

**Paul-Emile Borduas, *Écrits/Writings 1942-1958*. Translated by Dennis Young and François-Marc Gagnon, introduced and edited by François-Marc Gagnon. Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design/New York University Press, 1979. 160 pp., \$15.00, \$10.00 (paper)**

Joanna Isaac

Volume 6, Number 2, 1979–1980

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076937ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076937ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Isaac, J. (1979). Review of [Paul-Emile Borduas, *Écrits/Writings 1942-1958*. Translated by Dennis Young and François-Marc Gagnon, introduced and edited by François-Marc Gagnon. Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design/New York University Press, 1979. 160 pp., \$15.00, \$10.00 (paper)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 6(2), 134–136. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076937ar>

Although not treated at length in Shadbolt's book, this painting, owned by the Art Gallery of Ontario, gives us an insight into the divine nature of the artist's God. It portrays a tiny Indian church almost consumed by the great Western forests; in this painting, God (the Church) and Nature (the Forest) are one. Until her introduction to theosophy in 1927, Carr had only perceived God as persisting in a church. This painting thus marks Carr's transition, as she recognizes the God in everything animate and inanimate.

Some people believe that in order to understand an artist's inner life, it is necessary to resort to a form of psychoanalysis. (The application of psychoanalysis to art history was developed, as is well known, from Sigmund Freud's study of Leonardo da Vinci.) Doris Shadbolt has attempted to apply this method of understanding the inner-self to the art of Emily Carr (p. 140). The importance of the theme of life, growth, and rebirth, for example, is treated in this way, but the results are somehow unsatisfactory. Relating Carr's forest landscape paintings to sexual images and, in particular, to phallic symbols strikes one as being simplistic. Not mentioned is the artist's interest in natural themes, which relates to her firm belief in a rejuvenating infinite life force, created by God. Since psychoanalysis required immediate knowledge of the individual's subconscious, Doris Shadbolt's inference of sexual imagery in Carr's work can only be speculative.

In the final analysis, Doris Shadbolt's *The Art of Emily Carr* is significant because it constitutes a more comprehensive study of the art of this great artist than previous publications. It also appears at the end of a decade in which several similar studies about Canadian artists have been written by Canadian art historians and published by Canadian publishers. Unfortunately, the quality of the reproductions in Shadbolt's book is poor; they show little resemblance to the true pigmentation of the original paintings. Of vital importance to the Canadian art scene, this book falls short, in this regard, to previously published examples.

The continuing fascination with the art of Emily Carr and the

eccentric person behind the art should encourage art historians to continue their research on this Canadian artist. The appearance, in the past two years, of three major books dealing with Emily Carr (Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher, *Emily Carr: The Untold Story*, Saanichton, B.C., 1978; Maria Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, Toronto, 1979, reviewed above; and this book by Doris Shadbolt) has revealed much new information about the artist and her work. These studies serve to open the door to further advanced research on Emily Carr's life and art.

EMILY-JANE HILLS  
University of Victoria

PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS *Écrits/Writings 1942-1958*. Translated by Dennis Young and François-Marc Gagnon, introduced and edited by François-Marc Gagnon. Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, New York University Press, 1979. 160 pp., \$15.00, \$10.00 (paper).

Twenty years after writing to his friend Claude Gauvreau that the correct treatment for his failing spirits and health 'would be affection in my luminously beautiful country,' Paul-Émile Borduas is being fêted in Canada. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts held a Borduas retrospective in 1962; Guy Robert's book *Borduas, ou le dilemme culturel québécois* (1977) was shortly followed by François-Marc Gagnon's *Biographie et analyse de l'œuvre* (1978); *Artscanada* devoted its issue of December 1978/January 1979 to Borduas.

The latest tribute to Borduas is the bilingual edition of his writings by Dennis Young and Gagnon, many of which are available for the first time in English (Fig. 4). This extension to the anglophone audience would have pleased Borduas. In the last letter of this collection, entitled 'One small corner-stone is the turf of my old prejudices,' he realizes that his old assumption about being *Canadien* - 'as we say when we unreasonably identify this epithet with our "French superiority"' - was a betrayal of a much more valid unity which was Canadian.

Paul-Émile Borduas *Écrits/Writings 1942-1958*

Introduced and edited by François-Marc Gagnon  
English translation by Dennis Young and  
François-Marc Gagnon  
Traduction anglaise de François-Marc Gagnon et  
Dennis Young

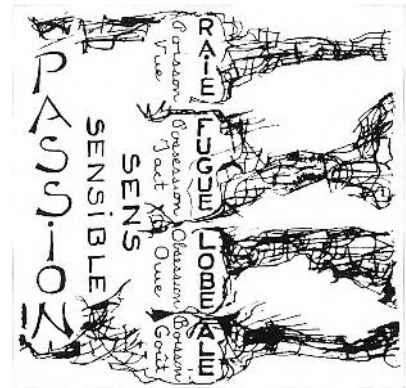


FIGURE 4. Borduas, cover.

This kind of reversal is typical of Borduas and frustrating to those who want to ascertain Borduas's position on art, on politics, on the effectiveness of art as political device, on nationalism, on internationalism, and so on. It is what leads Robert to devote a central section of his book to what he calls *Dilemmes* - the apparent contradictions and conflicts in Borduas's thought. Fortunately, in this collection we are given no directives for understanding Borduas, only Borduas's writings and a short introduction to each of the three sections: Montreal and Saint-Hilaire, New York, and Paris. These introductions contain brief biographical information and what has become the mandatory apology for Borduas's 'awkward, untutored' use of language. My own command of French is too crude to detect any crudities on Borduas's part, but the English version (and this is undoubtedly due in part to the careful, sensitive translation by Young and Gagnon) contains simple, lucid, and at times amazingly beautiful prose. The introduction also, in an attempt to locate Borduas in the tradition of famous manifesto writers, compares him to Marinetti - to whom he is nothing like. There is in Borduas no rejection of the past, no shrill macho stance, no rigidity of ideology that could ever become Fascist. There is instead that

baffling transformation continue:

Real things require relationships repeatedly renewed, or challenged, or put to question: relationships impalpable, exacting and dependent on the vivifying force of action.

Our treasure is poetic resource: the emotional wealth on which the centuries to come will draw. It cannot be passed on unless it is transformed, and lacking this it is deformed. (p. 54)

The consistency inherent in these writings resides not so much in the argument (although there is much more coherency here than would appear at first), but in the temperament of the man himself – generous and disinterested. The Arnoldian echoes are not gratuitous, for if we are going to locate Borduas within any tradition of aesthetic, political, or philosophical speculation it is Arnold to whom we would most profitably refer. Once placed in this tradition Borduas's ostensible lack of political platform or aesthetic directives would be seen not as a shortcoming, but as intentional. His abhorrence of the petty and the self-interested, in favour of the generous, the ardent, the spontaneous would not make us feel we are in the presence of the naive, but rather the wholly informed sensibility. Like Arnold, Borduas locates the revolutionary potential within the development of the best attributes of the human temperament:

The self-seeking act is fettered to its author; it is stillborn.

The passionate act breaks free, through its very dynamism. (p. 51)

Political distractions cannot be more than short-term and without consequence for us, as captivating as they may appear: They may be thrust on us but we must turn away. Social action should be effected through personal relationships, by the unreserved giving of the most illuminated. (p. 120)

Friends of the present regime suspect us of supporting the 'Revolution.' Friends of the 'Revolution' call us merely rebels, saying we 'protest against what now exists but only to transform it not to displace it.' As delicately as this is put, we think we understand.

It is a question of class.

We are credited with the naive intention A wanting to 'transform' society by exchanging the men in power with others of the same kind – and of ignoring the friends of the 'revolution'!

But the only distinction between these 'friends' and those presently in power is that they belong to different classes – as if a change of class implied a change of

civilization, a change of desires, a change of hope!

For us the risk of all in global refusal. (p. 52)

If Borduas was not going to allow his group to become *Les Automatistes au service de la révolution*, he was equally adverse to their being enlisted into the service of the French Surrealists. To Breton's overture of 1943 and his urgent request that the Québécois group participate in the 1947 Surrealist Exhibition, Borduas returned his sincere good wishes along with his evasive 'perhaps when you know us better.' That Borduas did not want to appear in a subordinate role where Breton was concerned is a possible, but rather facile, explanation and hardly in keeping with our sense of the man as it is derived from these writings. That Borduas found himself and his group in the Canadian cliché of needing to 'catch up' with the European avant garde while not wanting to be subsumed by it is a more common explanation, but really only a variant of the first. More to the point is to recognize that Borduas's position as an artist and animator of a group of artists and poets is a direct parallel to his political position. Herein lies the key to what has come to be seen as one of the central paradoxes concerning Borduas. His sense of place rooted in the area of Saint-Hilaire is thought to conflict with his internationalism and his desire to see the young Canadian school enter the 'cycle of world discussion.' But a man rooted and reaching out is not in an untenable position, rather the best of all possible ones. It is a question of response. He describes his people as 'a little people,' 'huddled,' 'trapped,' and 'abandoned' – 'spellbound by the annihilating prestige of remembered European masterpieces, and disdainful of the authentic creations of its own oppressed.' The solution to this insularity was not trips abroad 'for improved exploitation of the crowd upon return'; nor the importation of international artists to serve as a kind of cultural blood transfusion for anemic Canadian art. When Alfred Pellan arrived in Montreal, Borduas and his group were conscious of the benefit to their movement, but also conscious of their own self-worth: 'The work that this painter brought from Paris bore

the rich perfume of its place of origin. It was, all in all, a Paris fruit which he offered. ... But we were not to be swept off our feet! Pellan's painting was not to be allowed to set a fashion. It was a wholesome element to be assimilated, just as it should have assimilated the best elements of the Montreal art among which he had chosen to live.'

The interest of Pellan and many of the members of the Contemporary Art Society were solely 'cultural' and centred on the notion of 'catching-up.' But for Borduas imitation, while perhaps the highest form of flattery, was not creation. Research in art 'proceeds from a psychic state proper to the place where the work is done; this psychic state is the unconscious of the place. Who will ever know its wide ramifications?' Part of the excitement of the book is derived from Borduas's growing awareness of these ramifications: 'My students came to realize they were involved in something no longer confinable within the four walls of a classroom, but with echoes outside.'

The choice of metaphor here is significant. It reflects the Canadian preoccupation with isolation and communication. Historically we are a country bribed into what little unity we have achieved with the promise of the means of communication. Always with us there is the consciousness of geographic and cultural alienation. When Borduas talks of Canadian art he does so in terms of the desire to communicate; and he acknowledges that Canadian answers, once out of the country, do not start any discussion. 'Because from the outside they seem to be fixated on irrelevancies: the materials used have not been forged through an intense struggle, they seem loaded with sentimentality, and they have meaning only at home – or, if elsewhere, only for the under-developed classes.'

The solution is not to lapse into a kind of cultural solipsism, 'creating an ivory tower around ourselves and recapitulating, just for our own benefit, formal notions done with so long ago.' He grants the possibility for originality within the atavistic and cites those who have achieved it. 'They are, for sure, unexpected answers to the preoccupations of contemporary art, and answers useless outside home.' 'It

would be enough, for achieving the best of all possible worlds, simply that nobler souls, better informed, were free to spread some gentleness around by means of lively works (instead of being forced to withdraw into themselves in a morbidity that would look bad for any country's health). But Canada may even have the nucleus of something well enough informed to generate socially the relationship needed for the spiritual adventure. And that is already a great step!

Borduas was radical in both senses of the term. And this explains why he was seen as so great a threat to the repressive ideological climate of the Duplessis régime while those whose interests were solely 'cultural' were not – cultural overlay is innocuous, radical change threatens. The publication of *Global Refusal* resulted in Borduas's dismissal from his post as professor of drawing at the *École du Meuble* and the cancellation of his upcoming exhibition; eventually it necessitated his departure from Canada.

The most obvious complaint about the writings (one that can be deduced even from the quotes I have included) is that the answers are poetic, not practical. There is, to counter this complaint, the lesson of the life. Borduas managed for a time to live his solutions – they are viable. And if he is lauded for being a Canadian artist who has achieved international recognition, the praise has more to do with national chauvinism than with Borduas. The most appropriate praise of Borduas is one he addressed to his old master Ozias Leduc: 'So many exceptional beings have lived in ordinary places and made accurate responses to them. Accurate responses? That is to say poetic; that is to say bountiful.'

JOANNA ISAAC  
*Dalhousie University*  
Halifax

---

ANTHONY JACKSON *The Democratization of Canadian Architecture*. Halifax, Tech-Press, 1978. 32 p., 64 illus., \$3.95.

ANTHONY JACKSON *The Future of Canadian Architecture*. Halifax,

Tech-Press, 1979. 32 p., 58 illus., \$4.95.

Ces deux essais d'Anthony Jackson sont les deux premiers de la série « Library of Canadian Architecture » du Nova Scotia Technical College. Il faut se réjouir de cette initiative et espérer que cette tribune sera ouverte à tous ceux qui poursuivent des travaux de recherche sur l'architecture canadienne, même si l'auteur des deux premières publications est un professeur du N.S.T.C. Les deux ouvrages sont de format 9 × 12 po, semblable à celui des revues d'architecture, et tous deux offrent des illustrations, en général d'excellente qualité, qui occupent autant de place que le texte. La mise en page, qui n'est pas absolument orthodoxe, et l'emploi de plusieurs caractères typographiques différents créent parfois une certaine confusion qui a été largement corrigée dans le deuxième livre dont la présentation plus élégante marque un progrès par rapport au premier.

Le feuillet publicitaire de l'éditeur annonce que *The Future of Canadian Architecture* est un « Companion volume to *The Democratization of Canadian Architecture* ». Ce dernier pourrait en effet constituer l'introduction à un ouvrage plus considérable dont le premier chapitre serait *The Future of Canadian Architecture. The Democratization...* présente un contenu à caractère plutôt général. En dépit du titre, il ne comporte aucune référence canadienne, si ce n'est par les illustrations auxquelles le texte ne réfère jamais explicitement. Il pose la nécessité d'une architecture adaptée aux masses populaires et capable d'être comprise par elles. Dans le deuxième livre, *The Future of Canadian Architecture*, le point de vue est plus spécifiquement canadien, faisant valoir la nécessité de réaliser une architecture nationale ou, mieux, une architecture régionale. Les moyens qui sont proposés pour y arriver sont sensiblement les mêmes que ceux proposés dans le premier livre pour produire une architecture démocratique.

Par leur thématique, ces deux livres se situent au sein du débat actuel sur l'architecture du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle. Sans aller jusqu'à parler de la faillite de l'architecture moderne, Jackson n'en souligne pas moins

son caractère rigide et inadéquat parce qu'elle cherche à tout niveler. Les pionniers de l'architecture moderne ne sont cependant pas les seuls responsables de son échec. Jackson l'attribue aussi aux générations suivantes qui n'ont pas été capables de poursuivre les objectifs de leurs prédécesseurs, en particulier à l'égard du problème de la décoration.

Ces deux livres trouvent aussi leur place parmi la littérature contemporaine sur l'architecture, en encourageant le pluralisme, la tolérance et en tentant de promouvoir une architecture qui aurait une base populaire.

Contrairement à l'architecte des temps passés qui travaillait pour une minorité de privilégiés, l'architecte contemporain travaille pour la masse. Mais celui-ci, quelles que soient ses origines, n'est pas préparé pour comprendre et traduire les aspirations populaires. Plus instruit que la moyenne, gagnant plus que la moyenne et avec des goûts différents de ceux de la majorité, il est séparé de ceux pour qui il construit. Le résultat de tout cela est que le grand public ne comprend pas l'architecture moderne, il ne s'y retrouve pas et il ne s'y intéresse pas. L'auteur suggère à l'architecte des moyens pour apprendre à parler aux masses. Il faut d'abord que son architecture soit visuellement attrayante, ce qui, selon Jackson, fait défaut à l'architecture du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'architecte devra aussi chercher à satisfaire les aspirations populaires. Loin de porter un jugement hautain sur le goût populaire et renonçant à son arrogante prétention de pouvoir éduquer les masses, l'architecte se rappellera que même William Morris méprisait les objets d'art décoratif auxquels les collectionneurs soit-disant cultivés accordent aujourd'hui une grande valeur.

Parmi d'autres recommandations concrètes formulées par l'auteur, notons le recours à la technique courante plutôt qu'à une technique complexe et coûteuse et la possibilité pour l'utilisateur d'intervenir même dans l'aménagement de l'extérieur de sa demeure plutôt que de tout soumettre à un contrôle morne et sans vie qui ne reflète pas le pluralisme de la société.

Les ouvrages récents sur l'architecture nous ont, bien sûr, habitués