in the relation between those events that might ground our idea that the earlier event possesses a power we could call causal efficacy reflects earlier dissolution of absolute of Divine rationality into a plurality of separate will-acts connected by no inner necessity and the rejection of medieval ideas on the unity of substance. The repudiation of these ideas left the picture of the world as constituted by many discrete, individual event-objects and its morale correlative, of free, individual utilitarian judgements. Those of us who, aghast, listen as our students as our students no sooner miserably inform us that they have not the means to purchase their art-supply than they blithely announce they have just purchased hundreds of dollars on various new-age occult gadgets and books of pseudo-learning, are shocked with increasing frequency as students promulgate, with terrifying smugness, the idea that we should not seek to understand phenomena since each is unique, each extraordinary and inexplicable, the result of conditions that cannot be reproduced. Ironically, their malarkey they spew shares foundational principles with the view of the world that the science of the last four hundred years has furnished.

These conditions produced two different artistic responses. One was to try to ground reality in something certain, and specifically to use the symmetry and proportion of artwork to work out the mathematical order that grounds reality. This we might refer as the Mondrian turn in art, for often artists who, deliberately committed themselves to such an artistic practice often adopted abstraction as the means for creating a pure, perfectly harmonious order.

We can account for the well-known appeal that theosophical ideas had for the early abstractionists on the basis that Theosophy shared similar beliefs. When Madame Blavatsky described the intent of her writing on Theosophical, a paragraph quoted in the catalogue for this exhibition, she uttered a purpose with which a branch of the early abstractionists could have concurred:

> The aim of this work may thus be stated: to show that Nature is not "a fortuitous concurrence of atoms," and to assign to man his rightful place in the scheme for the Universe; to rescue from degradation the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions; and to uncover, to some extent, the fundamental unity from which they all spring; finally, to show that the occult side of Nature has never been approached by the Science of modern civilization.

It is generally well known that Kandinsky reasons for pushing towards abstraction were spiritual ideas similar to those announced here. The geometric abstractions of the neoplasticism and de Stijl such as Piet Mondrian or Malevich's Suprematism have similar bases. In cinema, similar spiritual ideas gave impetus to the extraordinary early abstractions of Oscar Fischinger, one of the greatest early "experimental" filmmakers.

The second response was to create an art that evolves from the self. The catalogue notes that inventiveness and spontaneity became the norms by which the decade evaluated works of art. However, it suggests that their becoming normative was a result of a necessary to be au courant. It was more directly ideological that these comments suggest. The particular form that philosphers, art theorists and artists themselves gave to the ideas of the inventiveness

and spontaneity derives from the liberal conception of history, of history as dark mantel that the body longs to toss off, to emerge naked and innocent and to reenter the Eden from which humanity had been expelled when it was forced to don that heavy mantel, and to start anew. The Christian understanding of the transcendence of time as history is that we find in Dante's magnificent Commedia, that is the discovery that there is an order in which all events exist sempiternally. The modern understanding is that individual must escape from the history by rooting himself or herself in something natural truth, be it the energies of the body or the primal truths known to non-Western cultures that moderns have forgotten—the two routes prescribed by a great poetic theorist of the fifties, Charles Olson.  This transformation of Western culture's view of salvific time and history inflected the relation between the inner world and the outer world. The classical and early Christian view proposed that salvation was bound up with the discovery of that self and the world belonged to a sempiternal order. The modern view dissolved that link and proposed that reason, order and value lay wholly on the side of the subjective. When humans ceased to think of nature as the product of Divine creation, nature lost its ground, and as nature came to appear ungrounded, humans were pitched back upon subjectivity as the sole source of authenticity. Thinkers increasing advanced the idea that one discovers the fundamental truths by digging into the inner recesses of self where it hides or by releasing through a non-deliberate act, for deliberation distorted it. This conception of subjectivity is associated with the atomistic conception of the individual that is the most basic notion in American political culture.

The controversy in France between the informel (or tachist) school and the school of geometric abstraction whose primary spokesperson was Pontus Hulten is largely a controversy between the first and second types of abstraction.

The third response is to create a work that offers itself to us in its material truth and to use the work in an exercise in perception. The nineteenth century saw the beginning of a crisis in perception as the rates of change of increased to exceed perceptibility and as the world-picture that science gives us became increasingly remote from the image that the human senses furnish. In this context, we value art for its capacity to create a fixed and stable material form that we can examine in detail and with which we develop a secure perceptual relation.

The late 20s, the 30s and 40s saw the fledgling beginnings of abstraction in Canada. While the catalogue suggests it, it understates the importance of the role that spiritual ideas played in the development of abstract art in Canada. Thus, the automatistes, lead by Paul-Émile Borduas took advocated the new forms in painting it was Surrealist terms in which they framed their advocacy, for Surrealism really is (as Glas has intimated more recently) the Hegelian art *par excellence*, since it strives to mobilize the antithetical term in the dialectic between ordinary really and superreality. When the plasticiens took over the leadership of the abstract art movement in Montréal, it partly with an acknowledgement of the profundity of surrealist metaphysic and recognition of its limits. As Fernand Leduc wrote:

> Automatic writing, which is the one of the most fruitful discoveries of Surrealism . . . rarely corresponds to the deepest, and most vibrant part of ourselves.

Here we see the turning from the more Idealist, which is to say, typically Canadian reasons for interest in abstraction to the more subjective and individualist reasons that Americans held. So it is hardly surprising the Québéc painters were to seek renown outside Canada, or that those who did not usually discussed their works in the neo-Thomistic terms of Jacques Maritian who taught briefly at the very distinguished Catholic centre of learning in Toronto, the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. The example of Henri Bergson had inspired Maritain's philosophical endeavours and, like Bergson, Maritain celebrated the role of intuition in human

knowledge. He spoke of a spiritual unconscious, or more precisely preconscious, and maintained that all ideas and all rational thinking emerge from this spiritual preconscious. Not just rational ideas emerge from the spiritual preconscious, however, but also prephilosophical knowledge, affective understanding and even mystical knowledge. And of supreme importance, from it emerges poetic knowledge, knowledge that is non-conceptual and non-rational, "an obscure revelation of both of the subjectivity of the poet and of some flash of reality coming together out of sleep in one single awakening."

These ideas are clearly ideas for which the automatistes had an affinity, as they did for Maritain's Dantesque notion that the artist's efforts continue God's labour of creation. Nonetheless, throughout Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, Maritain reiterated that "pure art" was a dead-end, that art must not cut itself off from the realm of concrete existence, and that the artist's task is to find the means for transforming actual existents so that the artist could realize the form he or she divined in them.

Maritain's based his theory of knowledge on the recognition that there are many types of knowledge based in ways of apprehending reality. His philosophical views on our knowledge of nature suggest that their study of the mysterious realm of nature leads scientists to problems that are not amenable to analysis using experimental methods, that opened onto a physiomathematical realm that while was more concrete than the ideas of mathematics, but transcended the sensible. It had, in short, the mixed quality of the Ideal in the Real that Hegel's that is the principal subject of Hegel's philosophy. Though the abstractionists often invoked Maritain's name, Maritain's concern that art maintain an orientation towards concrete reality puts his view at odds with the basic character of abstraction.

The placticiens that supplanted the automatistes as the dominant force for abstraction in Québéc painting were almost entirely materialist-perceptualist in orientation (that is to say, their brand of abstraction was of the third type). Thus Claude Tousignant interpreted Piet Mondrian''s art in a fashion that eliminated all the metaphysical elements from it and described as it as material construct that engages perception: "Mondrian turned painting . . . into an object of perception. . . . With him, the painting became an object which, when apprehended offered first level perceptual information." (Quoted p. 52)

But Québéçois and Canadian cultures have been radically different from before the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and abstraction in English Canadian retained its spiritual, Idealist basis much longer. The real father of abstract art in Canada is Jock MacDonald CHECK SPELLING, and MacDonald took a lively interest both in the anthroposophic ideas of Rudolf Steiner and in the theosophical ideas of Ouspensky. We should not forget that these ideas had deep roots in Canada. Ouspensky drew his ideas, as the catalogue points out, from the Canadian psychiatrist (once the head of Hamilton Asylum for the Insane) Richard Bucke and his great book Cosmic Consciousness. Leslie Amour and Elizabeth Trott, in their very fine history of Canadian philosophy, The Faces of Reason, delineate the relations between Bucke's ideas on the Absolute revealed to cosmic consciousness and Absolute that the Idealist philosophy for which Canadian thinkers long showed an affinity.

Jock MacDonald claimed "The artist does perceive through his study of nature the awareness [sic] of a force which is the one order to which the whole universe conforms" and "The artist no longer strives to imitate the exact appearance of nature but rather to express the spirit therein." (Quotes p. 59-60; emphases mine.) Alexandra Luke attended and conducted seminars on the ideas of Gurdjieff. There are other examples

In this connection I want to return, just briefly, to Maritain's celebration of the connaturality revealed by poetic knowledge that I quoted above. The relation between subject and object it proposes is essentially the conception that (in its more Hegelian formulation) has been foremost in the Canadian Mind.

This conception of the connaturality of mind and nature that is such a striking feature of

Canadian thought had its origins, I believe, in the early European encounters with the Canadian landscape. The landscape in most parts of Canada is hard and unaccommodating to human being. The early European topographic artists' tendency to misrepresent the Canadian landscape to make it look more like landscapes they were familiar with and to make the Canadian landscape better conform to familiar canons of beauty testifies that the early Europeans experienced the Canadian landscape as something strange and alien.

Soon enough they ceased to experience it simply as harsh and hostile to human being, however. The European settlers soon formed a relationship with the land that was intimate, and they relied on the land to provide them with the necessities of life—with food and the materials for constructing shelter.

Thoughtful people, who reflected on the human situation and human's relation with their environment required a system of thinking that could acknowledge the unity of self and world at the same time as it recognized their mutual otherness—that accepted the integrity of mind and world while testifying to their radical opposition. Absolute Idealism of various sorts, from the rigorous Hegelian variety to the hierophantic conception of the real that various spiritual teachings expound answered this need. Even before a worked-out philosophical conception, they needed a model of the relation between mind and world, between subject and object. An accurate, representational image is such a model, for an image partakes of features both of the self that produces and of the object it represents. It can be interpreted both as incarnating the contents of mind and as turning the object it represents into a self object.

Consequently the realistic image, especially but not exclusively the image of the landscape has had a privileged place in Canadian art. We can trace this importance through Canadian literature, painting, and film. I attempted to provide the theoretical undergirding for that effort in Image & Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture. Gaile MacGregor came to some strikingly similar conclusions in The Wacousta Syndrome: Studies of the Canadian Langscape. And, of course, Northrop Frye was their long before anyone else, as he proposed that Canada's was "a garrison culture."

When Canadian painters began to create abstract pieces, most of them did not repudiate this tradition. Rather they deepened it. Canadian art has a predisposition towards discovering the Real within the real, the Ultimate that inhabits, but does not negate the everyday. Thus, the dominant sort of abstraction belonged to the first of the categories I set out above.

Denise Leclerc, the principal author of The Crisis of Abstraction acknowledges no continuity in Canadian culture at all. The notion of crisis that subtends this catalogue is, according to Leclerc herself, pretty much that of Hannah Arendt, of a crisis a moment of rupture that in modern has become more common, for the modern world knows no continuity of tradition. Leclerc makes several telling comments in the work that reveal the real programme of the exhibition and catalogue is celebrate this moment of rupture so as to highlight the claim that Canada has no central cultural tradition, that Canada is only a community of communities. In the concluding chapter, she writes:

> To what extent CHECK CHECK CHECK is the art we have been discussing truly Canadian? Any attempt to resolve this question must be deemed an exercise in futility, especially since the best Canadian art of that era —which was find its way into important exhibitions outside Canada was abstract; thus it fell within the framework of the major international developments. (p. 77)

This is a curious piece of reasoning "This work of art was abstract. thus it was international. Thus the question of whether there is something Canadian about it is futile." However we

cannot be amused by the easy assumption that the best Canadian art of the period is the art that found its way into important exhibitions outside Canada. That is just the sort of reasoning that led some artists of the period to forsake their roots and seek international celebrity. So she continues consistently, "The fact that the practice of abstract art in the 1950s gave Canadian artists the opportunity to have their work seen outside the country helped to establish their reputation abroad." She doesn't quite go as far as to say that Canadian artists are best off to forsake their roots in order to seek international celebrity, but she might as well. Those of us who labour to celebrate the difference of various cultures find these comments morally dubious.

A piece in her argument for Canadian art not having a distinctive tradition is the following criticism of the Group of Seven:

> Jack Bush delivered one of the most devastating criticisms of the behaviour of his elders, the Group of Seven, regarding their claims of Canadian "purity" [quotes hers!] in their painting:
>
> > . . . They never once told us where their influence had come from. Suddenly they were indigenous to Canadian soil through self-toil, and all that nonsense [!]. They had picked it all [all?!] up and never said a word about it. (p. 60.)

She quotes Frank Underhill's critique of the Massey Report offering indirect approval (for she suggests that they coincide with Art McKay's reasons for hiring Americans to head the Emma Lake workshops, and those reasons she concurs with):

> What we need . . . is closer contact with the <u>finest</u> expressions of the American mind . . . We need closer touch with the best American universities and research institutions, closer touch with American experimental music and poetry and theatre and painters, closer personal touch with the men who are leaders in these activities. (p. 79)

She even criticizes the Massey Report, that work that did so much for the preservation of a distinctive Canadian culture for its haughty tone and "amnesia vis-à-vis the recent past" of the following passage of that document, and quoting the summary of the report in the <u>Canadian Encyclopedia</u> for support:

> Furthermore, the commission noted with embarrassment that whatever support there had been in Canada for the arts had come primarily from American foundations, $7.3 million along from the Carnegie Foundations and another $11.8 million from the Rockefeller Foundations. Canada had paid a heavy price for this easy dependence, states the report, in loss of talent, the impoverishment of our universities, and an 'uncritical acceptance of ideas and assumptions alien to our tradition.' (quoted on p 79.)

The only benefit of Canada Council grants she finds worthy of mention is that they allowed Canadian artists to go abroad—so to learn international standards for painting, we might imagine. (p. 79.)

Two other remarks Leclerc makes are just as telling, for they reveal her reasons for denying the importance of the differences amongst various cultures and traditions. One is:

> William Ronald lucidly [!] responded to the misguided [!] debate over whether

> Canadian artists of the fifties were more influenced by trends in New York or Europe: "There is no such thing as a New York people. They are all from out of town, and they are all of European descendants almost. If anything, we paint like Europeans, except we paint in a North American way, because we are part of America too."

One could expect that workers who have lost their jobs since the Free Trade Agreement because American head offices closed down branch plants in Canada to bring jobs home to the United State might find the claim that "we are part of America too" somewhat less lucid than Ms Leclerc does.

What the claim argues though is the melting pot notion of America, a notion that one group of advocates of multiculuralism favours. So it is entirely fitting that she ends the introductory essay with the multicultural affirmation, "It must be remembered that we have all been uprooted from our traditions, that we are all "immigrants" in modern civilization. The desire for a culture that is our home we might as well forsake, to become one with the universal homeless.

Leclerc smudges the distinctions between the categories I set out above to further this end. If the purpose of a style is to get an artist into international exhibitions, then any style will do. If we begin to ask about the world-views that produce styles, then we might brush up against the distinctiveness of different cultures.

As sad is that Leclerc missed the chance to reflect on why abstraction did not attract as many of our interesting artist in the 1960s as it did in the previous decade and why many of our better painters, having worked briefly with abstraction, returned to representational imagery long before American artists did, or most significantly the sad fates of many, including William Ronald, who aggressively pursued American-type abstraction.

To consider the problems of Leclerc's advocacy, one need only to consider the sad case of Ron Martin whose recent work has sunk, or the blasted-out mind revealed in a parade of senseless, badly written, self-aggrandizing squibs on material-based painting. Ron Martin's paintings of a decade and half ago were, not magnificent perhaps, but at least of interest. Now he can no longer cobble an idea together. Saddest of all was his hanging for a recent show (Christopher Cutts gallery, Sept/Oct 1992) the copy of one squib he had sent to Carl André who returned it, having blotted out most of except the opening words about learning to think. Martin mounted this in a class case, along with the hand-written envelope one which André's had inscribed his return address, as though to say "Wow! A big American artist knows I'm alive. He called me dope. That means he knows who I am. I've made it!" This is what happens when a mind is severed from its roots; he even seems to recognize what has brought him to his present sad state when he issues <u>in memoriae</u> to his London painter-friends that tell us more than anything about how lucky they were to know him. Leclerc would like many others to go the same way, it seems.