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<論文>

“The Other View of Us”: Two Canadian Literary Portraits of Rockwell Kent

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I Introduction

The turn of the century has witnessed a revival of interest in the life and work of American painter, illustrator, adventurer, and political activist Rockwell Kent (1882-1971). While a permanent exhibition and an extensive collection of his work has been lodged at The Rockwell Kent Gallery at Plattsburgh State University since 1973, a number of major exhibitions of his paintings “The View from Asgaard” (1999), “Distant Shores” (2000) and “Rockwell Kent: The Mythic and the Modern” (2005) have reacquainted art lovers with a body of work that, as curator Richard V. West tell us, has been central to “the American visual tradition.”⁽¹⁾ In addition to a 75th anniversary of edition Kent’s illustrations for the famous 1930 Lakeside Press edition of *Moby Dick* and a 2001 US Post Office commemorative stamp, the year 2005 saw the release of a documentary film by Frederick Lewis of Ohio State University, focusing on the art, politics and exuberant life of a man once called “the stormy petrel of American art” (Traxel 6). The literary world has also celebrated Kent, with Russell Banks’ 2008 *The Reserve*, a novel centering on a left-wing artist named Jordan Groves, who moves among the wealthy.

In Canada, Kent’s art has also attracted attention, in particular, the paintings and drawings produced during his short stay in Newfoundland from 1914 to 1915. As Gemey Kelly points out in the exhibition catalogue to the Dalhousie Art Gallery’s *Rockwell Kent: The Newfoundland Work*, Kent’s paintings of this period express a distinctly Canadian “idea of north” (Kelly 11). Interestingly, two major Canadian novelists have also offered up fictional portraits of Rockwell Kent, works of fiction appearing less than ten years apart. In Jane Urquhart’s *The Underpainter*, 1997, winner of Canada’s prestigious Governor General’s Award for fiction, Kent is the friend and mentor of Austin Fraser, a fictional American painter who is fascinated by the rugged landscape on the northern shore of Lake Superior

and by a local woman associated with its severe beauty. Kent is a secondary character in Urquhart's novel, but an important presence nonetheless, espousing his views on life, art, and politics. The two painters remain artist compatriots until Fraser is stung by Kent's criticism of his work. In *The Big Why* by Newfoundland writer Michael Winter (2004), Rockwell Kent himself narrates, looking back from the vantage point of old age on his brief sojourn in Brigus, Newfoundland during 1914-1915, striking a tone of contrition for the personal, professional, and political failures besetting his hopes to live simply and deliberately in defiance of the modern art scene of New York City. With the outbreak of war, Kent finds himself at the centre of patriotic frenzy and paranoia in a loyal British colony, his recalcitrance, his socialist politics and his love of German culture ending in his deportation, fifteen months later, on suspicion of being a German spy.

Both *The Underpainter* and *The Big Why* politicize the artistic gaze by focusing on an outsider's view of a Canadian setting. For the Ontario-born Jane Urquhart, writer in residence at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland, in the late 1990s, a visit to Rockwell Kent's cottage in Brigus inspired her with the theme that would inform *The Underpainter*, her fourth novel:

Kent started me on the whole idea of an artist ... and an American artist, and how would an artist view our landscape and geography. I liked this idea of the other view of us, and I wanted to explore that, I wanted to really get inside that mind. (Smith)

Winter, as Herb Wylie points out, sees Newfoundland from the point of view of an outsider: "the perspective of a foreigner failing to embrace and be embraced" by his adopted home (Wylie 2011, 204). In what follows I want to sketch the differing characterizations and uses that Rockwell Kent serves in these two novels. I argue that, for Urquhart, Rockwell Kent functions as touchstone of artistic passion and political commitment, a champion of the northern mystique and of landscape art in the service of a democratic nation—all qualities that mark his difference from the passionless, calculating and apolitical modernist Austin Fraser. More pointedly, Kent anchors a kind of national allegory deployed in the text, as the novel links landscape painting, the capitalist exploitation of nature, and Canada's late 20th century status as an economic and cultural satellite of the US. The radical Kent

with his anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism becomes a figure around which this theme is woven. Michael Winter's *The Big Why* is, in some ways, a response to the idealization of Kent in Urquhart's work. Winter follows Urquhart in offering up the confessional memoir of an artist nearing the end of his life. Yet his Rockwell Kent, like Urquhart's Austin Fraser, is equally an exploiter for artistic gain, both of his private life and the culture of Newfoundland fisherfolk. Kent figures as one in a line of middle-class intellectuals who, as cultural historians Ian MacKay and James Overton tell us, have been drawn to Atlantic Canadian hinterlands in search of a primitive and unspoiled refuge from modernity. In short, while Urquhart endeavours to idealize Kent to serve nationalist sentiment, Winter casts a suspicious eye on Kent's sincerity as well as his political commitments, all, it would seem, in a somewhat ambiguous gesture toward regional nativism.

II Rockwell Kent

Descended from 17th century New England settlers, Rockwell Kent, Jr. was born June 21st, 1882 in Tarrytown, New York, into a wealthy upper middle-class family. Forming a close relationship with Rosa, the family's Austrian maid, young Rockwell spoke German before English (Traxel 7) and cherished German culture all of his life. The sudden death of his father from typhoid fever in 1887 plunged the family into a life of genteel poverty. Whatever the effect of the trauma, Kent, writes biographer David Traxel, was a "difficult child: willful, rebellious, intractable" (9), becoming an equally defiant adult. In 1900 he began studies in architecture at Columbia University. That same year, he enrolled in a summer art program with William Meritt Chase, and would attend two more summers before realizing that painting was his true calling. Soon he was attending the New York School of Art, taking classes with Robert Henri, an iconoclastic painter born on the frontier, a man eager to promote an art based on American subjects. Henri, along with painter and naturalist Abbott Thayer, would inspire Kent with a love of nature and adventure, and familiarize him with Tolstoy, the English Romantics, the Transcendentalists and Norse mythology—not to mention fostering his penchant for rugged northern landscapes. Henri also introduced the young Kent to the grittier side of New York life, where he confronted the lives of the working class. Befriended by "millionaire socialist" Rufus Weeks, Kent joined the American Socialist party in 1904, thus

sending him on a career that would entwine painting, politics, and writing.

Kent's 1905 excursion to an artists' colony on Monhegan Island, off the coast of Maine, began two decades devoted to painting, travel and adventure: 1914-1915 found him in Newfoundland, 1918 in Alaska, 1922 in Tierra del Fuego, while the years 1929-1931 saw three visits to Greenland. From these adventures, paintings and sketches were supplemented with books detailing his adventures: *Wilderness* (1920) chronicles the year spent with his son in a lonely Alaskan cabin, while *N by E*, *Salamina* (1935), and *Greenland Journal* (1960) record his more northerly adventures. Such excursions as well as periods of financial need were supplemented with commercial work. A skilled architectural draftsman, Kent was also to become America's leading commercial illustrator in the 1920s and 30s. He held accounts with Rolls Royce and GE; his colophons for Viking Press, the Modern Library and Random House are still in use; he illustrated numerous literary works, including his meticulously researched illustrations for *Moby Dick*, which helped generate new interest in Herman Melville.

During his lifetime, Kent sought out public attention for himself, his art and his political views. A 1930 profile in *The Outlook and Independent* noted that his "personality and adventures are often front-page copy" (Strawn 391) while *The Magazine of Art*, reporting on the subversive message he painted into a Post Office mural in 1937, opined that "Mr Rockwell Kent's ability as his own publicity agent threatens to surpass his other talents, prodigious though they have seemed to be" ("Eskimo Incident" 642). Yet his career suffered because of his leftist politics. Defiantly, Kent followed his political convictions even when it cost him work and gallery showings. His support of the American Labor Party brought on a disastrous local boycott of the diary that he ran from his farm in Au Sable Forks in New York State. And he lost commercial work with Lakeside Press when he wrote a letter in support of its union organizers. Except for "small-scale work," writes biographer David Traxel, "his career in commercial art was over" by the 1940s (193). In June of 1953, Kent was subpoenaed to appear before Joseph McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Kent's books *Wilderness* and *N by E* were among alleged subversive materials in overseas American libraries. Kent was grilled as to why he donated \$800 to the Communist party in 1935. Asked whether he was a communist, Kent took refuge in the Fifth Amendment. When he sought permission to read a statement that would have charged Senator McCarthy with leading a fascist

coup (Traxel 200-01), he was refused. Distraught at being silenced and denied the limelight of radio and television exposure, he brought out an autobiography in a confessional key, *It's Me O Lord*, a 200,000 word tome of more than 600 pages. That too flopped largely because of anti-communist propaganda (Traxel 199). In 1958, Kent successfully fought the State Dept.'s refusal to issue him a passport—a state of affairs that had affected thousands of Americans since the late 1940s (Lawless 310). The case was, as Ken Lawless observes, "one of the most significant symbolic struggles" during the McCarthy era (Lawless 305). In the furor, galleries closed to his work. He thumbed his nose at his homeland and its art establishment—not the first time it should be added—offering a generous share of his work to the Soviet Union, garnering the Lenin Peace Prize in 1967 and donating \$10,000 of the prize money to the people of Vietnam. Most of the 1971 *New York Times* obituary of Kent is devoted to the political controversies in which he was involved (Whitman 1). "Kent's long and illustrious career as a maverick," suggests Lawless "was one of the most consistent in the annals of American dissent" (305).

III Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter*

Although Rockwell Kent and his brief residence in Newfoundland in 1914-1915 clearly played a role in Urquhart's inspiration for *The Underpainter*, Kent himself is not its protagonist. Nor is Newfoundland the setting of the novel. *The Underpainter* is narrated by Austin Fraser, an American painter now in his declining years, who, in a flat, often remorseless confession, chronicles the phases of his artistic work, the family, friends and lovers in his long life. Trained under "Ash Can" realists Robert Henri and Abbott Thayer—like Rockwell Kent—Fraser is, however, an unrepentant modernist, a painter whose signature technique consists in working up detailed and realistic "underpaintings" which are later abstracted or washed out by subsequent layers of obscuring paint. The technique parallels his life and personality: Fraser desires to know the stories of those around him, injecting the story materials into depictions of his subjects, only to dissociate and distance himself from them after the artistic transaction, as it were, has ended. The rugged Canadian Shield north of Canada's Great Lakes, not coastal Newfoundland, forms the main setting of the novel, a Canadian landscape powerfully invested with nationalist meanings, chiefly through the symbolist landscape paintings of Tom Thomson

(1877-1917) and the Group of Seven (1920-1931). The shift of setting to this iconic Canadian landscape, along with a novelistic time frame centering on the years 1920-1935, which overlaps with the years of the Group's working relationship, helps to underscore Urquhart's nationalist theme.

Austin Fraser and Rockwell Kent possess significant affinities, many of which the narrator Fraser recognizes. First, he tells us that Kent has the romantic imagination and adventurous spirit of his own mother: "She should have been given a boat and a sail and set adrift to bump up against one steep, forbidding shore after another, ... had they ever met, Rockwell might have fallen in love with her" (Urquhart 20). Fraser's mother, like Kent, believes that the "north is the birthplace of spiritualism" (26). Likewise Fraser and Kent share a fascination with "the glamour of a north shore, how everything opens and clears there, sky, various winds, water, how light lingers long after it should in summer, as if trying to announce something vital that has been overlooked or refused" (45).

Yet more consequential for the novel are the contrasts between Kent and Fraser. Against Fraser's aestheticism, Kent is constructed as a touchstone of authenticity, spontaneity, and manly adventure (Urquhart 61), his flaws only marking him as the archetypal romantic painter and man of action. Fraser acknowledges this: "I was a pedestrian, after all, and he was driven by the engines of emotion, of desire, towards destinations that I, clinging to safe, rectangular spaces, could scarcely imagine" (141). Kent also contrasts Fraser's lack of political commitment. Fraser tells us that, in addition to his northern mysticism, Kent's outrage at "the hideousness of the war" and "the immorality of capitalism" are constant themes of his talk (142). In a pivotal scene of the novel, Urquhart's Rockwell Kent is also made to express his admiration for seminal Canadian landscape painters of the national school, the Group of Seven, Lawren Harris and F.H. Varley (259), thus aligning him with the nationalist mythology that informs Urquhart's novel. Fraser, a visitor to Canada for some 15 years, knows nothing of their work.

The most salient difference, however, lies with their attitudes toward art and its social function. For Fraser, choice of artistic subject serves largely to advance his career. He finds in the northern landscapes an opportunity for economic as well as professional gain: "Wealthy New Yorkers, it turned out, loved wilderness landscapes. They wanted rocks and water, twisted trees and muskeg on their smooth plastered walls" (Urquhart 96). They also, Fraser readily confides, show an interest

in Sarah and her "fair skin and dark-blond hair" (96). Fraser's model and, later, his lover, Sarah Pengelly, is the daughter of a transplanted Cornish miner who worked at the Silver Islet mine near Fort William on the northern shore of Lake Superior. Fraser spends 15 summers, between 1920 and 1935, painting Sarah and the northern country around Lake Superior, returning to New York in the winters. For Fraser, Sarah's is a separate world, a world that never should be joined to his: "When I was in New York, Sara became a series of forms on a flat surface, her body a composition adapting to a rectangle, her skin and hair gradients of tone. She became my work, and then, when the work was finished, I lost sight of her completely, turned towards ambition" (96). Her lover and confidant, Fraser refuses her any place in his life, and when she makes a visit to New York during the winter, Fraser resents her presence: "She belonged in a light-filled room in the north, a room with a view of landscapes I could frame and sell, her body frozen into poses I could also frame and sell" (98). Yet Fraser believes that Rockwell Kent would be intrigued by the raw material of his northern paintings with their "fortuitous combination of landscape, class, and gender," but Kent in one episode of the novel, viewing Fraser's many portraits of Sarah, finds them "Cold...as...hell" (261).

Austin's penchant for disengagement and distance is not merely a personal character flaw. Urquhart invites us to hold the conjunction of artistic modernism and capitalism, specifically, American capitalism, responsible for this exploitation. Fraser's father has become wealthy as a result of astute mining investments in Canada, which moves the family during summers to Davenport on the Canadian side of Lake Ontario and, later, farther north to the shores of Lake Superior and the Silver Islet mine. It is there that Fraser, like his father, discovers the value of the northern landscape. Indeed, Fraser follows Robert Henri's observation that "Art is a kind of mining 'The artist a variety of prospector searching for the sparkling silver of meaning in the earth'" (84). And this prompts Fraser to link art explicitly to economic exploitation, to his father's lucrative investments in the northern silver mine at Lake Superior, and in turn to the great catastrophe of modernity, World War One: "I think of my own father, and men like him. Men whose wise investments tore open the wilderness, penetrated the earth, moved mountains, and who ultimately were responsible for creating the furious machines that would eventually be used in the wars" (Urquhart 84).

IV Michael Winter's *The Big Why*

The Big Why by Michael Winter focuses, for the most part, on Rockwell Kent's 15-month sojourn at Brigus, Newfoundland, the episode and the landscape that originally inspired Urquhart's novel. Like *The Underpainter*, *The Big Why* is a retrospective narrative, penned near the end of the artist's life (presumably sometime between 1968 and 1971). Confessional in tone, Kent registers his regret for the failure of his Newfoundland plans, writing frankly about his motivations for the Newfoundland settlement: to isolate himself from sexual temptation, to purify his art through contact with the folk and with the forbidding north, and to thumb his nose at a New York art scene awash in modernist abstraction. Winter's Rockwell Kent is an artist in quest of authenticity and permanence, who resolves to "move to a small place, the periphery, to a community that is one organism and does not change" (7). Meeting then-famous Newfoundland explorer Captain Bob Bartlett in New York, who piloted explorer Robert E. Perry to the North Pole in 1909, Kent is attracted to Bartlett's sense of belonging: "The exuberance of Bob Bartlett, the generosity of his laughter coupled with my own contempt for New York, made me want to go to his country" (7-8). Kent, the privileged upper middle-class intellectual, confesses, "I had no sense of home" (8). Newfoundland and Kent's plans there fill a need for work and commitment to family, yet it seems also to be escape from temptation: "I wanted to focus on hard work and my family. I wanted to be faithful" (21). Kent sees an opportunity to remake himself, following Thoreau's resolve to go the woods to live deliberately (35), shedding civilization and living the simple life. Indeed, Kent wants to be regarded not as "the painter," nor especially the recipient of class privilege. Rather, he craves to be viewed simply as "a human being on a quest for the good life" (33). Yet on numerous occasions, Kent is brought face to face with the image mirrored by others, namely, that of a foreigner, an urban American from a comfortable middle-class world. In the more intense confessional moments of the novel, Kent realizes the futility of this wish. He even questions the motives that brought him in search of the simple life:

I was a modern man living an old fashioned life. I was trying to blend the two and it seemed a bad idea I thought I could disappear in Brigus and lead a pure, natural life, free of suspicion. But I was misguided. My motives were not

true. I didn't just want to live here, I wanted its customs to inform my work and make it unique. I wanted to make my name in Brigus. I was using the culture. I was exploiting it. And what I was creating is not what happened here. (271)

Winter's penitent Rockwell Kent recalls not only the use of his art in exploitative and punishing ways but also its use for ends that are euphoric and celebratory, but ultimately hollow. His work on "House of Dread," a portrait of his family is, he says, full of "joy," "something edenic" (250). Yet even as Kent revels in the painting as a "pagan image" that is "like a prayer," an expression of his "devotion to family, to Kathleen, to the town of Brigus, which was our home" (250), he also confides to his patron Charles Daniels that his technique has little to do with art but rather his own "joy of mimicry" (250). Likewise, Kent's later renunciation of the art that he produced during his stay in Newfoundland faults what he sees in retrospect as cold technique, a renunciation that is reminiscent of the privileging of technique over emotion in the work of Urquhart's Austin Fraser. Winter's Kent confesses, "I look back on it now and I see how romantic it was. How industrial my art had become, and how measured. It was full of effort. Technique appeared all over the surface, and where was I? Where was the personal?" (Winter 212).

Without a doubt, the general mood of contrition that Winter depicts in his version of Kent was discovered in Kent's own writings, in particular, his last published work, *After Long Years* (1968), a limited edition chapbook dedicated to Premier Joseph Smallwood of Newfoundland. It was Smallwood who invited Kent back to Newfoundland in 1968 as guest of honour at a lavish state dinner, where he offered a formal apology for Kent's treatment fifty years earlier. In the book, Kent ridicules the youthful folly of his Newfoundland adventure, belittles his own art, and praises Newfoundland's modern progress, striking, it seems to me, a fairly typical Kentian public pose, using confession and self-ridicule to defer to his host while praising Smallwood's interventionist programmes of cultural and economic development in Newfoundland. On such a reading, it is valid to conclude that Kent was not so much making a contrite reconciliation as expressing solidarity with a fellow leftist traveller and holding out hope for a rising social democracy in North America at the height of the Cold War and the Vietnam debacle. In this regard, Winter gives short shrift to Rockwell Kent's socialist politics, depicting him as something of dilettante, and fails to explore the historical Kent and his Christian-

inflected democratic socialism. Elsewhere in the novel, he distorts significant instances of Kent's political dissent. Winter's portrait is intent, I would suggest, on discerning that willful rebellious child of privilege who challenged authority at every turn and sought refuge from modernity in a primitive setting. As Herb Wyile writes, in Winter's hands, "Kent's narcissistic and uncompromising joie de vivre undermines his objectives" (Wyile, 2011, 204).

V National / Regional Political Allegories

As I have suggested, both *The Underpainter* and *The Big Why* politicize the artist's gaze. Both share an interest in the ethical relationship of an artist to his human and natural subjects, especially the qualities of possession, voyeurism, and distance that the relationship seems to require. *The Underpainter* and *The Big Why*, however, are shaped significantly by the cultural politics of nation and region respectively. In equating art, especially landscape painting, with resource extraction, specifically the silver mine on the shores of Lake Superior, *The Underpainter* can be read as a national allegory of Canada's economic and cultural domination by American capital. The shift of setting from the Newfoundland that inspired the novel to the upper Great Lakes region of Lake Superior is significant in this respect. Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven promoted the region to iconic status forging a set of distinctive Canadian images out of that landscape and becoming themselves Canada's first national school of painting. As J. Russell Harper in his *Painting in Canada: A History* (1977) suggests, the Group depicted "the bare Precambrian rock, the wide skies, lonely lakes and rivers, the sinuous dark pines and the autumn colouring of the maples," characteristics that they believed marked Canada as "a solitary northland" (Harper 263). In a landscape thus widely identified with Canadian national identity, Urquhart can better deploy her allegory of the country's economic and cultural domination by the US. At same time, Urquhart's theme evokes seminal nationalist George Parkin Grant (1918-1988), a professor of religion who wrote on Canadian culture and politics. Conservative in temper, Grant witnessed with dismay the increasing integration of post-war Canada into what he called the American empire, the nation becoming "a northern extension of the continental economy ... and a branch-plant of American capitalism" (Grant 9). While Grant lamented the disappearance of Canada as a sovereign nation, his thinking addressed the condition

of modernity more generally: "Modern civilization," he wrote, "makes all local cultures anachronistic. Where modern science has achieved its mastery, there is no place for local cultures" (Grant 53).

The argument that Canada, a local culture, must disappear can therefore be stated in three steps. First, men everywhere move ineluctably toward membership in the universal and homogenous state. Second, Canadians live next to a society that is the heart of modernity. Third, nearly all Canadians think that modernity is good, so nothing essential distinguishes Canadians from Americans. (Grant 53)

Grant's thought would inspire a generation of Canadian intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, strains of leftist economic and cultural nationalism persistent through the early 1980s. The main literary representatives of this movement include Margaret Atwood and poet Dennis Lee, both of whom have written explicitly of Canada's colonized situation. Atwood, in particular, in her novel *Surfacing* (1972) and in *Survival* (1972), her guide to Canadian literature, envisioned Canada as a feminized hinterland threatened by a masculine American technological empire. Urquhart's *The Underpainter* follows Atwood in figuring Canada as feminine but also in depicting the modernism of abstraction and effacement of local specificity in Austin's aesthetic.

Yet it is important to point out, if only briefly, the omissions and simplifications in Urquhart's deployment of the national allegory. One might begin with Grant's observation on the role of Canada's elites in the exploitation of their homeland: "Our ruling class is composed of the same groups as that of the United States, with the signal difference that the Canadian ruling class looks across the border for its final authority in both politics and culture" (Grant 9). Urquhart includes no representatives of such a Canadian elite—the China painter George, his wife Augusta and Sarah are all representatives of the lower middle class or working class; and although all these characters are complex and admirable, they are in varying ways seen as victims: George and Augusta through the tragedy of (an imperial) war, Sarah as exploited by Austin, George a victim of his economic circumstances. Nor does the history of the Upper Great Lakes region, developed by Canadian as well as American capital for both tourism and mining, emerge with

even one allusive detail. The displacement of the region's aboriginal people receives implicit recognition in the legend of the sleeping giant, yet as deployed, it is a tale whose message seems to serve more as a warning to Euro-Canadians about giving away their resources to foreigners.¹³

Michael's Winter's *The Big Why*, on the other hand, can be profitably viewed in the context of Newfoundland's cultural politics, and hence a regional take on the figure of Rockwell Kent. Newfoundland cultural politics begins with Premier Joseph Smallwood (1900-1991), who led the former British colony into union with Canada in 1949 on an ambitious program of modernization and state intervention. Indeed, Smallwood's mixed political and economic successes, his spectacular failures, not to mention his tight grip on politics and patronage, would inspire a nativist backlash following his long reign (1949-1972), especially against the federally funded initiatives in regional economic development, social welfare, and fisheries in the province. In the 1980s, regional political sentiment and a spirit of cultural revival emerged among the province's educated middle-class. The appearance of the first literary history of the province, Patrick O'Flaherty's *The Rock Observed* (1980), and the election of Premier Brian Peckford (1982-1989), a champion of provincial rights (including Newfoundland's claim to offshore oil reserves), accompanied calls for greater self-reliance. Local resentment of outside influence has periodically stoked a reactionary regionalism by high profile international controversies, in particular, the ongoing protests over the annual Newfoundland seal hunt. Federal mismanagement of Newfoundland's cod fishery and a failure to defend it against foreign exploitation, which led to its closure in 1992, has done little to quell resentment of outside influence on the province.

This residual nativist sentiment is reflected in the rather banal (but telling expression) "come from aways" to refer to non-native Newfoundlanders migrating to the province—a category into which Rockwell Kent fits. Ontario-born best-selling author and environmentalist Farley Mowat (1921-2014), an eight-year resident of Newfoundland during the 1960s and 1970s, remains well known for both his writings and activist stance. Patrick O'Flaherty referred to Mowat as "just another muddled outsider" (Flaherty qtd. in Overton, 1996, 70). This despite the recognition of Mowat as an important figure in initiating a revival of Newfoundland culture in the 1960s (Overton 2000, 168). Mowat, whose non-fiction books on Newfoundland, environmentalism, and the simple life remain international best-sellers, has

frequently been cast by Newfoundland intellectuals as the archetypal romantic anti-modernist. Indeed, much like Kent, Mowat was drawn to the simple life offered by the province (Overton, 1996, 65). This view of outsiders, not to mention a suspicion of imported ideologies, whether in the form of socialism or counter-cultural lifestyles, appears to be an important structure of feeling in Newfoundland. A more recent "come from away" who also left a mark on the province's cultural scene is E. Annie Proulx, whose international best-seller's *The Shipping News* (1993) sparked controversy for its depiction of the province, yet succeeded, as some in Newfoundland claim, in putting the province on the literary map. In this intellectual milieu, it may have been difficult for Winter—born in England but raised and resident part of the year in Newfoundland—to write sympathetically of Rockwell Kent's artistic quest for simplicity, or his more critical stance on Newfoundland merchant capitalism. Likewise, as I have suggested above, Winter may also be reacting to Urquhart's idealized portrait of Kent. Conveniently then Winter's novel accepts the image of a contrite man purveyed in Kent's own writings.

Yet in other less ambiguous ways, Winter is intent on disturbing the region's cultural politics by presenting a rather sensational portrait of a Newfoundland cultural icon. Again paralleling Urquhart's novelistic construction, *The Big Why* examines fraternal bonds between the narrating protagonist and another in whom he finds authenticity: charismatic, energetic, seemingly larger than life. Kent for Urquhart's Fraser; Bob Bartlett (1875-1946) for Winter's Kent. Yet while Urquhart's Rockwell Kent is linked firmly to the novel's national allegory recognizable to Canadian readers, Bartlett emerges in more ambivalent (and deliberately controversial) terms. Winter seeks to exploit the personal life of a public man and iconic cultural hero in the name of a private and seemingly transhistorical "inner life" (Winter 346).

Born in 1875 in the outport community of Brigus in Conception Bay on the Avalon peninsula of the island of Newfoundland, Robert Abram Bartlett followed family tradition, serving an apprenticeship in the Newfoundland fishing and sealing industry, before joining the English merchant service. In 1898 he signed on with American arctic explorer Captain Robert E. Peary, and in 1905 advanced to captain of the *Roosevelt*, the ship in which Peary would conduct his most famous explorations, namely, his 1909 discovery of the North Pole. It was a feat in which Bartlett played an important role, receiving the Hubbard Medal from the National

Geographic Society and catapulting himself to fame as an internationally recognized explorer. He won further distinction for his heroic rescue of the men of the Canadian Arctic Expedition in 1913-1914, an episode in the background of Winter's novel. In all, Bartlett made some 40 expeditions into the arctic, logging more than 200,000 miles of ocean voyaging in his life. Bartlett like Kent was individuals whose actions and personalities captured media attention, attention he openly sought, publishing three books on his life and adventures and lecturing widely. Bartlett was a figure of unselfconscious masculinity, selfless duty, and unswerving loyalty, his image shaped in what Lisa Bloom in *Gender on Ice* (1993) has characterized as a public mythology of polar exploration, a blend of nationalism, masculinity, and scientific accomplishment (Bloom 11). The subject of a number of biographies, Bartlett in the words of his Newfoundland biographer, Harold Horwood, calls him "one of the last of the 'heroes,' a true Victorian, enigmatic and full of contradictions" (Horwood viii).

Winter appears to construe Horwood's description of Bartlett as "Victorian" to mean repressed and therefore to explore the private life of the public icon as that of "a gay man trapped in a time when he couldn't express himself" (Winter, 2010, 127). Not that Winter was stretching for the sake of sheer sensationalism: the hints are there in the biographical and autobiographical record. Publisher and promoter, George Palmer Putnam called Bartlett, an "intrepid bachelor" with three loves: the North, his commander Robert E. Peary and his cherished schooner the *Effie M. Morrissey* (3). Bartlett himself titled a chapter of autobiography, *The Log of Bartlett*, "The Trouble with Women," in which he confessed little understanding of the female but an uncanny ability to "tell what a man is like" (Bartlett 4). None of this evidence offers proof of Bartlett's sexual identity, of course. But rather it is Winter's intent, I would suggest, to arouse our own readerly expectations of autobiography and confession, and to explore the ways in which the personal and the private are not only a seemingly transhistorical entity but also a largely universal desire that we bring to the understanding of the past. Winter's approach to this task is not an entirely serious insistence on this transhistorical category of the personal. Presenting Bartlett's revelation of himself in a sexual act that alludes playfully to the his career as an explorer is ultimately perhaps Winter's swipe on our own, that is readers' desires around confession in its contemporary form.

VI Conclusion

The Underpainter and *The Big Why* explore the politics of the artistic gaze by focusing on an outsider's view of Canadian landscapes and people. The respective portrayals of American artist and political activist Rockwell Kent by Urquhart and Winter can be understood in national and regional terms. On the one hand, Urquhart's *The Underpainter* locates Kent's cultural significance and political stance in relation to the national imperative in the Canadian imaginary, specifically, the symbolist school of landscape painting represented by The Group of Seven, linking the American modernist's art to abstraction and neo-colonialism of American resource exploitation. On the other hand, Winter's *The Big Why*, dramatizing Kent's brief but tempestuous residence in Brigus, Newfoundland, in the years 1914-1915, resonates with regional cultural politics, focusing on the urban artist's romantic exploitation of the culture of Newfoundland fisherfolk.

Notes

- (1) For a thorough account of exhibitions of Rockwell Kent's work, see Ferris, "Rockwell Kent Exhibition."
- (2) See Potter, "Introduction to the Fortieth Anniversary Edition."
- (3) For an account of the development of mining and tourism in the upper Great Lakes region, see Patricia Jasen's *Wild Things: Nature, Culture and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914*, chapter 4.
- (4) For brief account of cultural revival in Newfoundland, see Overton, "A Newfoundland Culture?" in *Making a World of Difference*.

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