



June 1993

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Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 29, no.2, June 1993, p.88-101

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Geography, I-Site, and (Post)Modernism: Some New Perspectives on(in) Canadian and American Painting

by GAIL MC GREGOR

POSTMODERNISM has somehow come to be viewed as always-already in recent years.¹ From an obscure, minor, and much contested modality of specialized aesthetic or literary interest, it has been bandwagoned into the very heart of the academic mainstream.² The more attention it attracts, unfortunately, the more enigmatic this term becomes. Some commentators go so far as to deny that it signifies anything real. Those who do use it tend to disagree about what it "means." Even the few who buy "postness" at face value are inclined to hedge when it comes to specifying the precise nature of the break that the prefix denotes. And there are many who claim that the phenomenon, despite its label, is not an historical one at all. It is notable, for instance, that some of the best-known of the ism's early architects have intimated that, far from a periodizable event, "post" modernism is intimately bound up with its logical precursor. Fredric Jameson, for instance, sees it simply as a shift of emphasis. "Everything we have described here," he says, "can be found in early periods and most notably within modernism proper: my point is that until the present day those things have been secondary or minor features of modernist art, marginal rather than central, and that we have something new when they become the central features of cultural production."³ Jean-François Lyotard goes even further, implying that the term postmodernism relates to a developmental phase not subsequent but propaedeutic to modernism itself.⁴ The debate signalled by these sentiments has inspired an entire cottage industry in academic circles over the eighties. These genealogical wrangles may simply blur what's really at issue here. Whether the phenomenon is temporal or conceptual, real or theoretical, it is at least clear that what we are dealing with is a dichotomy of some kind. What I propose to do in

1. The germ of this paper was in a slide show presented at the 1987 meeting of the American Culture Association in Montreal. For the general cultural background from which it arises, see Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1985), *The Noble Savage in the New World Garden: Notes Toward a Syntactics of Place* (Bowling Green and Toronto: The Popular Press and the Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988), and *Signs of Difference: Cycles, Markers and Mythos* (forthcoming), especially Chapter 8, "The Intellectual in/and History."

2. For a discussion of this evolution and the problems it entails, see Gaile McGregor, "The Mainstreaming of Postmodernism: A Status Report on the 'New' Scholarship in Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 24, 3 (Fall 1989), 146-73.

3. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p. 123.

4. See *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the pages that follow, therefore, is to bracket the whole debate about genealogy, using the categories "modern" and "postmodern" in a purely abstract manner. Far from frivolous, it is hoped that this exercise⁵ will give us a better understanding of some aspects of contemporary culture which neither entail, nor deny, but in a sense run at right angles to, the linear schemata which necessarily, albeit implicitly, inform the idea of "postness."

Given the lack of consensus on the matter, our first step is obviously to define our terms of reference. Under the circumstances, on the other hand, this preliminary task could easily prove our undoing. Even reasonably exhaustive arbitration of the critical largesse is beyond the scope of the present paper. Fortunately, I don't think that such arbitration is necessary for my particular purposes. Keeping always in mind that what we are dealing with is in reality an extremely complex phenomenon, since my concern here is not reality but models of reality, and not just any models of reality but those specific models of reality provided by "art," I will simply take as my provisional point of departure the broadly (if by no means universally) accepted premise that most of the important differences between modernism and postmodernism can be related to a shift from a mode which celebrated the ascendancy of subject over object to one which documents the omniportentousness of discourse.

Let me elaborate a little. First, modernism. While political and technoeconomic modernization can obviously be traced to a much earlier period, modernist *art* had its start in the then-revolutionary assertion on the part of the nineteenth-century impressionists that what was important was not the world-in-itself, but how the artist *perceived* that world. Later this evolved into the even more radical claim that what was important was not external reality at all, but the reality each individual made for himself, *internally*. The orientation implicit in this description involved a change, not just of content or style, but in the whole idea of what art was "for." Far from producing a record of "the real," or even simply of the world-as-experienced, the act of writing or painting was now deemed to provide a means of articulating a world which was immanent only in the mind and imagination. In order to achieve such an articulation, the artist was not merely allowed but expected to break with the past, with tradition, with convention of all sorts. Newness became a standard of value. Most important for the topic at hand, the subject became his⁶ own subject matter. Even the apparent emphasis on form only served to celebrate the skills of the poet or painter as

5. My use of a word that may seem to trivialize my object is quite deliberate. What I'm trying to underline here is that this paper is intended, and should be taken, as an *essay* - a playing with or on or around certain provocative ideas - rather than a full-fledged analysis or history. This isn't simply a matter of preference. Given the sheer scope of my topic, space clearly prohibits presentation of the number and kind of cases which would "prove" my thesis in any conventional (scientific) sense. To offset the limitation, the reader is invited either to test my observations against the evidence of his/her own experience or, if this is lacking, to pick up any illustrated "history" of Canadian or American painting. Even without the ability to tailor-make my examples, I believe that any reasonably representative sample of art from these two countries will, to a statistically significant extent, support the generalizations I make in subsequent pages.

6. To avoid the clumsiness of doublings like "he or she," "his or her," in cases where it is appropriate to use a neutral pronoun I have employed the coinages "hir" and "s/he." Note the qualifier in that sentence, however: "where appropriate." Political correctness notwithstanding, there are places in this paper where the use of anything other than a male pronoun would radically misrepresent either the psychological (in the case of modernism) or the historical reality.

artificer, and to reinforce his liberation from the tyranny of nature. If we look closely enough, in fact, formalism simply dissolves into a kind of obsessive *re*-formulation of the given. Rejecting as extrinsic all concepts of “fitness” or decorum, artists now insisted upon an autonomy not just of ends but of means. The oeuvre that emerged from this far-reaching clean sweep was energetic, assertive, and self-consciously revolutionary. It was also, even in its most critical moods, a testament to the power of the human will.

Like its ostensible progenitor, postmodernism, too, claims to represent a radical break with the past. (This is why, of course, so many people have challenged its distinctiveness.) Unlike modernism, its episteme implies that, far from freely creative, the contemporary writer or artist is in fact constituted by the communal text. How do we account for such a radical *volte face*? One common scenario invokes the depersonalizing effects of technology. Other commentators speak of a recoil, a radical disillusionment, triggered by the ambitiousness of the modernist project itself. Such explanations are themselves, however, obliquely resonant with modernist optimism. Rooted in structuralism, the more radical view insists that limitation is implicit simply in the human condition. Far from a theoretically reversible concomitant of specific historical developments, in other words, the coerciveness of the public world so bewailed by would-be modernists is entailed by our dependence on language—that is, on the publicly given—not merely for “expressing” but for “constructing” our essential selves. Freedom was *never* more than an illusion. Where does this leave the artist? In the same place as all the rest of us, really. Subordinated to the *sign*. Effaced by that same self-validated art object which earlier was held to establish his ascendancy over the world at large. And his art? Here we are on firmer ground. Whether the death of the subject is perceived as comic or tragic—and there are abundant examples of both attitudes in the literature—there is a general agreement that the style of postmodernism is constituted specifically in terms of that absence. Characterizing features include a de-lineation of both logic and narrative, a radical disjunction of viewpoint, a preference for passive or paratactic structures, above all a devaluation of the aesthetic in favour of the adventitious.

If we consider American painting of the last half century with this polarity in mind, what jumps out at us is how strongly it is biased toward the modern side of the fence. Take the Abstract Expressionists, for example. Formalism notwithstanding, the work of this school seems above all dedicated to the task of breaking down or through barriers and boundaries. Collectively these artists challenged every physical and psychological constraint on their creative freedom. One of the first and most critical triumphs was the triumph over surface. For all Greenberg’s harping on the flatness of modern art, painters like Pollock and Rothko in fact created a pictorial space which was irresolute, ambiguous, and indeterminate. The same might be said of objects *within* that space. Whatever the idiom, the effect we find over and over again in Abstract Expressionist painting is one of deliberate, self-announcing equivocation. Inside and outside, figure and ground, line and plane: there is no single traditional distinction or standard that escapes being called into question. And aggressively so. Clyfford Still’s famous battle

against the “tyranny of the edge” was only one isolated skirmish in the Abstract Expressionists’ battle against the tyranny of any and all extrinsic limitations.

This last point is the important one. In our definition of modernism above we placed great emphasis on the autonomy of the subject. The breaking down of boundaries could, however, be taken to suggest an opening, even a submission, of self to world. Other, equally obvious aspects of Abstract Expressionist painting militate vigorously against such an interpretation. Despite their lip service to spontaneity and even automatism, the Abstract Expressionists were notably—indeed notoriously—individualistic, unrestrained, and larger than life. More to the point, judging at least from the collective self-image embedded in their work, their felt relations with the at-large were not just dynamic but aggressive. Pollock’s painting-as-performance, Motherwell’s histrionics, de Kooning’s brutal deconstruction of the female form—whatever else they may be, these strategies are all acts of unblushing self-assertion. Even Tobey’s calligraphy has a domineering quality in its sheer insistence. This brings us to the one element which, in linking mood with mode, technique with vision, holds the real diagnostic key to Abstract Expressionism: its centrifugality. Whether it does so in the gentle fashion of Rothko’s melting rectangles or with the impact of Kline’s strikingly gestural black-and-white ideograms—whether it oozes or vibrates or expands or explodes—Abstract Expressionist art quite palpably refutes the whole idea of containment. It also refutes any notion of a reticent, compromised, or self-effacing subject.

The Abstract Expressionists, then, were classically modernist—at least with respect to their subjective focus. The question that arises at this point is whether this group can be considered as in any meaningful sense representative. Received opinion would suggest not. According to the preferred version of American art history, American art underwent a major shift in the sixties *away* from the egocentric, emotional moods of Abstract Expressionism toward a more objective and certainly a more impersonal kind of art. At the same time—at least according to this view—the American *artist* underwent a radical metamorphosis from culture hero to mass man. Out went the idea of “aura.” In came the found object, the popular and the ephemeral. *In came postmodernism*. Or so it was commonly supposed. Consensus notwithstanding, what I would suggest is that this shift was not quite what it seemed—that the sixties artists, for all their differences in style, were at root just as “subjective” as any of those self-proclaimedly heroic figures against whom they were wont to define themselves. Does the claim seem rash? Think for a moment of Andy Warhol. Not what he *said*—his repeated claims that his art was mechanical and non-unique—but what he did, who he *was*; the cult of personality that won him superstar status. Think of Rauschenberg, proclaiming in a telegram: “This is a portrait if I say so.” The phenomenon goes far deeper than a few individuals with a penchant for performance, though. Even in the absence of explicit self-display, the products of the sixties themselves almost invariably “give off” signs of egocentricity, if only in their oftentimes audacious demands to be taken seriously. This is the truth hidden beneath all those vehement denials of authority. From Pop to Minimalism—

from Johns's flags to Lewitt's cubes—the ostentatious arbitrariness of the American oeuvre proclaims implicitly that the artist him-(*very* rarely her-)self is now the sole judge and arbiter of art.

The real change from the forties to the sixties is not, then, from subjective to objective, but from imposition to expropriation. The sixties vision no longer simply asserts ascendancy over otherness, but in a very real sense swallows it up. This is a long way from a postmodern deliquescence of self in text. It's also a long way from postmodern nihilism. Popular assumptions notwithstanding, on the other hand, this distance is not really all that surprising. The one element that has historically set not only American artists but American writers, American politicians, even American scholars, most clearly apart from their European counterparts is their seemingly ineradicable faith in the power of the individual will and imagination. And this goes for the iconoclastic sixties quite as much as the chauvinistic fifties. It wasn't only the hippy who believed in "doing one's own thing." Look at the image that emerged from American sociology during the sixties of the self-made social actor engaged in constructing his own reality. Even more saliently, look at sixties American fiction. Despite its obtrusively ironic tone, its preoccupation with death and disaster, the fact is that this is an oeuvre written from the point of view not of the victim but of the survivor. For all the horrors they take for granted, in other words, most fictional worlds of the sixties are still ones in which force of character wins victories. More to the point, like the plastic fantasies of the Neo-Dadaists they are also, for all their grotesqueness, *perceptibly* under the control of their creators. This alone, in terms of our provisional definitions above, is enough to make American art, American writing, American culture as a whole, unequivocally and ineradicably modern.

The question is, of course, how do we explain this odd and unrecognized *difference*—especially with respect to the visual arts. Given the reputation that American painters have earned during the last half century, it would seem foolish to try to attribute to them some kind of belated or relict provincialism. Yet the fact remains: where Europe has, ostensibly anyway, moved on to the "next" phase of development, America remains firmly rooted in its own past. The divergence seems even more puzzling when we extend our focus northward to Canada. For despite its much lamented cultural dependency, the truth is that the Canadian pattern not only differs, but differs *significantly*, from both the European and the American one.

Where does this difference lie? The first and perhaps most basic point to note about the Canadian oeuvre is the discrepancy between what it says and what is said *about* it. If we were to judge entirely by the ancillary rhetoric, for instance, there would be no doubt in our minds that Canadians, even more than their American neighbours, have been sold on the modernist myth of artist-as-hero. From the Group of Seven, with their chauvinistic celebrations of the northern character, to the revolution-touting Automatistes, Canadian artists have been quick to assert the worldly consequences of their practice. If we look at the art itself, however, the message we derive is something quite different. In marked contrast to the buoyancy of the Abstract Expressionists, this oeuvre is notable

above all for its subordination of personality to technique. Far from self-assertive, in other words, the presence we infer from Canadian art is in a sense a kind of non-presence, an almost palpable and often anxious absence.

This fact in itself accounts for a number of the oeuvre's most singular features. It accounts, for one thing, for its ambivalence. It accounts for such implicitly self-deprecating strategies as quotation, self-parody, and bricolage. In so far as the subject-in-the-picture may be taken to represent the subject-in-the-world, it accounts for the plethora of isolated, evasive, and/or repellent figures we are given. Most important of all, perhaps, it accounts for the emphasis on, or more accurately, the (not necessarily successful) quest *for* order. Given the twentieth-century American's pursuit of greater and greater freedom, it is interesting, for instance, how often the careers of both individuals and schools of art in Canada evince a movement from relatively expressive modes to more rigorous and ultimately more objective pictorial idioms. The Montreal scene is exemplary in this regard. For all the revolutionary sentiments espoused over the last few decades in this city, one of the more striking features of the collective corpus is the recurrence, among different schools and generations of artists, of an orderly progression from ineffability to surficiality to materialism, and thence to a kind of incipient—or regressive—illusionism.⁷

Even more notable than—though quite consonant with—such intangibles as implied “stance” are the biases one may detect in the *formal* characteristics of Canadian art. Given the expansiveness which is well-nigh universal south of the border, the observer cannot help but be struck by the dynamic introversion of this oeuvre. Canadian paintings, for instance, are almost always “centered,” both visually and psychologically. In many, this orientation is further accentuated by an inside/outside organization of pictorial space. Echoing oddly the a-sociability of figurative modes, the contemporary corpus in Canada is replete with enclosure images. It is also replete with signs of anxiety about the integrity and the meaning of these enclosures. Cutting as it does across all stylistic lines—obsessing artists and schools as different as Joyce Wieland and Charles Gagnon, Christopher Pratt and Jack Shadbolt, Toronto's Painters Eleven and Winnipeg's surrealists—the “boxed” experience—the boxing *of* experience—is obviously in some way paradigmatic or revelatory for the Canadian. The same implication is carried by those structurally more complex paintings in which the compartmentalization is either multiple or serial. Where American art both invites and suggests a kind of

7. Because of the extent to which it runs counter to popular wisdom, this is one claim that would seem to require some elaboration. The most salient example I can adduce here is Riopelle, whose work in its prime seemed to epitomize not only the idiom but the energy of American-style modernism. “In the later 1950s,” notes a mid-eighties textbook, “the intensity and ‘all-over’ character of [the artist’s] surfaces begin to change. The individual strokes of paint become more broadly described, developing into a sort of drawing with paint, defining shapes which begin to emerge as forms from a ground. Into the early sixties these forms remained generalized and indistinct, but they gradually become more clearly separated, often openly descriptive. The shapes of birds and animals emerge; in recent years the owl has been a frequent subject in his paintings” (David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff, *Contemporary Canadian Art* [Edmonton: Hurtig & the AGO, 1983], p. 28). Riopelle was not anomalous, however. In terms at least of the move from greater to less “freedom,” one might compare, for instance, the early fifties defection of Louis Belzile, Jean-Paul Jerome, Fernand Toupin, and Jauron from the ranks of the highly gestural, unconsciousness-plumbing Automatistes to embrace a method which was described in the 1955 *Plasticien* manifesto as “more rational than intuitive.” See Ann Davis, *Frontiers of Our Dreams: Quebec Painting in the 1940s and 1950s* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1979), pp. 35 ff.

mental and emotional “breaking out,” the Canadian oeuvre—like postmodernism in general—bespeaks a strong sense of the self’s limits; of its isolation and impotence in the face of otherness.

The question we must now consider is what it all means? There seems no doubt that the Canadian orientation does differ from the American one. It’s not merely art that carries the message, either. Canadian literature, with its penchant for paratactic structure, its pretended adventitiousness, its ambiguation of “voice,” bespeaks exactly the same kind of reticence on the part of its authors that we infer from Canadian painting. Even the biases of Canadian scholarship may be related in large part to the peculiarities of communal stance.⁸ If, however, we accept (at least for the sake of argument) that the difference we have delineated in the foregoing pages is analogous to the difference between modernism and postmodernism, we are faced with some rather ticklish interpretive problems. Bracketing for the moment our previous bracketing of linearity, one possibility that suggests itself is that Canada, having come into its own as an independent cultural entity at a later date than the United States, simply skipped modernism altogether, thus ending up “further ahead” simply as an aftereffect of its early retardation.

Supporting this particular hypothesis is the fact that, apart from expatriates like Morrice and Lyman—and discounting the spurious and largely decorative modernity of the Group of Seven—authentically “modern” artists were exceedingly thin on the ground in pre-War Canada. Unlike American Abstract Expressionism, whose lingering influence must be attributed at least partly to the charisma that accrued to early success, late modern movements here hence tended to be rather easily subverted by the post-War influx of “postmodern” ideas. The result? In the absence of serious competition, postmodern styles and attitudes found it much easier to gain a foothold north than south of the border. The only thing wrong with such an explanation is that there is ample evidence that the divergence between Canadian and American art in fact relates less to contemporary cultural developments of *any* ilk than to longstanding differences in social psychology. If we take a longer perspective, in other words, it becomes clear that both the American’s so-called modernism *and* the Canadian’s apparent postmodernism are rooted in, and presaged by, culture-specific features in the oeuvres of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Take nineteenth-century American landscape painting, for instance. As, indeed, has already been amply noted by indigenous commentators, the earliest of recognized post-colonial schools, the Hudson River school, was characterized by exactly that brand of egocentricity we have already associated with the Abstract Expressionists. The size, the scope, and particularly the perspective of these paintings, whatever else they achieve, assert the unequivocal ascendancy of the viewer over the vista. The Hudson River paintings, in other words, represent a visual version of the American’s conquest over the wilderness.

8. See Gaile McGregor, “A View from the Fort: Erving Goffman as Canadian,” *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 24, 4 (1986).

Sublime, operatic, and openly emotional, they provide an eloquent testimony to the perspicuity and particularly to the *control* of the artist whose hand is all too evident in the composition. They also offer an invitation to the viewer to share vicariously in this victory of self over other. Whether explicitly prepackaged for human consumption, as in Cole's allegorical series, or bodied forth in primal splendour like most of Durand's oeuvre, from the godlike vantage assumed in these paintings the landscape offers little resistance to the claiming eye. Adding to the effect of the panorama, moreover, is the disposition of geographical features to facilitate entry. Mountains frame rather than obstruct. Rivers wind sinuously into the distance, opening up the countryside like a lush, compliant woman. The sky is backlit, seducing us with its promise of renewal. We are invited not merely to enter this landscape, but to *penetrate* to the heart of its mystery.

With the Luminists the view changes. Now what we are given is a world almost uncannily devoid of emotion. Silent, static, flooded with unearthly light, these landscapes seem almost perforce to trigger references to Eckhart, Friedrich, and Emerson's naked eyeball. Far from self-assertive, the implied observer here has clearly given himself to—merged with, been absorbed by: however one puts it, it boils down to the same thing—that very otherness on which the Hudson River painter was wont, so grandiloquently, to stake his claim. Or at least so it seems. What I would suggest, though, is that the purported objectivity of Luminist painting is just as deceptive as the purported self-abasement of the sixties Pop artist. Look closely at any so-called Luminist work. What you will find is a tremendous if inexplicit sense of well-being; that is, of being-well-in-the-world. What you will *not* find is any sense of an impervious other. *These landscapes have already been appropriated in every sense of the word.* The light that diffuses them is not a natural but a spiritual light. For all the talk of God and capital "N" Nature, moreover, it is a light that issues not from the Oversoul but from the Inner Man [sic]. The Luminist corpus is thus in a sense even more egocentric in its implications than the blatantly interventionist Hudson River paintings. Where the latter suggest that paradise may be waiting in the next valley, the former celebrates the paradise that the American Will and the American Imagination have established—that is, not discovered but *made*—in the here and now.

If Luminism differs from the work of the Hudson River school, it is not, then, as an impersonal from a subjective viewpoint. *Both* modes in fact celebrate the ascendancy of the subject, the one by showing off the process of appropriation, the other by showing the results. The same cycle, the same spurious progression from conquest-promised to conquest-accomplished, turns up again and again throughout the American oeuvre. And every time it carries the same message. From Ryder's symbolism to Hopper's austerity, from Wyeth's rural nostalgia to Estes' slick urbanity, the one thing that unites the diverse styles and schools of American landscape painting—the one thing that stamps so many diverse artists as "American"—is their (obvious or implicit) celebration of the creating subject.

This, of course, brings us back once again to our earlier discussion of non-

representational modes. While admittedly both superficial and selective, the foregoing review should demonstrate at the very least that the self-assertion, the blatant theatricality, the image of the artist-as-hero we find throughout the contemporary corpus, while they might *coincidentally* mimic “modern” subjectivity, find ample precedent in home-grown predispositions. Even the expansiveness on which we commented above finds specific forebears in nineteenth-century painting. For sheer size, the Abstract Expressionists had nothing on the Hudson River painters. Even the ostensibly more modest Luminist works manipulated scale to create an illusion of almost infinite space. The marked horizontality of these landscapes may, in fact, be considered as an exact correlative to the emphasis on de-limitation in twentieth-century works. Their hidden aggressiveness, on the other hand, finds its most notable echo in Pop and Neo-Dada. Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Johns: these artists not only presumed to re-define art, but by appropriating the entire world as their subject matter, they also in a sense redefined—reconstructed—reality.

Turning now to Canada, we find exactly the same degree of consonance between pre-modern and contemporary modes here that we do in the U.S. While the object changes, in other words, the subject does not. Or to be more accurate, the subject’s *orientation* does not. Anticipating uncannily the self-effacement of his twentieth-century professional progeny, the stance of the colonial Canadian artist was almost ostentatiously deferential. His choice of themes, his concern for propriety, even his preference for the less assertive medium of watercolour, were in striking contrast to the macho predilections of his Yankee compeer. Why? Because he had an entirely different attitude toward his own function and capacities. Where the American spoke long and often of “creating,” the Canadian typically conceptualized his task as “taking a view”—that is, reproducing the landscape-as-given. Before Confederation, the field of landscape painting was dominated by the British military topographers, with their passion for scientific exactitude, their painstaking one-leaf-at-a-time style of rendition; afterwards it was the camera that provided the exemplar for “artistic” activity. Even those outspoken advocates of muscular outdoorsiness, the Group of Seven, were still talking in 1920 of painting “the Canadian scene on its own terms . . . permit[ting] the country to dictate the way it should be painted” (Lawren Harris).

How do we account for such oddly persistent reticence? A lot of it undoubtedly has to do with the way the country was actually *experienced* at the north end of North America. The nature we infer from Canadian landscape painting, even when not explicitly inimical, is alien, impenetrable, overwhelming to the point of claustrophobia. It is a world in which the observer is always looking uphill. Where rivers carry us out of, rather than into, the distance. Where the eye rebounds constantly to its starting place. It is a world, in other words, which categorically denies us entry. Or more accurately, perhaps, from which we are careful to debar *ourselves*. This last point is sometimes obscured by the apparent fortuitousness of the obstacles by which we are cut off from “beyond.” Contrasting poignantly with Thomas Cole’s gloriously backlit paths into futurity, the kinds of natural features we are most likely to find in Canadian painting are

notable mainly for their obtrusiveness. Woods are like walls. Waterfalls are like bowls. Mountains stretch like palisades across the picture plane or squat like huge toads, malevolently, in the center of the canvas. What is important to note, however, is that in the absence of such palpable “givens” the nineteenth-century artist was quick to provide his own barriers. From the topographers’ preference for landscapes cut up by fences, fortifications, roads and dams, to the CPR painters’ penchant for a definitive formal disavowance of foreground from background, the nineteenth-century Canadian oeuvre is characterized above all by visual strategies for keeping nature-at-large perceptibly at bay. Nowhere is there the sense of opening up, of laying claim to the distance, that is the hallmark of contemporaneous American painting. Far from asserting their ascendancy, the “creators” of *these* landscapes would clearly prefer to dissociate themselves from the at-large altogether.

Enclosure, then, is just as much a keynote of pre-modern as it is of recent Canadian art. More important, the *attitudes* evinced by the artist/observer towards his existential condition are also similar in both periods. And I’m not simply talking about negativity here. Claustrophobia notwithstanding, the characterizing feature of the Canadian world view is in fact neither affirmation *nor* abhorrence, but a radical, deep-seated ambivalence. There is, in other words, an “up” as well as a “down” side to introversion. I said above that Canadian cultural production “bespeaks a strong sense of the self’s isolation, impotence, and vulnerability to otherness.” What I perhaps might have added was that it also offers a number of therapeutic models for dealing with or responding to these uncomfortable feelings. Many of the aforementioned iconic boxes exude a feeling not of entrapment but of safety. And so it is with at least a few among those claustrophobic nineteenth-century landscape paintings. Joseph Legare’s figures are typically smothered by the lank foliage in his forest scenes. Thomas Davies’ are diminished almost beyond recognition. When Lucius O’Brien structures his seascapes around a quiet, protective cove, however, or Allan Edson bathes his besieged personae in a kind of incandescent light, or Otto Jacobi turns thickets into nests, we are made aware that in the “real” world, as in its abstract facsimiles, enclosure can be experienced as either oppressive *or* reassuring.

The centripetal vision is not necessarily a negative vision, then. Nor does the process of naturalization stop at such simple ploys as role reversal. Indeed, if we consider both periods in juxtaposition, it becomes apparent that in the nineteenth century, as in the twentieth, the Canadian’s perspectival biases serve not merely as an *expression* of his felt relations with otherness, but as a means of managing, perhaps even neutralizing, the dangers implicit in those relations. How does this work? Consider the issue of impenetrability raised a few pages back. When David Thompson, in 1810, paints a solid screen of mountains across his canvas, it tells us that he is repelled by this topography. When Tom Thomson does the same thing a hundred years later, however, he is able to translate that knee-jerk recoil into a highly successful aesthetic strategy. In rationalizing the surficiality which earlier worked to undermine the illusion, Thomson gives us a means not merely of delineating but of actually *mediating* the dangerous interface between

self and other.

There is a real sense in which this is what Canadian art was tending toward—groping for—all along. Centripetalized perforce by the confrontation with a brutal environment, the Canadian is led almost inevitably to image his existential condition in terms of inside/outside, figure/ground. Surrounded by what s/he most fears, s/he is also led to view the point of cleavage within that dichotomy with a considerable degree of ambivalence. Hence the tendency to reassert rather than eradicate boundaries in Canadian painting. Hence, too, the strikingly high number of numinous threshold images we find through the corpus. Take note, however, of that word “numinous.” Despite anything we may have implied in earlier phases of this discussion, thresholds for the Canadian are *not* necessarily bad or even threatening. What they *are*—necessarily—is problematic. Why? Because the walls they breach are problematic. Because the whole idea of enclosure is problematic. Think about it. An enclosure may be a cave or a cage. It may be given or constructed. It may contain the self or it may be *used* to contain the other. Like the black holes of Borduas’ later works, it may even serve to obscure the question of which site the self actually occupies. The common denominator to all these cases, though, is the fact that the enclosure always signals some kind of “difference.”

This, then, is the bottom line to Canadian art, the thing it’s “really” about. Difference. Any kind of difference. The *idea* of difference. Boxes, compartments, horizons, divisions of any sort, including the “division” between viewer and vista, subject and object, which is signalled by the picture plane: the Canadian’s obsession with such motifs reflects/reveals an obsessive need—stimulated by that first encounter with an unassimilable environment—to pin down, map, explore the ambiguous interface between self and non-self. More to the point for the current discussion, it also reflects/reveals an interesting kinship with some of the major preoccupations of postmodern philosophy. The question is, to be sure—as in the American case—to what extent can we consider this apparent alignment with a particular worldism to be anything more than coincidental? If both American self-assertion and Canadian self-effacement can be traced to aspects of communal psychology long predating the birth of modernism, then it is perhaps absurd to be talking about “alignments” here.

What I would suggest at this point is that we take the question of historicism out of the closet again. Instead of accepting modernism → postmodernism as some kind of exemplary development, however, I would like to recommend an alternate reading of the last hundred years—a reading which, instead of assuming uniformitarianism, makes a clear distinction between *trans*-cultural stimuli and culture-specific responses. Take the impulse toward increasingly non-representational forms of art, for instance. *Qua* trend, this feature *could* be seen as an indicator cutting across all national and cultural lines. *Qua* practice, it produced a wide range of distinct and in some cases mutually incompatible local variants. What makes the difference? Peter Fuller, adapting D.W. Winnicott’s theories of childhood development, has described abstraction as a regression not merely to “magical” thinking, but to a transition stage in which the pure

subjectivity of early infancy is just beginning to give way to a more objective view of ego/other relations.⁹ By wilfully repudiating the conventions of realism, the modernists were thus in a sense recapitulating their own childhoods; recreating, as it were, the tabula rasa of an unstructured consciousness in order to apprehend the world in an entirely fresh and spontaneous manner. Consider, though, the phrase “their own.” What it reminds us is that there is in reality no such thing as a complete tabula rasa. If consciousness itself may be seen as “unstructured” at a certain stage, structuralism teaches us that this surficial pliability is in fact profoundly predisposed by the inherent grammaticality—the propensity to *be* structured—of the *unconscious* mind. How is this propensity satisfied? There are a number of theoretical perspectives that might be considered pertinent here. Jean Piaget, for instance, talks of the way the inverse but complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation work together to effect a “fit” between internal and external structures.¹⁰ Clifford Geertz speculates about the possibility that the human species, both now and historically, uses/has used material culture as a tool for thinking.¹¹ Nancy Chodorow, most provocatively of all, proffers the hypothesis that children are psychologically “impressed” by the organization of the social setting in which they are reared. “Elements of social structure,” she explains, “are appropriated and transformed internally through unconscious processes and come to influence affective life and psychic structure. . . . What is internalized . . . may be generalized as a feeling of self-in-representation.”¹² Chodorow doesn’t mean this quite as literally as I myself would like to take it.¹³ If, however, we go one step further to combine her notion of differential structurability with Piaget’s materialism and Geertz’s view of culture as an information-carrying system (“Culture patterns . . . provide a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes, much as genetic systems provide such a template for the organization of organic processes”¹⁴), what we come up with is the proposition that an unstructured mind—whether infant’s or artist’s—will always tend to mimic the pre-given structures of its world-as-experienced. Even if Fuller is right about modernists all undergoing the same kind of regression, consequently, the results

9. *Art and Psychoanalysis* (London: Writers and Readers, 1981), Ch. 3, especially pp. 163-64.

10. For a useful, compact discussion of this aspect of Piaget’s work, see Hans Furth, *Piaget and Knowledge: Theoretical Foundations*, 2nd ed. (Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981).

11. “[T]he human brain is thoroughly dependent upon cultural resources for its very operation; and those resources are, consequently, not adjuncts to, but constituents of, mental activity. In fact, thinking as an overt, public act, involving the purposeful manipulation of objective materials, is probably fundamental to human beings; and thinking as a covert, private act, and without recourse to such materials, a derived, though not useless, capability.” *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 76.

12. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, L.A., London: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p. 50.

13. It is clear from the qualification she adds that the salient features of Chodorow’s scenario are “social” relations, not material ones. “Internalization,” she says immediately following the passage already cited, “does not mean direct transmission of what is objectively in the child’s social world into the unconscious experience.” My own observations vis-à-vis the continuity between mental structures and social ones (see McGregor, “Notes Toward a Syntactics of Place,” lecture presented at the Power Plant Gallery, May 1991, to be reprinted as Chapter 12 of *Signs of Difference: Essays on Culture* [forthcoming]) go far to suggest, however, that this is *exactly* what happens.

14. *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 216.

of the experiment will depend in each case upon the structural givens of a particular social situation.

What does this have to do with our observations on North America? A great deal, in fact. Suppose, for a moment, that we can apply Fuller's psychoanalytic methodology not just to the individual member but to the collective consciousness as a whole. Suppose, further, that the regression to which he refers was *not* a wilful creation of the artistic personality, but a public phenomenon triggered in the wake of the Industrial Revolution by a kind of cumulative public traumatization. If this were the case, it would mean that the de-structuring of art was a direct result, rather than merely a casual concomitant, of the post-feudal disorientation of social reality. More important, it would also mean that modernism as a whole was (despite its revolutionary rhetoric) a non-unique, rational, and fully rationalizable process. Here, of course, is where we find our explanation for divergences in the cultural development of the various Western nations. Just as individuals are differentially imprinted by their specific conditions-of-becoming, so too are communities. And by much the same means. The corollary to the subject formed by culture is the culture collectively constituted by the subjects it informs. Add to this Piaget's contentions about the proclivity of structure to self-replicate,¹⁵ and what we have is an explanation for both cross-cultural differences and intra-systemic homology. Just as an individual's responses will tend to be congruent with preexistent social biases, a community's typifying acts and artifacts will reveal themselves upon close examination to be, to some degree, transforms of preexistent structures of consciousness. The reason, then, that Canada and the United States have shown such markedly divergent preferences in modes of self-imaging over the last half century—and this despite the ostensible similarity of their resources and influences—is simply that both of them have picked up primarily on those aspects of international culture which suited their conditioned predispositions.

If true, this thesis could shed considerable light on recent cultural history. If Canada's apparent postmodernism was stimulated in the first place by a radical recoil from an unruly reality,¹⁶ this might well explain why pessimistic postmodern modes have become increasingly dominant in an economically devastated and ideologically fragmented Europe during the last few decades. It might also explain why the Americans—burdened as they are with an almost terminal optimism—have been unable to work convincingly within the new, and for them "unnatural," vernacular. For all the trendy rhetoric that has been thrown around by American artists over the last decade or so, it is clear, if only from the names privileged in the literature, that American art as a whole has slipped into the role of epigone. There have been successful practitioners, just as there have been

15. It is this principle that explains the essentially conservative nature of the aforementioned assimilative function. "Psychologically ... considered," says Piaget, "assimilation is the process whereby a function, once exercised, presses toward ... 'reproducing' its own activity.... [A]ssimilation, the process or activity common to all forms of life, is the source of that continual relating, setting up of correspondences, establishing of functional connections ... which finally gives rise to those general schemata we call structures." *Structuralism*, trans. and ed. Chaninah Maschler (New York: Harper Row, 1970), p. 71.

16. For a more detailed explication of this process, see McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome*, Chapters 1-4.

successful appropriations, but the home-grown product simply doesn't seem to have what it takes to set the pace any more. Hyper-Realism, Neo-Expressionism, even post-Post-Painterly Abstraction: for all their elaborate theoretical apparatus and ostentatious referentiality, the isms of the eighties tended almost without exception to be mock-ironic replays of the good old days. Why is this a problem? It's not the irony that proves the fly in the ointment, but the fact that it's qualified. Lacking both the sincerity of their own fathers and the true disillusionment of their European cousins—*self*-mocking in their covert attachment to the very (romantic/heroic) modes they profess to disdain—despite their technical virtuosity the “new” American painters in fact rarely rise above the sentimental, the superficial, the essentially trivial. And why? Because their ingrained sense of self is incompatible with the recent paradigm shift. The situation is quite different on the other side of the border. More appropriately “programmed” than their southerly neighbours, Canadian artists of the last two decades, like Canadian writers of the same period, have found themselves quite at home with the free play, the multiple displacements, and the deference of self to sign entailed by philosophic (as opposed to decorative) postmodernism.