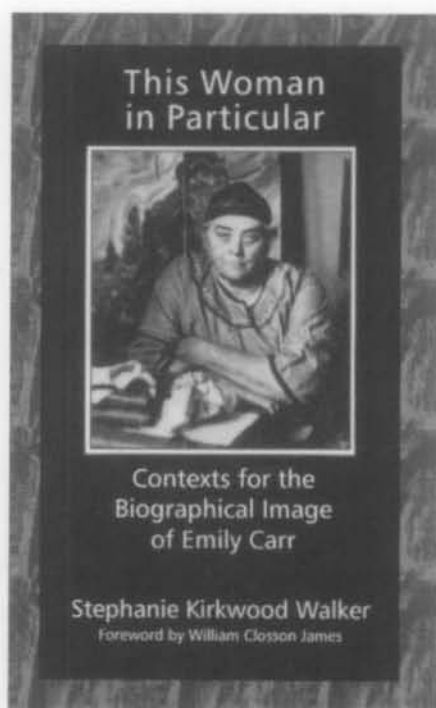


**THIS WOMAN IN PARTICULAR**  
Contexts for the Biographical  
Image of Emily Carr

Stephanie KIRKWOOD WALKER  
Wilfrid Laurier University Press,  
Waterloo, 1996  
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Fiction, autobiography, letter-writing and painting coalesce to provide researchers with a richly documented archive from which to construct Canadian artist and icon Emily Carr. Such a fertile source of documentation has ensured the "writing" of Carr as an important figure within Canadian art history while, at the same time, it has limited the analysis of her work and allowed critics and historians to be seduced by perceived "truths." At a time when identity, as Stuart Hall suggests, is discussed "as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation,"<sup>1</sup> Emily Carr has been most often constructed as inhabiting a fixed space defined by her own writing and the writing of those who knew her. The possibility of shifting or dislocating boundaries established by Carr's own words seems to elude even the most astute; instead, description, formal analysis and repetition form the centre and therefore provide the margins of most of the writing about her. For example, although fifteen years separates the publication of Maria Tippett's second edition of *Emily*



*Carr: A Biography* from the book's first release, Tippett confidently announces in her "Preface" to the second edition that she corrected "typographical and factual errors" but "decided not to make other alterations."<sup>2</sup> Thus, despite the burgeoning amount of literature since the late 1970's which weaves through and around issues of identity, subjectivity, biography and autobiography, and the continuing debates about gendered experience, Tippett remains concerned with a linear chronological description devoid of theoretical analysis. Similarly, Doris Shadbolt's writing about Carr explains, interprets and clarifies but does not

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stray from the worn path which threatens to atrophy Carr's words, pictures and life.

Stephanie Kirkwood Walker's thoughtful and meticulously researched analysis of the writings about Emily Carr (Carr's own writings included) serves to relocate a discussion of Carr, thereby challenging the closure of the autobiographical text and shattering the boundaries of the absolutist empiricism which has threatened to turn Carr and her words to stone. Even though, as Walker suggests, "the energies of postcolonial political and cultural strategies are as attracted to Carr's life as her image is augmented by them" (p.10), the ordering of her life and work relies upon the genre of autobiography and traditional biography. Since at least the mid-1980's, "the question of the constructed, fictional nature of autobiography has become a focus of feminist theoretical work,"<sup>3</sup> and biography as a genre has been scrutinized and criticized by feminists and poststructuralists alike. Walker's short second chapter, "The Enigma of the Biography," highlights the problems without disguising its popularity: "Though much postmodern criticism is applicable to biography, especially regarding the validity of the individual as a discrete and self-determining creature, the continuing and unselfconscious vitality of the genre suggests it is strangely exempt from deconstructing urges" (p.34). Walker exposes the con-

tradictions between the pleasure obtained from reading about a heroic life and the danger in accepting an unquestioned presentation of an "authentic reality."<sup>4</sup> The construction of a so-called "authentic self" in the genre of autobiography resists deconstruction when historians and critics cling to an unproblematized empiricism while, at the same time, theorists of such genres insist that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is blurred, thereby highlighting the unreliability of this source in the "objective" biography.

While Walker examines the extensive material written around and about Emily Carr, she highlights and expands upon the elements in the artist's life and work that have attracted discussions of the spiritual. Walker is not an art historian and does not attempt to make critical analyses of Carr's paintings; rather she approaches Carr from the discipline of religious studies and because of this offers the art historical reader an important perspective on the production and consumption of Carr's art. Walker's emphasis on the spiritual assumes two directions: one is concerned for women's biography; the other is concerned for the development of a rational and theoretically informed discussion about religion in art. Both of these topics present multi-faceted difficulties in academic (as opposed to fictional) writing.

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The writing of women's biography during the past twenty to thirty years has fallen into a chasm flanked on either side by almost insurmountable difficulties. Much recent feminist theory borrows heavily from poststructuralist theories which in turn criticize the construction of the unified individual which the biography seeks to construct; thus, biography has become a questionable and contested literary form. Most biographies that have been written and still appear with regularity on bookstore shelves are about men. Walker rightly posits "[t]hat relatively few female lives were told before 1970" (p.115) and the situation has not dramatically changed. For example, Phyllis Grosskurth's new biography of Byron, *Byron, The Flawed Angel* is garnering extensive coverage in newspapers and magazines. *Maclean's*, in its recent review, subtitled the page-length article "Byron was, in a sense, the Mick Jagger of his day,"<sup>5</sup> thereby assuming (probably correctly) continuing public interest in patriarchal "bad boys." The publication of books like the new Byron complements the intense and continuing interest in the spectacle in the world of art galleries and museums. For example, well over 200,000 people visited Glasgow's McLellan Galleries in 1996 during the eighteen-week long Charles Rennie Mackintosh exhibition. Thus, while feminists agonize over how to "write" the lives of women, writing the lives of

men continues and Walker, in her work on Carr, feels compelled to establish the credibility of the biography. Predictably she chooses the writings of Carolyn Heilbrun and Rita Felski to support her own foray into "writing a woman's life."<sup>6</sup> While Heilbrun and Felski approach their material in slightly different ways, the latter being much more sophisticated in her use of contemporary theory, together they do offer feminists the opportunity to examine the multi-faceted narratives around women's lives. Walker utilizes their impressive work effectively and efficiently. Not so predictably, Walker also relies upon medieval hagiography: "Indeed the pattern of women's lives depicted in medieval hagiography manifests patterns of discontent and difference that mirror the preoccupations of the writers of women's lives now" (p.102). Far from manifesting a digression or providing a disparity, the use of this material offers insights into Carr's spirituality as it relates to her work.

While an analysis of spirituality opens new doors on Carr research, Walker's examination of the writing about Carr ultimately becomes an extremely sophisticated literature search. Her discussion of the development of Carr's biographical image from the "excessive rhetoric of the forties" through to the "cautious movement toward a clearer description of Emily Carr" in the fifties and early six-

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ties promises the kind of productive analysis that could enhance the relationship between the production of art and its reception but, instead, relies too heavily on a short descriptive account which avoids a close reading of a relationship between text and image. Walker tends to dwell too much on descriptions of writings about Carr while avoiding much analysis of those writings, thus leaving a reader with little insight into how these writings constructed Carr at various points in time. A few years ago Jan Marsh undertook a similar kind of analysis of nineteenth-century English artist Elizabeth Siddal; but Marsh, much more confident in her writing of a woman's life, located the biographical "problem" in her preface and did not feel the need to challenge the categories over and over again in her text. "Strictly speaking," wrote Marsh, "this book is not a biography, although it deals almost exclusively with biographical material. It is, specifically, the study of a biographical history or, as designated here, a biographical legend, which has been told and retold during the past hundred years with varying elements and emphases."<sup>7</sup> Thus dispensing with a justification for writing women's biography, Marsh approached the material by organizing the writing about Siddal into chronological periods which were defined by certain general preoccupations. For example, during the 1880's and 1890's

Siddal's role as an artist amongst the Pre-Raphaelites was perceived to have been one in which she was "looked at and adored, the object of masculine admiration," a model to be drawn and painted.<sup>8</sup> During the 1920's writing about Siddal was defined by the burgeoning interest in Freudian thought that dominated English intellectualism of that era; by the 1960's Siddal had assumed characteristics appropriate to an era of sexual liberation. Marsh made a narrative about Siddal that illuminated the artist's life and work without succumbing to the most problematic aspect of biography: the writing of one person's life as "fact" without the author's acknowledgment of his or her own perspective. Walker lucidly describes this dilemma in biographies about Carr: "To the extent that various perspectives on Carr's life and work seem to be in competition — each an attempt to discern the accurate version of her life — the biographical model remains traditional; the quest, though it may include many versions, is toward an exemplary truth" (p.91). Walker goes on to suggest that each text about Carr is "written from a particular and *always* legitimate position, an understanding shaped by the life experiences of the biographer" (p.92). While Walker understands the complexities and carefully describes them, it is in the description that her work loses its force: that is, the time Walker takes to examine the writing of writ-

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ing biography, Marsh used to narrate her story of Siddal. And again, while Walker understands narrative and its fictions (she relies heavily on Felski for these analyses) she overdoes her discussion of the problem and underwrites Carr as "narrative." Similarly, she overwrites a discussion of the genre of biography, particularly as it developed in late 19th- and early-20th century England around the work of Leslie Stephen, and underwrites Emily Carr. Again, Walker develops a rigorous analysis of the literature around the writing of biography but allows the analysis to overwhelm and thereby confine and constrict Carr's autobiographical voice as well as her biographical voice.

Similarly, while Walker alludes to the overwhelming interest in a North American triadic icon composed of Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe and Emily Carr, she elects to raise the problem without analysing the phenomenon: "Interest in the lives of other women artists on similar margins, like Georgia O'Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, suggests a societal urge to come to terms with the links between women, art and nature" (p.6). This generalization simplifies a complex tendency on the part of feminist researchers to seek ways of writing about women artists that both establish a female tradition and challenge established ways of writing about art, and it ignores the apparent public interest in the three artists. The relationship constructed among

the three North American women forms an integral part of the perception by late 20th-century viewers of Carr as an artist. In other words, any writing about Carr in the 1990's challenges an interpretation of O'Keeffe and Kahlo as well, particularly as all three artists made intrusions into cultural identities which they did not "own." My reading of Walker's text yearned for more about these women and their situations, and less about Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf, whose connections with Carr as an artist or as a constructed "text" remained elusive if not extraneous.

Nevertheless, in keeping with her concern for a viable framework for analysis of a female subject and to escape the pitfalls of biography which she describes so well, Walker positions herself by using two poetically constructed insertions, one near the beginning of the book (p.14), the other near the end (p.146-7), thus framing her discussion of Carr with a personal voice. This is an effective tactic which highlights the personal and retains an integrity often missing from "objective" biographical writing but, again, she could have taken this kind of analysis further and been less reticent about inserting her own voice into the Carr text. While it is unnecessary perhaps to take this kind of politics as far as Griselda Pollock has in her recent analysis of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1881-82),<sup>9</sup> it has become an

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acceptable form of feminist writing that attempts to position or locate a space between the objective and the subjective, allowing for a rigorous scholarship without succumbing to dangers of wholeheartedly accepting the “factual” archive. Walker’s positioning of herself gives this reader a glimpse into her politics and poetics that is both intriguing and promising, but the effort is abandoned too quickly.

In addition, while Walker contemplates the experience of Emily Carr as a gendered subject, she does not develop the positioning of a gendered reader/viewer. Nor does she discuss the politics of pleasure involved in gendered reading. Walker briefly alludes to Lynne Pearce’s suggestion that “women need and desire other women to compensate for what they lack themselves” and therefore women also “need and desire images of other women for the same reason” (p.146). However, she might have followed Pearce further into discussions of the gendered reader and the “sexual/textual politics involved” in the author’s own “readerly incarnations or ‘positionings’.”<sup>10</sup>

Moving away from feminist concerns to more general art-historical concerns, Walker offers much while, at the same time, falling short in terms of her attention to visual analysis. Certainly, art historians should pay close attention to Walker’s discussion: her interdisciplinary discussion of Carr

particularly, as mentioned earlier — her attention to the literature of religious studies — should be welcomed as a valued addition to Carr literature. Similarly, Walker’s contribution to the analysis of Carr as a literary “text” will expand any future writing about Carr’s literature, her paintings or her life; but Walker’s lack of engagement with Carr’s visual images is disappointing, particularly if the work is situated within recent feminist art-historical writing and within issues of postcoloniality.

Walker’s discussion of Carr’s engagement with the “primitive” other is commendable, particularly her utilization of Terry Goldie’s theories: “Terry Goldie’s analysis of the *image* of the indigene in literature, according to a dialectic of attraction and repulsion, sets out grounds for its powerful force in Carr’s life. Trapped between categories — the restorative landscape and the hostile wilderness, the dusky maiden and the fiendish warrior — the autonomous subjectivity of the indigene has gone unrecognized” (p.139-40). Certainly, the relationship between Carr and indigenous Northwest Coast culture requires more intensive and extensive work; art history has only begun its examination of these kinds of relationships and what they mean to the viewer as well as what they might have meant to the producer. Walker’s sensitive analysis of Carr as a “player” within and around these issues is both useful and enlightening but it leaves

the visual images of Carr's transgressions unintended, thus constructing a gap which remains despite Walker's own belying of other gaps. Granted, Walker's programme involves a study of the literature about Carr, but that literature is largely about her images and any writing of the artist implicates her visual production. Even Carr's own writing is woven around and through her artmaking and thus any discussion of Carr must negotiate meaning within two trajectories: writing and looking. Walker, while ordering, classifying and commenting on the written, loses the impact of the visual. Nevertheless, art historians will be well-served by her sometimes tentative but always lucid examination of the spiritual, particularly her placement of Carr into a tradition of writing about female mystics which draws upon literature with which few art historians will be familiar. Most important, Walker signals directions: her listing of "loci of late-twentieth-century concern," specifically "[w]oman, nature, power, space, health, cities" (p.138), highlights issues that will, one hopes, be taken further. Walker, far from causing a reader to feel that everything about Emily Carr has been written, causes the reader to hope for more. If Emily Carr is a narrative, she is far from complete.

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## Notes

- 1 Stuart HALL, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 392.
- 2 Maria TIPPETT, *Emily Carr: A Biography* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), ix.
- 3 Sara MILLS and Lynne PEARCE, *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading* (London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), 57.
- 4 Mills and Pearce use the term "authentic reality" in their discussion of biography and autobiography. Rita Felski refers to the "authentic self." Rita FELSKI, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 88.
- 5 John BEMROSE, "Poetic licentiousness," *Maclean's*, 28 Apr. 1997, 61.
- 6 Carolyn HEILBRUN, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988).
- 7 Jan MARSH, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* (London: Quartet Books, 1989), xi.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 9 Griselda POLLOCK, "The 'View from Elsewhere': Extracts from a semi-public correspondence about the politics of female spectatorship" in Penny FLORENCE and Dee REYNOLDS (eds), *Feminist Subjects, Multi-Media Cultural Methodologies* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), 3-38.
- 10 Lynne PEARCE, "The reader: text, context and the balance of power," in Penny FLORENCE and Dee REYNOLDS (eds), *Feminist Subjects, Multi-Media Cultural Methodologies* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), 160.