



1 | Lawren S. Harris, *Self-Portrait*, 1932, oil on paperboard, 80.9 × 64.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, anonymous gift, 2008. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario, © 2011 Estate of Lawren Harris)

Lawren S. Harris's *Self-Portrait*: Critical Milestone on a Remarkable Human Journey

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A unique *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 1) by Lawren Harris (1885–1970) has received very little attention over the years, perhaps with reason. There is no record of Harris ever having made reference to it, and it was not included in either of the two major retrospectives of his work organized during his lifetime. It has been publicly exhibited only twice; at the Arts & Letters Club in Toronto in 1932 right after it was painted, and in an exhibition devoted to his abstract paintings that was organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, shown there in the fall of 1985 and subsequently in Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Halifax.¹ It was actually painted for the Arts & Letters Club exhibition, one of the events organized for the Monthly Dinner of Saturday, 27 February 1932; a letter to members a few days before announced that a “gallery of portraits of the artist members by themselves will be formally opened.”² Given that context, it is possible that it was not meant to be taken entirely seriously, and indeed, the first Harris scholar to identify the work refers to it as “a satirical likeness which emphasizes his resemblance to Charlie Chaplin.”³ Charles S. Band, the prominent Toronto collector and a friend of Harris’s, acquired the work either from the exhibition or shortly after. It remained with the Band family until recently donated to the Art Gallery of Ontario. Charles and his wife, Helen, seem not to have displayed the work often in their home. When I first viewed it in 1979 it was in their attic, propped up against a box close to and directly facing a west window. Mrs. Band explained that Harris had advised this treatment to diminish the tendency of the white paint to yellow.

We should not be too quick to dismiss the work, however. Although he did not often paint portraits, Harris left a number of memorable examples, and even a summary review of his career would have to include the remarkable *Dr. Salem Bland* of 1926 (AGO). At the very least the *Self-Portrait* deserves study as a document related to a critical juncture in Harris’s life, and he does appear here to be apprehensive, perhaps troubled. We mustn’t assume that reading, however. It is in the nature of self-portraits to be a bit self-consciously probing. The subject is examining him- or herself in a mirror, after all, trying to strike a balance between description and interpretation. A very informal small *Self Portrait* (Fig. 2) by George Agnew



2 | George A. Reid, *Self Portrait*, 1884, oil on wood panel, 15.9 × 13.3 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario. (Photo: © 2011 Art Gallery of Ontario)

Reid (1860–1947), for instance, painted under the tutelage of Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1884, for all its forthright naturalism still reveals a hint of wariness in the eyes. And even though the recent literature on Jeff Wall (1946–) reads his evident unease in *Double Self-Portrait* of 1979 (Fig. 3) as an inherent aspect of the theme of the doppel-gänger,⁴ I would argue that the intense yet wary stares he presents are every bit as much evidence of the deeply informed, close reading of historical painting precedents he brings to all of his compositions. He knows what constitutes the image of the self-portrait. Harris, too, may have had a sense of historical precedence in mind when presenting his *Self-Portrait* for the enjoyment of his fellow club members, but we also know that he was very concerned, in some cases troubled, by a range of issues at that time.

We know precisely that the self-portrait was painted in February 1932.⁵ We are also fortunate that following their first meeting late in 1927, Lawren Harris corresponded regularly with Emily Carr (1871–1945) and from the spring of



3 | Jeff Wall, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1979, cibachrome transparencies in lightbox, 164 × 218 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, purchase, 1982. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario, © 2011 Jeff Wall)

1930, often with an intimate directness that reveals his emotional state. Carr, fortunately, saved all those letters but Harris, regrettably, did not. His side nonetheless presents an evolving narrative of opinion, reflection, anxiety, even despair, and then the gradual affirmation of a route through the crisis. It is a dramatic journey, and as we'll see, the *Self-Portrait* is perched right at the edge of its steepest decline.

Harris's correspondence with Carr between 8 January 1928 (the first letter) and the spring of 1930 is virtually all about exhibitions and Harris's encouraging responses to specific Carr paintings.⁶ In an undated letter of 1930, likely in April or May, he refers to Carr in the familiar for the first time – “Dear T’Other Emily” – and responds very directly with practical advice to her complaint in her recent letter that she was in despair.

Despair is periodic, a part and parcel of the life of every creative individual – some even succumb to it and are swamped for this life. It cannot be conquered – one rises out of it. Creative rhythm plunges us into it and then into the genuine joy of work – the further we go creatively, the more the rhythm plunges then lifts us until we are

driven to extricate somewhat the plunge into the opposites. Now none of it is bad and we can't stop the rhythm but we can detach ourselves from it – we need not be completely immersed – we have got to learn not to be immersed. Well then how? By not resisting – resistance is an aggravation of that that we would escape from. If we say “now, I am in despair, nothing goes right, I am under a cloud” – all right then – but I must not get perturbed about it that will stir things in a dreadful mess. If I resign to it abiding my time inwardly, willing to face a deeper and deeper despair because all things in heaven, in hell and on earth must be faced, then it will lose its potency. For deepest within beyond the opposites, beyond perturbation and struggle and this whipping there lies dormant the attitude that is above and untouched “by all this.”

Harris was able to express himself so authoritatively because he had been crippled by a severe depression himself in 1918, what he called a “nervous breakdown.” He slowly learned to control it by pursuing a new direction in his painting opened up by trips to Algoma, and by focusing his energies on the establishment of the Group of Seven. Most significantly, though, he fully embraced theosophy, in which he'd shown some interest over the previous few years, and became actively engaged with the Toronto Theosophical Society. Henceforth, theosophical principles provided the essential framework for both his spiritual and creative growth.⁷

In May 1930 Harris and his wife, Trixie, travelled to Europe, principally to view examples of recent modern homes in Stuttgart. They had decided to commission a splendid new home in the modern style in the exclusive Forest Hill neighbourhood of Toronto, even though they'd purchased a new house not far from there just three years earlier. While in Europe they also sought out art, of course, and in his next letter to Carr, in June, Harris reflected on the abstract painting he saw there and the appropriate Canadian approach to making art.

We should saturate ourselves in our own place, the trees, skies, earth and rock, and let our art grow out of these. If it becomes abstract, wholly or in part or not at all is not the paramount thing. It's the life that goes into the thing that counts . . . Abstract painting is now somewhat natural to Europe only somewhat – because though they sever themselves from earth they are not yet, any of them in heaven. With us, with a new adventure largely before us (not behind us) it doesn't seem natural to me. We have not yet learned nor made use of one one-billionth of what nature has for us – as a people – and we need it. Profundity to me, is the interplay in unity of the resonance of mother earth and the spirit of eternity. Which, though it sounds

incongruous means nature and the abstract qualities fused in one work.

...

Jackson and I are going to the arctic the end of July – on the yearly Govt. expedition. I hope to get loosened up and somewhat freed from my solidifying inhibitions and more into exultation for a time. I am in great need of losing my bitterness and sharing completely in the life of the universe in waters and skies and land and light.

Writing about a fusion of natural and abstract qualities suggests an anticipation of what Harris would find in the Arctic.

His next letter to Carr was more than three months later, on 13 October 1930. “Been infernally busy since getting back home and can’t get caught up with a host of miserable details – business things – a few more days and I’ll be clear and can start to paint. Got a few useful things in the Arctic and am anxious to work on them.” Six weeks later, 30 November, he still had not really started to paint. “I’ve tickled and worked over my sketches and done a few since getting home and have now a number of possible things, but few, too few for canvases. I need to start, to commence to begin to paint but have not as yet. I find it difficult to pitch right in.” Then finally, 26 December 1930: “I’m painting some of the Arctic things – not bad – but nothing to usher the soul into eternal bliss. I am striving but also not realizing and aware most moments that I’ll come to the usual disillusionment of accomplishing anything unusual. I’m trying to get up to the summit of my soul and work from there – there where the universe sings.”

He and Trixie were building their new house through all this, from a design by Alexandra Biriukova with heavy input from Harris. In March he sent a short letter from his new home at 1 Ava Crescent (all previous letters had been written from the Studio Building). “Sorry for delay in writing to you. Have been away – and am going away this morning again for a few days – in the interim have been settling the new house-palace-hotel or what is it? Therefore up to my neck in this or in encumbrances. Will write later.” The house rises grandly three storeys high on the north side of Forest Hill, facing south. The ground floor is given over to large entertaining rooms, the second to bedrooms, and the third to a spectacular library-studio for Harris with a commanding view south over the Village and the city of Toronto beyond, down to Lake Ontario. It caused quite a stir.⁸ The Depression clearly was not affecting his income from the Harris family fortune. In a letter later in March there is the first reference to the suffering economy.

So far as we now know there will be a group show in December this year. I hope you can let us have four things. Too bad about your show

in the States. We also have had two shows cancelled – hard times and curtailment of activities, lack of sufficient funds, I think, was responsible . . . Nobody here is working enough. Jackson returns from Quebec in a few days. Lismer has started two big canvases but his time to paint is not enough. They work him too hard at the gallery.

In May he reported: “Jackson and I have a show of our Arctic sketches and some canvases at the art gallery here now. He has one gallery, I have another – it doesn’t look too bad. Fred Housser was not right in telling you I was doing most good things. They’re mostly indifferent.” He had been able to complete six canvases from the Arctic sketches for the show. There is a long gap in the correspondence then, with the next letter in December 1931. It is upbeat, following the opening of the seventh exhibition of the Group of Seven at the Art Gallery of Toronto. “Well, the show is away to a start and is a bit of a surprise to everybody, ourselves included. The standard is generally higher and the gratifying surprise is that the work of the invited contributors is much better than it has ever been. It’s a lively show and does not let down in any one of the four galleries. Everyone, so far, has been quite thrilled and reanimated.” What he did not report, curiously, is that at a party at Harris’s home following the opening, it was announced that this would be the last exhibition of the Group of Seven, and that they planned to expand into a larger, nationwide group.⁹ There is, perhaps, a suggestion of a sense of a turning point later in the letter. “Recently, in fact, just since the show was hung, I feel the need to play back and forth over a lifetime of work. That is to take up a subject done years back and press forward with it. Study it off and on for a week or so until something more definite, more developed emerges and then to do it on a new canvas. I have a few I am going to do over in that way.”

Carr appears to have responded quickly to this letter in a manner that challenged aspects of Harris’s position, yet registering still her own level of despair. He replied immediately, encouraging her to persist (20 December 1931). She wrote back in January in a more positive mood and Harris replied on 29 January 1932:

Your letter cheered me considerable . . . Really, no person can tell us what to do and what not to do. We are each our own man with our own individual convictions and the finer those convictions and the more individual we are the less likelihood there is of anybody being able to help us march and what is more trying, the suggestions that others offer and the reactions of others may be all wrong for us. No man ever yet did a real thing that was not in the beginning

misunderstood – a new path or a different path is bound to be somewhat lonely. Everybody (or nearly everybody) will want to make us conform to their notions – and we should not – unless are dead certain the suggestion is valuable in terms of our own vision.

In February he painted his *Self-Portrait*.

In response to yet another affirming letter from Carr, Harris wrote, 20 March 1932, with the first clear evidence that he was facing another crisis in his life.

No – for more than a year I have felt that I have said my say – and that my usefulness may take another direction – I may be quite wrong of course – but I keep myself aware for intimations of what that direction may be – and am ready for anything. I don't feel that I will be just left aside to fade gracefully because something is stirring deep within but so far it doesn't seem ready to emerge – but it is there. I keep on painting – biding my time – and every now and then get into creative clarity and feel the power of beauty working within – and perhaps tomorrow I may be away again on a fresh momentum.

...

The soul has a different life from the personality – a deeper stream of consciousness – closer to the immortal – it alone is affected by beauty, nobility and the deeper more enduring motives of men and the spirit that informs nature. Personalities chatter, gossip, fritter away on the surface of life where there is no meaning and protect themselves by laws, codes, creeds and dogmas. When one feels for another beyond the gossip and recriminations of personalities – it is the soul that lives. When one is moved by beauty wheresoever, it is the soul that is awake. When one is aware of the spirit that informs nature, it is the soul that understands – it is always the soul that understands. Just why I wrote the above I don't know.

About a month later (late April 1932), he continued in the same vein:

Well, well, I sense a new life stirring within me – something pristine and clear-eyed – but I have been dull for so long that I almost fear it will come and go and leave no trace of its meaning. What you say about life opening up, I feel. I hope it opens for everybody. Perhaps a new vision arises in the world of men. It is needed. I feel like painting, want to paint, whereas for a few years I've been making myself do it in an effort to stir the inner fire. It's not the spring. For spring is usually

my slack time – I skimp a little then. I suppose we are only content when all sails are up and full of the winds of heaven. Certainly the doldrums are trying.

Harris didn't write to Carr again until the fall. The pressure clearly was building.

I am not painting. I am at a cross roads where the entire problems of a lifetime meet. I do see the way. O it is difficult because the life problems of others are involved – and yet I do see the way even though I encounter daily the commonplace and its power of disintegration alone, I see. I am going away alone this week or next to think, see, determine maybe. In one sense it is not difficult, not difficult to a greater stride which emerges within. It is difficult to the entanglements of the weaknesses of a life time – very difficult, perhaps impossible. Maybe the greater will grow and replace the little disintegrating paces. I feel it will – but I will be passed through some fearful struggles

I don't know why I tell you this – yes, I do – you are one of the few who will understand completely.

I am not telling you all. Some day soon or late I will. Perhaps when the need grows great (October 1932).

He wrote twice again that year, long letters of encouragement for Carr and on 2 December 1932, the news of the death of J.E.H. MacDonald (1873–1932). Seven more letters were sent between 1 January and 24 June 1933, with information about the new Canadian Group of Painters and long passages of encouragement for Carr in her painting and writing. In the last of these there is some evidence of his own progress. “About work. I potter along. Have done a few passable canvases – arctic subjects. Am getting together sixteen canvases of the arctic for a little show. Have fifteen completed now. Also I try and write a bit – want to get a book together – but am exceedingly slow about it.” We have no record of a show of the Arctic canvases.

An undated letter of the summer of 1933 was sent from Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park. Harris and Trixie were in a cabin with their daughter, and their two sons were nearby at the Taylor Statton Camp for boys. “I had intended doing some writing but simply cannot get started, . . .” he wrote.

Have not painted for ages it seems and feel as if my painting days were over. Just keep open inside for whatever promptings arise.

Occasionally I get a flicker of an idea, then it fades or sufficient enthusiasm is lacking and there we are. Nothing to do about it. I am at a cross roads really and have as yet no vision to know what to do, what road to take. But my O my, I am anxious to be on my way – and that is trying when one doesn't know the way.

The Harrises appear to have spent the whole summer on Canoe Lake. Carr seems to have responded to the note of despondency in Harris's letter by suggesting that he had accomplished much more in life than she. He wrote back, 15 August:

I never told you before did I, that you were silly? When you say that "I have climbed further up the hill than you, considerably," I think you [sic] silly. I reek with evil, I tell you – and weaknesses also – and I have a hunch that in order to get straight with myself, in order to have vision conquer the lower part of myself – I will have to pass through a real burning ordeal where it may be nip and tuck whether I burn to some good end or merely shrivel up into no account. I feel I cannot escape this if I would and it is not so very far off.

The next letter, from Toronto, was 12 September 1933.

Just back from the North – received two letters from you to-day. One a swell tirade against the Christian [worn?] attitude of my last letter. Thanks, and again bless you. You're right, quite right and I needed to be told just what you told me. I knew it and have always known it and was and have been fairly good at pointing out to others – that to dwell on anything is to give it life. Well, I am on my way out from abjectness – am out, as a matter of fact and feel a new usefulness emerging within, a reverberation of power, a faint beginnings of cold-hot-white inner flame.

...

It's a queer world in its manifestations, but behind the manifestations, the one law is at work ceaselessly, inexorably, supremely beautifully. Viewing only the manifestations infinite, unexpected and curious – there seems to be change in everything – yet there is no change, no accident down to and including the death of a mosquito. The one law, its glory, and also the wake of hours from its infringement is, I am coming to see, the very basis of art and life and the entire universe. More anon.

There would, indeed, be “more anon.” Harris, as we see, was finding strength again through theosophy. He may not have been painting to his satisfaction yet, but he finally was writing productively, largely in support of his faith. He had presented a paper at an international theosophical convention at Niagara Falls in June, “Theosophy and Art,” which was published in *The Canadian Theosophist* in two installments during the summer.¹⁰ This was essentially a reworking of ideas he had first presented in an article in 1926,¹¹ but the fruits of much more writing, largely of a proselytizing nature, appeared through the fall and winter. These included another article, “Theosophy and the Modern World: War and Europe,” published in November, but more significantly, he organized a series of radio broadcasts for the Toronto Theosophical Society on the theme of “The One Immutable Law, Re-Incarnation and Karma.” Harris himself delivered, and presumably wrote, three of these, broadcast between 5 November and 31 December 1933.¹² He also gave classes for young people at the Society that fall and again the following March.

Carr was able to experience this resurgent Harris first-hand when she unexpectedly arrived in Toronto in November. She had travelled east to visit the Chicago World’s Fair, and then decided to call on Toronto before returning home, staying with Bess and Fred Houser, 9–17 November. She saw the first exhibition of the new Canadian Group of Painters (which included two of her works), the Housers arranged parties, and there were opportunities for long discussions with Harris and the Housers about theosophy and Christianity. Reflecting on the visit in her journal before returning home she recorded the effects of one of these conversations.

We discussed prayer and Christ and God. I didn’t sleep well and woke at 5 o’clock the next morning with a black awfulness upon me. It seemed as if they had torn at the roots of my being, as if they were trying to rob me of everything – no God, no Christ, no prayer. How can I ever bear it? I ached with the awfulness of everything and cried out bitterly. I had thought I might get some light but I was stiff with horror. I was soul-sick. Bess and Fred saw and were merciful.¹³

Following this, Fred, and Harris, too, spoke with her again. “Between the two of them I saw clearer and the black passed over. Yes, there is something there for me and my work.” She finally was able to record: “There is a rounded-out completeness about this visit – nine days of refreshing content spent with those toddling along the same path, headed in the same direction. And I was one of them. They accepted me.”¹⁴ It was not entirely resolved, of course. Back home in Victoria she noted in her journal, 12 December 1933: “Today I

wrote Lawren and told him I couldn't swallow some of the theosophy ideas. I had to be honest. Couldn't let him think I was wholeheartedly in tune with it, when I am not."¹⁵

Harris seems not to have responded for two months, then, on 10 February 1934 he wrote a considered, conciliatory letter. "Stick to what yields you the fullest inner life," he underlined. "That is, live and let live, believe and let others believe what satisfies them." And then the letters seem to have dried up. Carr noted in her journal in May: "No letter from the East yet. I wonder if its happened the inevitable mysterious something L has hinted about. I do not want to conjecture for I may be wrong and think injustices."¹⁶ It broke, finally, in mid-June, although Carr seems not to have heard until early July. There are a couple of different reconstructions of the sequence of events, but Peter Larisey's seems the most credible.¹⁷

Fred Houser informed Bess sometime in the spring of 1934 that he had fallen in love with Yvonne McKague (1898–1996), a painter in their circle. Bess left Fred, seeking a divorce and Lawren took steps to support her, which caused friction with Trixie, resulting in his leaving her and their children 13 June. Committed to a purely spiritual union, Bess and Lawren did not intend to marry.¹⁸ The whole unfolding drama caused such an uproar in Toronto, however, that they felt they had to leave. Lawren headed to the United States 6 July, and Bess seems to have left for Vancouver about the same time. She met Carr there, 12 July, to break the news.¹⁹ Carr was aghast, confiding to her journal the next day: "They are down in California getting divorces and consoling each other meantime. She prattled about higher love and non-sex and made me a little sick."²⁰ Bess and Lawren nonetheless did marry, 29 August, likely in Reno, Nevada.²¹ It seems that they felt that if they lived together unwed, it would only raise the level of scandal. At the same time, it does seem that theirs remained a celibate marriage. They never lived in Toronto again.

We should now look at Harris's February 1932 *Self-Portrait* in light of these two-and-a-half tumultuous years that followed it. In fact, we've seen from his letters to Carr that as far back as June 1930 he was troubled, and was hoping that his planned trip to the Arctic with Jackson that summer would at least "somewhat" free him from his "solidifying inhibitions," that the exultant experience of "the life of the universe in waters and skies and land and light" would help him lose his "bitterness." One cannot help but imagine that the massively ambitious house-building project also was meant to lift him, and perhaps Trixie, out of some emotional low place. Neither tactic brought relief. Writing in May 1931, by then living in the new home and with the six Arctic canvases he had completed over the previous six months on view at the Art Gallery of Toronto, he reported to Carr that these new works were "mostly

indifferent.” When he next wrote, some seven months later, his spirits seemed higher as he talked about reworking earlier paintings until “something more definite, more developed emerges,” and also of the absolute need to follow one’s own vision, to resist entirely the pressure of others to “conform to their notions.” He painted his *Self-Portrait* about six weeks later.

In this context, then, we can definitely read it as the depiction of a man who is at the least wary of what the future holds, of how others will judge him. He is defensive, perhaps unsure of his capacity to realize his ideals. Yet, at the same time there is an intelligence in the eyes, a sense of resolve in how the head is held, and a feeling of hope in the intense illumination from above and behind that signals a still deeply engaged life. This man is not a quitter. But the worse was yet to come. Three weeks after the painting was shown at the Arts & Letters Club, Harris revealed to Carr the depth of his crisis, and his anxiety concerning his relevance in precarious balance with a sense of imminent “creative clarity.” Then seven months later, in full crisis, he revealed more; he was not painting, he was “at a cross roads where the entire problems of a lifetime meet,” and most difficult of all, the “life problems of others” were involved. He still maintained that he saw a way through this, but he knew he was to pass through “some fearful struggles.” By early the following summer he was back to a balance of sorts, however, reporting 24 June 1933 a project to accomplish sixteen Arctic canvases. But by mid-summer he had stopped painting again, and by the end of August had descended into self-loathing. He immersed himself in theosophy that fall, and Carr records no mention of new work seen during her visit in November. Certainly, there was no new work during the subsequent tumultuous months of the “revelation” and its aftermath.

Harris did, nonetheless, manage to take a tentative step in a new direction with his painting during the period between his first six Arctic canvases of early 1931 and the fifteen he had finally completed by the early summer of 1933. The evidence is in two canvases that have been known for a number of years only by line drawings in a pictorial inventory of stored works compiled for Harris following his departure from Toronto; one of them also by an old photograph, both however presumed lost.²² The two, remarkably, recently reappeared on the art market.²³ Effectively the same size, each is patently spiritual in its radiance and clearly embodies Harris’s June 1930 musing that a new direction in Canadian art might see “nature and the abstract qualities fused.” There is no doubt, nonetheless, that these works follow the Arctic trip of August–September 1930. One, (Fig. 4) titled *Figure with Rays of Light* in the inventory, is further labeled “Arctic Group III” on an early photograph, while the other (Fig. 5), titled simply *Abstract Painting* in the inventory, is evocative of the high coastal bluffs of both rock and ice encountered in the



4 | Lawren S. Harris, *Figure with Rays of Light (Arctic Group III)*, ca. 1931, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 152.4 cm, The Thomson Collection – Art Gallery of Ontario. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario, © 2011 Estate of Lawren Harris)



5 | Lawren S. Harris, *Abstract Painting*, ca. 1931, oil on canvas, 119.4 × 152.4 cm, Private Collection. (Photo: Courtesy of the author, © 2011 Estate of Lawren Harris)

far north. As I've argued elsewhere, the former, and now having seen it, the latter as well, clearly derive from the abstract paintings of Bertram Brooker (1888–1955).²⁴ The March 1931 exhibition of Brooker's abstracts at Hart House in the University of Toronto presents a suggestive starting point for this new direction.²⁵ While it might be tempting to assume that the only two surviving examples of this foray into new territory date so early,²⁶ it is certainly tempting to locate them closer to the end of the year through to the spring of 1932 during which time he wrote to Carr of deep reflections and possible reworking of earlier work.

Particularly in his letter of 20 March 1932, just after presenting his *Self-Portrait*, when he reflected on “the spirit that informs nature,” and then in late April when he described “a new life stirring within me,” we can imagine him

reflecting upon this fresh direction. Look at the portrait again. There is a hint of hope, a stirring of spirit. But there is still in this face a sense of gnawing doubt that would drag him down yet more that fall, essentially impede his painting progress through to the breaking of the complicated personal entanglements in the spring of 1934 that had weighted his emotional crisis.

NOTES

- 1 See Dennis REID, *Atma buddhi manas: The later work of Lawren S. Harris* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985), 64.
- 2 Arts and Letters Club of Toronto, Records, 1908–1982, Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, Ms Coll 315, Item 2, Scrapbook, 1926–1943, 74. The letter is dated 24 Feb. 1932.
- 3 L.R. PFAFF, “Portraits by Lawren Harris: Salem Bland and Others,” *RACAR* V, no.1 (1978): 21–22.
- 4 See Michael NEWMAN, *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2007), 44–48.
- 5 The minutes of the meeting of the Programme Committee of the Arts & Letters Club of 13 February 1932 record: “Ogilvie reports that he has obtained all the necessary beaver board and frame material for the Artists self portraits, that it is now at the club and that he is arranging to distribute it among the artists.” Fisher, Ms Coll 315, Item 2 ovs, scrapbook, 1926–1943, 73. I’m grateful to Scott James for finding these references to the exhibition.
- 6 The Harris-Carr correspondence is in the National Archives of Canada, E. Carr Coll. MG30 D215 vol. 2, with individual letters cited by date.
- 7 The fullest description of Harris’ breakdown and subsequent recovery is in Peter LARISEY, *Light for a Cold Land: Lawren Harris’s Work and Life – An Interpretation* (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1993), 34–36, 41–51.
- 8 See “A Canadian Artist’s Modern Home,” *Canadian Homes and Gardens* VIII, no.4 (April 1931): 40.
- 9 See Jehanne Bietry SALINGER, “Group of Seven Begins Expansion,” *Toronto Mail and Empire*, 7 Dec. 1931.
- 10 “Theosophy and Art,” *The Canadian Theosophist* XIV (15 July 1933): 129–32; (15 Aug. 1933): 162–66.
- 11 “Revelation of Art in Canada,” *The Canadian Theosophist* VII (15 July 1926): 85–88.
- 12 Harris’s three programmes were “Justice in Human Life” (5 Nov. 1933), an untitled presentation of basic theosophical principles (3 Dec.), and “Thought and Responsibility” (31 Dec.). The series was broadcast in the evening over radio station CKNC; transcripts are with the Toronto Theosophical Society. See Douglas WORTS, “Lawren S. Harris: Transition to Abstraction, 1934–1945,” final paper, Master of Museum Studies Programme, University of Toronto, 1982, 40.
- 13 Emily CARR, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1966), 79, entry for 17 Nov. 1933.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 78.

- 15 Ibid., 87.
- 16 Emily CARR, in *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr and Other Writings*, ed. Susan Crean (Vancouver/Toronto/Berkeley: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 74, entry for 22 May 1934.
- 17 LARISEY, *Light for a Cold Land*, 117–18. See also REID, *Atma buddhi manas*, 22, and Maria TIPPETT, *Emily Carr: A Biography* (Toronto, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 212.
- 18 Frances Loring wrote to Eric Brown at the National Gallery of Canada about the “upheaval” in Toronto, noting that they “are not getting married. Theirs is to be a purely spiritual union – and knowing Bess I can well believe it.” ([15] July 1934.)
- 19 CARR, in *Opposite Contraries*, 78.
- 20 Ibid., 80.
- 21 These precise dates for Harris’s actions come from notes he made a few years later for an astrologer. See LARISEY, *Light for a Cold Land*, 118, f.n. 5.
- 22 See REID, *Atma buddhi manas*, 18–21.
- 23 They were auctioned by Sotheby’s, in association with Ritchies, Toronto. *Important Canadian Art* (29 May 2006): lot 49; *Important Canadian Art* (28 May 2007): lot 151.
- 24 REID, *Atma buddhi manas*, 18.
- 25 See Dennis REID, *Bertram Brooker, 1888–1955* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1973), 14–15; (second edition, 1979), 12–13.
- 26 The unsigned entries for the works in the Sotheby’s-Ritchies sales catalogues assert they were made “during the months immediately following the trip.” See *Important Canadian Art* (29 May 2006): 38; and, *Important Canadian Art* (28 May 2007): 118.

***Self-Portrait* de Lawren S. Harris : Une étape critique dans le cheminement d'un homme remarquable**

DENNIS REID

Un unique *Self-Portrait* par Lawren Harris n'a pas fait l'objet de beaucoup d'attention au cours des années, peut-être avec raison. Harris n'y a jamais fait référence et il n'était inclus dans aucune des deux rétrospectives majeures de son œuvre qui ont eu lieu de son vivant. Il n'a été exposé que deux fois : au Arts & Letters Club de Toronto, car il avait été peint pour faire partie d'une « galerie de portraits d'artistes par eux-mêmes » pour le diner mensuel du 27 février 1932, et dans une exposition consacrée aux tableaux abstraits de Harris organisée par la Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, organisée dans cette ville à l'automne 1985 et subséquemment à Vancouver, Winnipeg et Halifax. Bien que cet autoportrait montre son sens du précédent historique, il est digne d'étude en tant que document associé à une période charnière dans la vie de Harris. Il y paraît appréhensif, peut-être troublé.

Après leur première rencontre, à la fin de 1927, Lawren Harris correspond régulièrement avec Emily Carr. À partir de l'été 1930, ses lettres expriment souvent un franc-parler intime révélateur de son état émotif. Carr a heureusement conservé toutes ces lettres, malheureusement, Harris n'a pas. Les siennes présentent, néanmoins, un récit évolutif d'opinions, de réflexions, d'anxiété, de désespoir même, et puis l'affirmation graduelle d'un chemin à travers la crise. C'est un parcours dramatique, et l'autoportrait se trouve au bord de sa pente la plus abrupte.

Dans une lettre non datée de 1930, probablement écrite en avril ou mai, il s'adresse à Emily d'une manière familière pour la première fois – « Dear T'Other Emily » – et répond très directement par des conseils pratiques à l'aveu de son désespoir qu'elle faisait dans une lettre récente. Si Harris pouvait s'exprimer avec une telle autorité, c'est qu'il avait été lui-même affligé, en 1918, de ce qu'il appelait une « dépression nerveuse ». Il avait appris lentement à la contrôler en donnant à son œuvre une autre direction, à la suite d'excursions à Algoma, et en concentrant ses énergies sur la fondation du Groupe des Sept. Mais le plus significatif, cependant, est sa pleine adhésion à la théosophie, pour laquelle il avait montré quelque intérêt au cours des années précédentes, et son engagement actif auprès de la Toronto Theosophical Society. À partir

de ce moment, les principes théosophiques lui ont fourni le cadre essentiel pour sa croissance spirituelle et créatrice.

Un voyage en Europe, en mai 1930, lui donne l'occasion d'écrire à Carr au sujet de la peinture abstraite et d'une manière canadienne appropriée de faire de l'art. Il espérait aussi que le voyage en Arctique qu'il projetait avec Jackson, l'été suivant, allait au moins « d'une certaine manière » le libérer de ses « inhibitions figées », et que l'expérience exaltante de « la vie de l'univers dans l'eau et le ciel et la terre et la lumière » l'aiderait à perdre de son « amertume ».

En mai 1931, il écrit à Carr qu'il avait le sentiment que ces nouvelles œuvres arctiques étaient « pour la plupart médiocres ». Quelque sept mois plus tard, son moral semble être en hausse et, en février, il peint l'autoportrait. Mais, en mars 1932, il écrit à Carr qu'il affronte une nouvelle crise : leur correspondance subséquente suggère que ses écrits théosophiques étaient plus productifs et satisfaisants que ses peintures. En 1934, il devait épouser Bess Houser et ne plus jamais habiter Toronto.

Il faut maintenant examiner l'autoportrait de Harris, de février 1932, à la lumière des années tumultueuses qui ont précédé et suivi sa réalisation. Nous avons vu, d'après ses lettres à Carr, que, dès juin 1930, il avait l'esprit troublé. Ni son voyage en Arctique, ni le projet de construction d'une maison avec sa première épouse ne lui ont apporté de soulagement. En 1931, il parlait de refaire des tableaux antérieurs jusqu'à ce que « quelque chose de plus défini, de plus développé émerge » et aussi d'avoir le besoin absolu de poursuivre sa propre vision, de résister entièrement aux pressions des autres de « se conformer à leurs idées ». Dans ce contexte, nous pouvons voir, dans l'autoportrait, la représentation d'un homme qui est à tout le moins inquiet de ce que l'avenir lui réserve et du jugement d'autrui. Il est sur la défensive, peut-être peu assuré de sa capacité à réaliser ses idéaux. Pourtant, il y a, en même temps, de l'intelligence dans le regard, de la détermination dans le port de tête et un sentiment d'espoir dans l'illumination intense venant d'en haut et d'en arrière et qui est le signe d'une vie encore profondément engagée. Trois semaines après que le tableau ait été exposé à l'Arts & Letters Club, Harris révèle à Carr la profondeur de la crise qu'il traverse, son anxiété concernant sa pertinence en équilibre précaire avec un sentiment de « clarté créatrice » imminente. En juin, il avait espéré peindre seize toiles sur l'Arctique, mais il cesse rapidement de peindre, paralysé par le dégoût de soi. Il se plonge dans la théosophie à l'automne 1933, et Carr ne fait aucune mention de nouvelles œuvres qu'elle aurait pu voir au cours de sa visite en novembre.

Harris a bien fait quelques tentatives de prendre une nouvelle direction au cours de ses deux séries arctiques entre le début de 1931 et l'été de 1933. Récemment réapparu sur le marché de l'art, les tableaux largement inconnus *Figure with Rays of Light* et *Abstract Painting* pourraient bien s'inspirer

des peintures abstraites de Bertram Brooker et même dater du printemps 1932. Dans sa lettre à Carr du 20 mars 1932, juste après la présentation de l'autoportrait, nous pouvons imaginer Harris réfléchissant sur cette nouvelle direction. Il y a un léger signe d'espoir, un éveil de l'esprit. Mais il y a toujours, dans ce visage, un sentiment du doute qui le ronge et qui allait l'envahir encore plus l'automne suivant et, essentiellement, gêner le progrès de sa peinture jusqu'à la rupture, au printemps de 1934, de relations personnelles compliquées qui avaient pesé sur sa crise émotionnelle.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette