

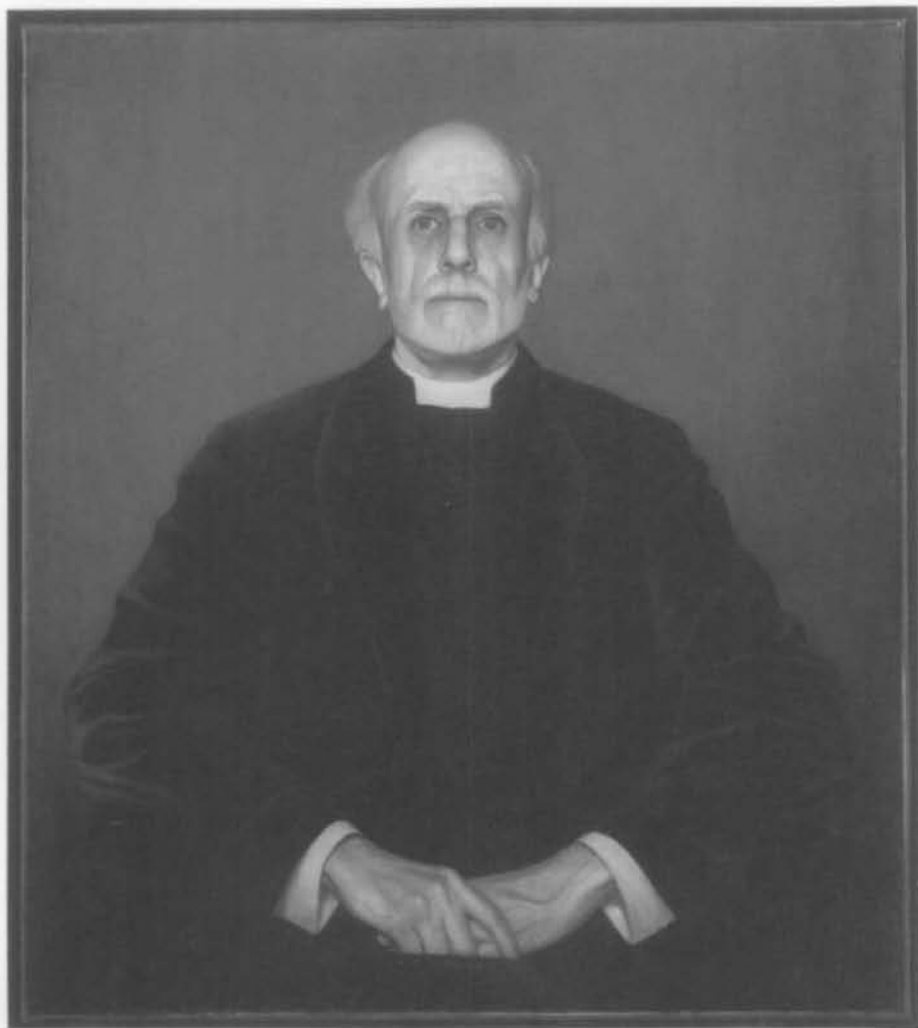


fig. 1

Lawren S. Harris, Dr. Salem Bland, 1925, oil on canvas, 104 x 91 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of the Toronto Daily Star, 1929. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario, Carlo Catenazzi)

PORTRAIT OF DR. SALEM BLAND

Another Spiritual Journey for Lawren S. Harris?

In the 1978 Art Gallery of Ontario catalogue dealing with the urban scenes and wilderness landscapes of Lawren S. Harris, Jeremy Adamson wrote that the artist's "social class and personal wealth, along with his interest in esoteric thought [Theosophy] militated against the politicisation of his artistic vision."¹ This position had been expressed by the artist in writings that post-date his 1924 membership in the Toronto Theosophical Society:

We are each of us but channels and the more we permit the full tide of thoughts and ideas to flow through us the surer we are to learn to discriminate between the temporal and the eternal, and between what we be foul and what comes to us wholly pure. To do this well we must assume the impersonal, high attitude of the eternal and the silent watcher of life and never permit any contamination to cling to us and clog [life's] free flow.²

Harris also expressed the opinion that an artist should "refuse to wear the coloured blinkers that a 'cause' will attempt to force on him."³ Yet in a series of works executed between 1920 and 1925, he inscribed explicit sub-texts, which if read cumulatively and in their entirety, suggest another level of meaning in Harris's understanding of the artist's role in social reform. In his notebooks he wrote about life as a search for cosmos, a "poor thing" if undertaken without a means for spiritual communion with the divine. Philosophy, in turn, was intrinsic to personality: "Every one of us has a philosophy of life though we may not call it that.... It is an inseparable part of us. It gives form and meaning to our character."⁴

As for the role of art, Harris was sympathetic to the ideas of American architectural critic, and theosophist Claude Bragdon (1866-1946) who believed that "organic art of any kind is ever the flower of the religious spirit." This quotation was transcribed into the artist's notes along with the observation that "art seeks through the soul's inspired activity to re-create the life of men into some semblance of the natural divine order." Hence, art might not only express spirituality but also transform both artist and viewer. In national terms this meant that: "If you change the thought currents of a people, you can change everything, and you can only do so by first changing your own."⁵ The nationalism so closely identified with the Group of Seven, was, for Harris, a striving for spiritual self-realization, both personal and societal. This spirituality was central to his creative impulse and, subsequently, scholarly interpretations have found it necessary to discuss Harris' art in the context of his Theosophical beliefs.⁶

If we accept the premise that art for Harris became a form of communion and communication, his works can be read as encoded representations of his spirituality. Even the portraits which Larry Pfaff described in his 1978 article seem to have had reverential overtones, representing either friends or individuals for whom the artist had particular regard. Because of his independent means, Harris had no financial need to paint any sitter except out of choice. Commissioned portraits like *Dr. Bruce Macdonald* still had personal meaning for him; Macdonald had been headmaster at St. Andrew's College during the two years Harris spent there. As Pfaff has already pointed out, the artist selected sitters whose spirituality he considered to be of the highest order. Among these was the Methodist minister Dr. Salem Bland (1859-1950), whose striking likeness Harris first exhibited at the Canadian National Exhibition in August 1925 (fig.1). Pfaff underscores the reason for Harris' choice with a quotation from Thoreau MacDonald (1901-89): "Lawren had great respect for [Bland] & thought of him as a type of spiritual leader."⁷ The severe frontal pose and lowered viewing angle were so successful in communicating this message that one contemporary reviewer described the image as a "touchstone" of "pure spiritual symbolism" that unsettled many who observed it.⁸

If, as it appears, the Bland portrait was a token of respect, the question remains — respect for what? Bland came from orthodox beginnings; the son of a Methodist minister, his early career was dedicated to sabbath observance and temperance reform in Kingston and later in life he began to champion social causes. Studies with the philosopher John Watson (1847-1939) and principal George Monroe Grant (1835-1902) at Queen's University introduced him to Grant's idealist views about practical ministry dedicated to the realization of God's Kingdom on earth. As early as 1898, Bland began making public statements about the importance of social questions. Two years later he was awarded an honorary doctorate in Divinity by Queen's University and soon became professor of church history and New Testament exegesis at Wesley College in Winnipeg. There he worked alongside George Blewett, whose *Study of Nature and the Vision of God* (1907) stressed that heavenly citizenship must be fulfilled on earth through the role of good neighbour, honest citizen and devoted churchman. By 1906, it seems Bland was publicly expounding similar views, which ultimately precipitated his dismissal from Wesley College in 1917 along with another member of faculty, purportedly as an economic measure. His subsequent appointment as pastor to Broadway Tabernacle, in Toronto, in 1919, led to an equally public wrangle with his own Board of Management over freedom of expression. The matter was eventually settled in Bland's favour by Dr. Samuel Dwight Chown (1853-1933), Superintendent of the Methodist Church of Canada.⁹

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Canadian evangelicalism responded to secularization and declining attendance by searching for a new rele-

vance in pro-active social reform.¹⁰ Then the carnage of the First World War overturned the old order, leaving a legacy of cynicism in its wake. Everyone was acutely aware that the Russian Revolution had set a precedent in the high-stakes game of social change. By preaching the "golden rule" and invoking the Sermon on the Mount, the evangelical churches sought to give voice to the grievances of the disadvantaged. Through their intervention the churches lent moral authority to ideas that subsequently found expression in progressive legislation, instead of in social upheaval.¹¹

As the concerns of the evangelical churches shifted from personal piety to problems of social equity, Bland was active in the General Conference of the Methodist Church of Canada. Following the centenary of John Wesley's death in 1891, the General Conference rededicated itself to the founder's mission of service to the poor and had established a committee on sociological questions by the end of the century. In the years between 1906 and 1914, this committee passed resolutions supporting both the eight-hour work day and fair labour practices.¹² In 1918 Salem Bland helped draught a resolution that called for "complete social reconstruction," transferring the basis of the economy from competition and profits to co-operation and service. As Bland later noted, the original terms had called for "social revolution" but the phraseology was later amended to clarify the non-violent intent.¹³ In the drive to make evangelical Christianity relevant to the average person, Canadian Methodists of the post-war period became what J.M. Bliss has called "the most radical religious denomination in North America."¹⁴

As part of his contribution to social reform, in 1919, Bland appeared before the Royal Commission into Industrial Relations headed by the Chief Justice of Manitoba, Thomas Graham Mathers (1859-1927). He told the commissioners that the country was at a turning point in human history, comparable to the Industrial Revolution after feudalism. The defence of democracy and the revolt of the *Christian conscience against a system "that is a denial and antithesis of Christian principles"* were the key issues. In his view, the passing of the "social reconstruction" resolution by the Methodist conference was a clear signal that the profit-seeking system had to be changed to a co-operative scheme in which the idea of service was paramount. Bland proposed public ownership where appropriate and suggested joint industrial councils to assure responsible labour-management practices. As employees followed their natural instincts for self-government, employers would have to stop functioning as a class and take up a leadership role. Future legislation needed to consider the eight-hour work day and forty-four-hour work week. Restrictions on the organization of labour should also be lifted as prohibitions on these activities had already proved ineffective in Britain. Taxation ought to be directed at luxuries rather than necessities as well as at inherited wealth and land held for speculative purposes. Furthermore, Bland suggested prices should be regulated and industries nationalised if necessary. The state

needed to provide old-age security as well as insurance against sickness, unemployment or accidental death. With responsible labour practices, concentrations of capital would no longer be necessary and taxation might be geared to making the least savoury aspects of the current system die a natural death.¹⁵ The Commission interviewed many witnesses, not all of them as prescient as Bland.¹⁶ The conclusions of the Commission must have been influenced by the fact that its chair, the Chief Justice of Manitoba, was familiar with the problem of growing labour unrest in the West. The urgent need for remedial action was soon underlined when the Winnipeg General Strike erupted just as the Commission's deliberations were completed.¹⁷

Bland, who had been resident in Toronto for over a year, was soon the object of spurious rumours alleging his complicity in the Winnipeg Strike. Nevertheless, in 1920 he published a slim volume entitled *The New Christianity* which "argued that the distinctive task of the age was to abolish modern capitalism in order that democracy be fully realised."¹⁸ His ideas were based upon contemporary American writings on the Social Gospel which questioned the business ethics of Gilded Age capitalists whose vast fortunes were built on the exploitation of their own workforce. Specifically Bland noted that the capitalist system had been revealed as one of the roots of war and its production for profit as a manifest moral peril. The war, he said, had been fought to make the world safe for democracy: "democratic control of industry was just and inevitable" because when the national interest demanded the most efficient means of production, democratic control superseded individual competition. Asserting that capitalistic control had been "on the whole, rapacious and heartless, and its sense of moral responsibility ... often rudimentary," Bland argued that "the Christianity of Jesus means nothing if it does not mean brotherhood. Brotherhood means nothing if it does not mean a passion for equality."¹⁹ Not surprisingly, the book caused a sensation.

With all the publicity, it is inconceivable that Harris was ignorant of Bland's ideas. Five years later, the artist, an heir to the Massey-Harris fortune, painted a portrait that clearly articulated his regard for the Methodist minister. What events occasioned the portrait and what did the work signify about Harris' own spirituality and his views on social justice? As Charles Hill's recent catalogue suggests, the date of the portrait's execution leads one to the conclusion that the events of 1925 were influential: "Whether Bland came to know Lawren Harris after his [review] article on the Group during the 1925 show or as a result of Harris's article from Glace Bay three months later is uncertain, but it is clear the two men had much in common. Both were social activists in their own ways, working to resolve social ills through faith and spiritual understanding."²⁰

We know, for example, that Bland's review of the fourth Group of Seven exhibition, published in the *Toronto Daily Star* on January 31, 1925, included the following statement which Harris copied into his own notebook of inspirational

quotations: "I felt as if the Canadian soul were unveiling to me something secret and high and beautiful which I had never guessed — a strength and self-reliance and depth and a mysticism I had not suspected."²¹

Mary Vipond has elaborated how an interest in national consciousness was shared by the artist and sitter. She notes that the arguments marshalled by the Group of Seven to "explain, promote and defend their work" were similar to Bland's arguments in support of the ecumenical movement among Canadian evangelical churchmen which led to the formation of the United Church of Canada in 1925. Both movements intended to end the country's legacy of colonialism by forging a new spiritual centre for a people fragmented by geography and by cultural and religious diversity. It was in this context that Salem Bland came to emphasise practical solutions instead of personal salvation: "The real business of religion is not getting ready for heaven, it is bringing heaven to earth. We must generate a passion for Canada. There is no meaning in a passion for the kingdom of heaven, if there is not a passion for Canada."²² Bland's daily columns in the *Calgary Canadian* and under the by-line "The Deeper Life" in the *Grain Growers' Guide*, from May and June, 1918, record his view that the passion for religious freedom "born among northern peoples" would spawn a new Canadian church: "It is on the open prairie that Canadians are first going to learn to think not in terms of old-world races and old-world sects, but Christianly and Canadianly."²³

After all, the Canadian climate had always caused Canadian society to fashion its own inventive solutions: "We have learned to build our houses to suit the Canadian climate and the Canadian social life ... the Canadian soul will never show its true and deep religiousness till it fashions for itself a Canadian church, a church that could have grown up nowhere else. We have emerged from the colonial stage politically. It is time we emerged from it religiously."²⁴ At the core of it all was not merely nationalism, but a profound desire for a transcendent Canadian spirituality, an issue upon which both Bland and Harris would certainly have agreed. In particular, Bland laid emphasis upon something more than just material wealth: "Till the last few months I have never found a Canadian who saw any ideal for Canada beyond increased population and productiveness [but] Canadians are beginning to see that if Canada is to achieve her destiny we cannot live blindly in mere individualistic struggle."²⁵

Harris too had written about the "mystery and bigness" of the North as early as 1911 and his first reviews of exhibitions at the Toronto Arts and Letters Club mythologized "virility," originality and largeness of vision as positive values, which might raise Canadian art above "the conventional and sentimental art of the Victorian era." The goal was not merely to depict Canadian subject matter, but to create something truly Canadian in spirit.²⁶ This was later enshrined in the often quoted phrase in the catalogue of the first Group exhibition of 1920 that:

"[The artists] are all imbued with the idea that an Art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home for its people."²⁷

Throughout his career, Harris wrote on art's spiritual contribution to the nation.²⁸ But after 1924, his words took on an increasingly transcendental tone that spoke in terms of "the ample, replenishing North" as a source of "spiritual flow" capable of releasing artists from the "superficialities of Europe." Nations and individuals might then fulfill their destiny through a process of spiritual communion: "Through the arts, the creative spirit uses and develops the idiom of the day and people, the particular personality, to give them intimations of the play of spontaneous selflessness and a glimpse of the shining power of great faith."²⁹ Art had to speak "with a sure voice" otherwise Canadians would experience "no collective purpose."³⁰

It is hardly surprising that Harris found common ground with Bland's progressive evangelicalism. In a wry comment at the opening of the 1954 Group of Seven retrospective in Vancouver, he revealed the degree to which evangelicalism was not only part of his heritage, but an influence on his attitude to life: "I have not yet succeeded in emancipating myself from some of the effects of my clergyman forbears and so remain inclined to point a moral whenever the opportunity offers."³¹ Yet he had little sympathy for institutionalised religion in old Ontario. In an admiring 1924 book review of *Cosmic Consciousness* by London, Ontario physician Richard Maurice Bucke, Harris offered a telling aside on the times during which Bucke's transcendentalism had matured: "Consider what life in this province was [forty years ago], the people submerged in the severest orthodoxy, divided and blinded and sustained by sectarian views, comfortably warped by provincialism and remote from all cultural centres."³² Similar sentiments were also expressed in his draft for a 1933 article on "Theosophy and Art": "Our churches are mean squat horrible buildings where people go to feel [the] fullness of life at having their poor souls saved."³³

These concerns were consistent with a general shift to alternative forms of belief, later described by Ramsay Cook as part of an intellectual response to Darwinism and logical positivism. Scientific spiritualism, agnosticism, Theosophy and Christian Science (to which Harris' mother gravitated in 1910 after the death of her second husband) all seem to have answered the need for new forms of spirituality.³⁴ Harris' emphasis on the importance of spirituality over the accumulation of material wealth is evident in his obituary of Sir Edmund Byron Walker (1848-1924), President of the Canadian Bank of Commerce and Trustee of the National Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum: "It isn't enough to achieve material well-being. It is ever a crying necessity to evoke spiritual well-being from within ourselves."³⁵ Then in terms that spoke even more directly of his own Theosophical beliefs, Harris referred to Walker's "living interest in the dawn of a spiritual consciousness in his people,"

and the belief that artists had a role to play in unfolding "all that is finest in man." The theme was a frequent one for Harris, who referred to art as transcending all barriers, whereas "materialism inevitably leads to catastrophe." Similarly "the arts at their highest embody and express the opposite to materialism just as individuals at their best live and express spirit which is in no sense materialistic."³⁶

Such condemnations of materialism may seem incongruous from someone of Harris' affluent background. The Massey-Harris farm implements empire to which Harris owed his wealth, grew out of a collaboration between Methodist entrepreneur Hart A. Massey (1823-96) and Harris' grandfather Alanson Harris (1816-94), a devout Baptist. Unlike many American tycoons of the Gilded Age, both men conducted their business in a manner that demonstrated a paternal regard for company employees although as the size of the enterprise grew in the years after their deaths, the intimacy of that rapport slowly declined. Nevertheless, by the end of World War I, Massey-Harris led the industry in providing benefits to its employees, including paid holidays, profit-sharing, health and safety measures and a mobile lunch cart to improve both morale and productivity.³⁷ The actions of the Massey-Harris founders were in marked contrast to those of American entrepreneurs like Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick to whom the admonitions of the Social Gospel were directed.

By the early twentieth century, the Social Gospel had gained widespread currency in the United States through the lectures and writings of Baptist minister, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), whose eleven years in the Hell's Kitchen area of New York led him to expose the ethical bankruptcy of *laissez-faire* capitalism:

The type of business leadership which took millions out of filthy factory towns, wore out women and took the youth out of children, cleared twelve-and-a-half per cent from slum tenements, kept men and women from marriage by underpayment, and kept the cradle empty by high prices and fear of the future — this type of leadership is antiquated. It belongs to a pre-Christian and pagan age.³⁸

In a series of books, *Christianity and Social Crisis* (1907), *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening* (1910), *Christianising the Social Order* (1912), *The Social Principles of Jesus* (1916), and *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (1918), Rauschenbusch argued that Christianity was founded on communal care, that Western civilization was threatened by its own systemic ills, and that the business elite needed to be awakened to the true cost of their policies. He called for a larger proportion of business profits to be placed in the hands of the working class, either through increased wages or by taxation of the wealthy, and urged insurance against sickness, old age and unemployment. He also believed that some public control over private ownership would be beneficial.³⁹

Rauschenbusch preached at the Walmer Road Baptist Church in 1910 when Lawren Harris resided in the area. He was invited to Walmer by the



fig. 2 Lawren S. Harris, *Black Court, Halifax*, 1921, oil on canvas, 97 x 112 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, gift of the artist, Vancouver, 1960. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

Reverend John James MacNeill (1874-1937), who had been appointed in 1906. MacNeill had spent the preceeding seven years at Winnipeg's First Baptist Church, where the social ills of rapid urban expansion had solidified a deep commitment to social service and evangelism to the urban poor.⁴⁰ The Walmer Road Baptist Church had been partially endowed in 1892 by Lawren's grandfather Alanson Harris, to honour his son Elmore (1854-1911), a conservative pre-mil-lennialist. Elmore retired from the pulpit two years later to join Lawren's maternal grandfather, the Reverend William Boyd Stewart (c.1836-1912) in founding the Toronto Bible Training School. Despite Elmore's conservatism, it seems that he was open to the message of the Social Gospel.⁴¹ Elmore's combination of pre-mil-lennialism with the teachings of the Social Gospel is as singular as Salem Bland's own interest in Eastern religion and social issues within a conventional approach to Christian observance. In 1925 Bland's reputation as a "modern" led one

Congregational group to revoke its invitation to host the final meeting of the Church's Toronto Association before its merger with the United Church of Canada, when Bland's name appeared on the proposed programme. But three years later in an address to the Toronto Theosophical Society, Bland so insistently defended Christian faith as the only route to salvation, that he seriously offended his audience.⁴² The Theosophical Society's members also embraced the idea of the Social Gospel, which they saw as representing the true teachings of Christ, the latter interpreted as part of humankind's evolution towards perfection.⁴³ Perhaps the combination of progressive evangelicalism and Theosophy in the periods immediately preceding and following Harris' formal membership in the Toronto Theosophical Society, led him to explore social issues in his art.

In 1920, the year in which Bland published *The New Christianity*, Harris visited the slums of Halifax where he produced two paintings that were much more forbidding than his earlier urban subjects (fig. 2). Both were included the following year in the Group's third exhibition, and drew comment from the *Toronto Daily Star's* Augustus Bridle (1869-1952): "*Black Court* is despondent with only a note of humanity in order to show that nobody should live in such a place at all."⁴⁴ A more comprehensive verdict was set down in 1926 by Fred Housser (1889-1936) in *A Canadian Art Movement* which mythologized the Group of Seven in terms of Theosophical beliefs. Housser explained that the artist understood the life of the city by painting its houses, reading biographies in front doors: "each picture has in it something of the struggle for existence ... the grind of life." The two Halifax paintings, he said, marked a *caesura* in the artist's career — a change initially described in purely formal terms, but later as striking a "bitter note" that provoked one banker who visited the exhibition to anger, because "the spirit of them cries for change, and holds in disrespect and contempt the glory of acquisitiveness [which made such places possible]." The works, in Housser's words, shattered any shallow idealism with "a naked material fact that stares us in the face, presented with so much humanity that one reads clearly the experience of the painter in his work." Such an intense portrayal, he speculated, "could not have been achieved without leaving scars upon the emotional nature of the artist," an experience that might have "projected [the soul] towards the light." The very fact that one segment of society lived in such privation, according to Housser, implied a spiritual poverty on the part of others, who would see such conditions and not rectify them.⁴⁵

Housser was sufficiently active in his desire for social reform to write on these issues as financial editor of the *Toronto Daily Star*. According to Goldwin Smith, Housser "could not accept the policy of *laissez-faire* towards prevailing widespread poverty." His writings suggest that he supported F.D. Roosevelt's attempts to achieve an equitable distribution of wealth "without entirely removing private initiative or introducing fantastic social values." Housser considered this

a viable strategy for restoring confidence in the country's institutions.⁴⁶ Harris it seems, agreed with Housser's thoughts about Roosevelt, albeit with greater scepticism: "I for one, am convinced that the strongest force working through mankind at present is socialistic or communistic and nothing can stop it ... modest acceptance may help — that's where Mr. Roosevelt comes in ... I don't think that any form of government is better than any other ... like every religion, it never rises higher than its sources."⁴⁷ The artist's concerns about social unrest seem, if anything, more acute than those of his friend and his faith in institutional solutions of any kind, more jaundiced.

Jeremy Adamson states that Harris was deeply shocked by the sight of the waterfront slums in Halifax, but suggests that Housser overstated the unique nature of these works. He sees them as part of a continuum beginning with the artist's early house paintings, which became more colourful during his exploration of Toronto's culturally diverse Ward district, then more expressive as he studied outlying suburbs like Earlscourt and Lambton. In Adamson's opinion the first picture to embody this new psychological dimension was the 1920 *A House in the Slums*.⁴⁸ Adamson suggests, as do many who knew Harris, that the artist did not wish to politicize his art. This was consistent with the tendency to remoteness that Theosophy encouraged: "[Such works] refresh[ed] his contact with humanity, as wedded as he [was] to the abstract and the subjective, [he might] easily cut himself adrift." Other critics were less understanding of Harris' spiritual search. Barker Fairley reviewed Harris' *Contrasts, a book of verse*, published by the artist in 1922. He commented on the extent of the "vague, transcendental reflections on life and humanity," and expressed the view that "[Harris'] mind runs to humanity in the abstract and the aggregate. For this shadowy Leviathan he entertains a mixture of affection and irony which seems to be personal to him." Even during his lifetime, interpreters of Harris' works were quick to characterize them as the musings of a mystic.⁴⁹

In his review of Adamson's catalogue, Roger Mesley agrees with the suggestion that Harris' esoteric interests kept politics out of his art: "Harris saw spiritual evolution, rather than political comment or action, as the answer to the plight of the poor and of all men."⁵⁰ Harris' writings, confirm that all issues increasingly coalesced around his Theosophical beliefs to a degree that his friend Dr. John Watson irreverently marvelled at Harris' ability to reconcile diametric opposites. As Harris explained "[Art] seeks and finds beauty in tragedy ... in squalor and filth and behind all horrors tangible and intangible, it finds beauty and establishes the permanent vision of harmony."⁵¹ By 1950 the *Montreal Star* critic Robert Ayre provided this explanation of the Halifax subjects: "[Harris] saw and felt the misery, but he had the impulse to rise above it He is, himself, that 'lover of light' he speaks of in his verses, piercing the way with living vision. Always a searcher for order, he was exploring form and light, even when he was painting the black courts and sunny streets."⁵²



fig.3 Lawren S. Harris, Portrait of Dr. McAvoy, 1925, *Toronto Daily Star*, 25 April 1925. (Photo: Metropolitan Reference Library)

At the same time it needs to be pointed out that critics in the early 1920s responded to these works as if they were overt "social propaganda," not least the irate banker whose response was reported by Housser. Harris clearly believed that the artist had something special to contribute in lifting the eyes of a culture from the degradation of daily toil.

In this industrial civilisation — the closer to the heart of the industrial centres — the blacker and more sordid, ugly, hard, and callous becomes life ... Out from the industrial centres toward nature uncontaminated air is sweeter — majesty and purity live in nature ... humans become hourly slaves with crippled children, dwarfed, starved, ragged souls — bodies clothed in dirty rags, under rotted roofs, in sordid surroundings. This all has [its] beauty, [its] poignant, heart-melting stabs ... the endless ways men go mad or resignedly wear the pain of grasping and finding nought but their own bruised and bleeding fingers.

The successful businessman works to maintain the status quo — thinks his civilisation is good ... the artist [knows] that his civilisation is nothing less than a mean shambles ... [The] romance of industry depends on a limitation of vision.⁵³

About the future, Harris specifically observed: "We are all slaves, *all* have diffi-

culties. Labour owes capital a great deal. What for? For forcing the issue. For bringing the time nearer, through terrific speeding up, when labour can and will intelligently, calmly, but with just and firm decision take over the machine."⁵⁴

Harris' most explicit foray into the arena of social justice came in 1925, just months after Salem Bland's complimentary review of the fourth Group of Seven exhibition. As the recent *Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* catalogue reveals, Harris allowed himself to experience a level of moral outrage never previously evident, during the course of a miners' strike in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. He went to Glace Bay, recorded a map of that visit in a notebook and wrote an article that published on April 25, 1925 in the *Toronto Daily Star*.⁵⁵ The article focused on the Reverend Dr. McAvoy (fig.3), a former employee of the Massey-Harris foundry in Brantford, who had lost an arm in a farm accident. McAvoy had since become a Baptist minister and was doing his best to provide necessities for strikers' families starving to death in the dispute with British Empire Steel Corporation. BESCO was created when fourteen companies merged; the province of Nova Scotia mandated this monopoly to control both coal mining and steel production on Cape Breton. Harris described how McAvoy had long been interested in the miners, preaching economics and politics, and telling them not to let religion drive a wedge into their economic fight.⁵⁶

There had been annual strikes in Cape Breton since 1922 when BESCO had first demanded a one-third wage cut. When the unions forced better settlements, the company opted for shorter shifts that left communities impoverished even before credit was suspended in company stores. Conditions were already so bad by the end of February 1925 that Independent Labour Party M.P. for Winnipeg, James Shaver Woodsworth (1874-1942) rose in the House of Commons to discuss the miners' plight, using the procedural ploy of a motion for adjournment. On March 8, BESCO's Vice-President J.E. McClurg announced to the press that the strikers would eventually come "crawling to" the company because they could not stand "the Gaff," by which he claimed to mean the "privation and hunger." Two weeks later a *Toronto Globe* editorial observed that: "Unless working men and their families are properly fed, clothed and provided with the means of intellectual and moral development, the industry is of no value to Canada. The greatest of our natural resources are men, women, and children, and the test of the civilisation is the character of the home."⁵⁷ On March 30, the *Toronto Daily Star* established a relief fund for the strikers; most of the donors were individuals who gave anonymously.⁵⁸ On April 21, when MacKenzie King again declined to assist the miners, Reverend McAvoy is reported to have declared that: "The men will stand tight until they starve, or there is going to be one of the bloodiest fights ever seen. The men will not recede from their position because they cannot afford to."⁵⁹

Three days after McAvoy's comment, the *Toronto Daily Star* published Harris' article. The town, Harris said, consisted of "huddles of box-like houses"



fig.4

Lawren S. Harris, *Miners' Houses, Glace Bay*, c.1925, oil on canvas, 107 x 127 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, bequest of Charles S. Band, 1970. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario)

scattered around the pit head, and tied together by a muddy road with a street car loop. Even on a sunny day the place looked drab and dreary, with sour yards, refuse-filled ditches, and wholly lacking in vegetation. Harris pulled no punches:

The real life of the place presents the most unfavourable phases of our vaunted civilisation, and these [are] accentuated because utterly devoid of all glamour and romance. Here we see the hard bare facts [they are] underlying the industrial machine and it's not a pretty sight.... These people strain every nerve for a way out, look everywhere for a ray of hope, search all men for a solution, where perhaps there is none. They constantly face starvation, they face the sight of wives and children suffering from squalor and privation and hunger, they face utter dejection, complete loss of faith in mankind.⁶⁰

Earlier in March the *Star* had published a photograph titled *Typical Miners' Homes in Cape Breton*. The houses which the miners rented from the company were poorly built, mass produced structures, completely lacking in amenities. In *Miners' Houses, Glace Bay* (fig.4), painted later the same year, Harris did not simply document the scene. One reviewer described the result as "a powerful satire on industrial peonage."

It might properly be called a "Dies Irae," and looks like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*. Two rows of thin, starved houses stand like rows of sepulchral monuments along the Appian way, or like crucifixes on the skyline of a place of

skulls. The street between these rows of cottage [cadavers] is like a stream of lava. The greenish indigo sky is cleft with a shaft of vengeful light as if signifying the impending wrath of Heaven.⁶¹

Another wrote about the canvas as "showing a small section of Hades" where "no one cares if people fall in the pit. Children living there might be glad to flop into the pit. Lawren Harris wants the Senate to do something about it."⁶²

On June 11, as the situation grew increasingly desperate, mounted company police charged demonstrating strikers and fired into the crowd; one man was killed. In the July issue of *Canadian Forum*, Harris published a drawing entitled *Glance Bay* (fig. 5) which depicted an emaciated mother clutching her children. The issue also included an unsigned article entitled "History Repeats Itself in Cape Breton." The writer of the article opened his discussion of Glance Bay with acerbic congratulations to the government on its "benevolent neutrality," ended in time "to pour oil on the flames." In the writer's view the problem was that everyone was "concurring in a system that inevitably produces rapacity on the [part of capital] and perversity on [the part of labour]." The absence of any ethical code in industry meant that:

If any improvement in our social consciousness is to be effected through moral forces, our organised religious bodies would seem to be the natural agents. The United Church of Canada has recently come into being, and has sent its first missionary to China. We would respectfully suggest that there is an equally important, but more arduous, work much nearer than Canton or Peking, and that a second missionary should carry the message of Christianity to the directorate of the British Empire Steel Corporation.⁶³

In his analysis of the *Forum's* editorial policy during this period, Allen Mills maintains that the magazine's stance was always secular rather than Christian or religious in orientation. Yet the comment about sending missionaries to reform the management at BESCO indicates that the anonymous contributor was well aware of contemporary critiques then being levelled by progressive churchmen against the abuses of *laissez-faire* capitalism. The editorial stance of the *Forum* during that time was progressive liberalism, not socialism as it became under Francis White and his successor, Frank Underhill, who aligned the journal with the League for Social Reconstruction, and its successor, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation.⁶⁴

Harris later claimed that art should never "preach about the cultivation of spiritual values, [but should] embody the life of the spirit as living, harmonious experience."⁶⁵ Unlike the journalist J. Phillips Thompson of the *Labour Advocate*, who managed to combine committed socialism with Theosophy, Harris rejected the ideas of Hegel and Marx because they embodied a conflict of opposites without transcendent harmony. By the time he became president of the Federation of Canadian Artists in 1944, Harris seemed satisfied that capitalism, moderated by



fig.5

Lawren S. Harris, *Glacé Bay*, c.1925, in *Canadian Forum*, Vol. 5 (July 1925). (Photo: Metropolitan Reference Library)

a social safety net, was a sound basis for creative freedom:

The aim of any nation which professes civilised intentions should be to care for the material needs of all its workers; its helpless individuals, whether children, or men and women incapacitated by illness or age. Its aim should also be to enable people to realise their individual cultural and creative needs in an atmosphere of freedom of the spirit. The former without the latter will only make for a dull or dangerously discontented humanity.⁶⁶

By curbing material excess, the aspirations of all citizens could find a place in an egalitarian society, which Harris assumed to be free of subtle inscriptions of power and inequity:

It appears from all the turbulent signs that we move now into a new order,

perhaps into the rule of the workers of the world.... That is good. For the extrication of society from the fabric of the intellectually defensible [*sic*] system of private capitalism into something more equitable with less emphasis on mere shrewdness and money-grubbing and exploitation can mean a thousand benefits. But that will surely depend not so much upon its conditions as upon the spirit in which it is conducted. For it is obvious that the system is of less consequence than enlightenment, good will and the spirit of accommodation. The creative individual lives and creates despite the system ... the creative individual feels that events are not of primary importance.⁶⁷

By this date one detects a growing rejection of social praxis, an interesting position for a consistent proponent of art's transformative power. Yet for Harris, the politics of the everyday were but one means by which a nation might realise its destiny.

What was important was the individual's opportunity for self-realization. From the *New York Times Review of Books* on Julian Huxley's "On Living in a Revolution," Harris noted that Huxley's only universal criterion of democracy was "the satisfaction of the needs of human individuals." This meant not only a reasonable standard of economic security, but opportunities for individual self-development and self-expression, such as one might find in liveable cities and through planned recreation and community welfare.⁶⁸ Harris believed that the relationship between art and identity was predicated upon the assumption that all aspects of life shared a common unity — the same type of reasoning that led proponents of the Social Gospel to call for the realization of God's Kingdom in this life rather than the next. Both Bland and Harris could see spiritual values as a force for shared vision and strength. Their commitment to self-fulfillment through divine order was their common bond.

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Notes

- 1 Jeremy ADAMSON, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906-1930* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978), 115. I am indebted to Charles Hill, Curator of Canadian Art, National Gallery of Canada, and to Larry Pfaff, Art Gallery of Ontario Library, for many very helpful suggestions concerning Harris and Bland, and to Howard Woods, of Ottawa, and Stan McMullin, School of Canadian Studies, Carleton University, for refining my understanding of Theosophy. The work included in this paper has been presented under the titles "The Ecclesiastical Amphitheatre: In the Service of a People's Church," and "Theosophical Mysticism and the Art of Social Transformation: The Legacy of Evangelical Protestantism in the Art of Lawren Harris," at the Annual Meetings of the Universities Art Association of Canada, University of Guelph, 2-5 Nov. 1995, and McGill University, Montréal, 7-9 Nov. 1996, respectively.
- 2 Notebooks of 1920s, typescript, Lawren S. Harris Papers [LSH], MG30, D208, vol.2, unpaginated, National Archives of Canada [NAC].
- 3 "Art and Propaganda," file 4-9, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.4, NAC.
- 4 "Untitled," file 4-12, and quote from "Philosophy and Art," file 6-19, LSH, MG30, D208, vols.4 and 6, NAC.
- 5 "Theosophy and Art," file 6-33, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.6, NAC; and Claude BRAGDON, *Art and Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 56. Claude Bragdon, architect, author and lecturer, in 1903 wrote of his admiration of the functionalism of Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, whose organicism he interpreted in the context of his own transcendentalism. He later edited SULLIVAN's *Kindergarten Chats on Architecture, Education and Democracy* and wrote the preface for his *The Autobiography of an Idea*, of 1924. He published no fewer than sixteen books including a volume of poetry entitled *The Golden Person of the Heart* (1898, 1904), as well as several works reflecting his interest in Theosophy, notably *A Brief Life of Annie Besant* (1909) and *The Beautiful Necessity: Seven Essays on Theosophy and Architecture* (1910). In 1920 he collaborated with Nicholas Bessaraboff to translate P. OUSPENSKY's *Tertium Organum*, which Harris reviewed in the *Canadian Bookman* in 1924.
- 6 For example, Peter LARISEY, *Light for a Cold Land: Lawren Harris's Work and Life — An Interpretation* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1993); Ann DAVIS, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992); Dennis REID, *Atma Buddhi Manas: the Later Work of Lawren S. Harris* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985); ADAMSON, *Lawren S. Harris*.
- 7 Larry PFAFF, "Portraits by Lawren Harris: Salem Bland and Others," *RACAR* 5 (1978): 21-27, details eleven oil portraits executed between 1919 and 1932. At least one of the early exhibition catalogues listed a purchase price, indicating that the portrait was not commissioned; see also, "Honour Dr. Macdonald," *Toronto Daily Star*, 8 Apr. 1925.
- 8 W. Gordon MILLS, "Art at the Canadian National Exhibition," *Canadian Bookman* 7 (September 1925): 152-53, describes the curious reception, which varied from "a shrug of irritation" to "reverent gazing" to uneasiness that some emotion might have been betrayed. The "quality of thought, rather than a human personality" in the portrait mingled the tenderness and severity of those, like Enoch, who had "walked with God."
- 9 A.B. MCKILLOP, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1979), 181-228. On 216 and 217, McKillop refers to Watson's view that "no creed of any church can be accepted ... [the Church is simply] an organization for making men better," and to Grant's lectures on practical preaching, "which deals with actual life, inspires action, and aims at establishing the Kingdom of God on earth." For additional information on Bland, see Salem Bland Papers, 86.037c, and Mary Vipond, Finding Aid no.21 for Salem Bland Papers, both in Victoria University Archives, University of Toronto; Alexander

Richard ALLEN, "Salem Bland and the Social Gospel in Canada" (M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1961); and his, "The Crest and Crisis of the Social Gospel in Canada, 1916-1927" (Ph.D., diss., Duke University, 1966), among others.

10 For example, Ramsay COOK, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1985), introduction. See also J.M. BLISS, "The Methodist Church and World War I," *The Canadian Historical Review* 49 (September 1968): 213-33.

11 Richard ALLEN, "The Social Gospel and the Reform Tradition in Canada, 1890-1928," *Canadian Historical Review* 49 (December 1968): 381-99.

12 William MAGNEY, "The Methodist Church and the National Gospel, 1884-1914," *The Bulletin of the Committee on Archives of the United Church of Canada* 20 (1968): 3-93; George N. EMERY, "The Origins of Canadian Methodist Involvement in the Social Gospel Movement, 1890-1914," *The Bulletin...* 26 (1977): 104-119; ALLEN, "The Social Gospel," 381-99.

13 Salem Goldsworth BLAND, *The New Christianity: or the Religion of the New Age* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973), vii; *Proceedings of the Royal Commission into Industrial Relations* (Ottawa, 1919), RG33, M1982, NAC, 156-163, items 2992-2999.

14 BLISS, "Methodist Church," 213-33.

15 *Proceedings of the Royal Commission into Industrial Relations*.

16 Instead of dismissing post-war social unrest as a product of subversion, the committee identified numerous social pressures. Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, *Report of Commission appointed under Order-in-council (P.C.670) to inquire into Industrial Relations in Canada together with a Minority Report*, 1919, s.21.

17 J.M. BUMSTEAD, *The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919: An Illustrated History* (Winnipeg: Watson, Dwyer, 1994).

18 PFAFF, "Portraits by Lawren Harris," 25; Rev. Ernest THOMAS, D.D., "Let Us Observe the Observer," *Toronto Daily Star*, 4 Mar. 1934, in Salem Bland Papers, 86.037c, Box 15, file 923, Archives of Victoria University, University of Toronto, for Bland's innocence in connection with the Winnipeg Strike.

19 BLAND, *New Christianity*, 23. For Harris' views on the same issue, see L.H., "The Armaments Racket," *The Canadian Theosophist* 15 (June 1934): 125-26.

20 Charles C. HILL, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995-1996), 323, cat.96.

21 The Observer [Salem Bland], "The Group of Seven and the Canadian Soul," *Toronto Daily Star*, 31 Jan. 1925; Notebook 1910-1925, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.2, NAC.

22 Mary VIPOND, "National Consciousness in English-Speaking Canada in the 1920s: Seven Studies," (Ph.D., diss., Univ. of Toronto, 1974), 1: 183-84, 465-519. For further discussion of how nationalism was nurtured by a particular elite for their own purposes, see the same author's account of "The Nationalist Network: English Canada's Intellectuals and Artists in the 1920s," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 7 (Spring 1980): 32-52; "Canadian National Consciousness and the Formation of the United Church of Canada," *The Bulletin...* 24 (1975): 5-27, revised and reprinted in Mark MCGOWAN and David MARSHALL, eds., *Prophets, Priests, and Prodigals: Readings in Canadian Religious History, 1608 to the Present* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992), 168, quoting Salem Bland Papers.

23 VIPOND, "National Consciousness," 167-187, quotes Dr. Salem Bland, "The Mind of the Prairie Dweller," *Calgary Canadian*, 7 June 1918.

- 24 BLAND, "The Deeper Life: A Canadian Christianity," *The Grain Growers Guide*, 15 May 1918.
- 25 BLAND, "An Ideal for Canada," and "A Spiritual Ideal for Canada," *Calgary Canadian*, 21 and 22 May 1918.
- 26 Lawren HARRIS, "Palmer's Work," and "The RCA Reviewed," *The Lamps* 1 (December 1911): 12 and 9, respectively.
- 27 Group of Seven, *Catalogue Exhibition of Paintings* (Art Gallery of Toronto, May 1920).
- 28 For example, Lawren HARRIS, "Artist and Audience," *Canadian Bookman* 7 (December 1925): 197.
- 29 Lawren HARRIS, "The Revelation of Art in Canada," *Canadian Theosophist* 7 (15 July 1926): 87.
- 30 Lawren HARRIS, "Winning a Canadian Background," *Canadian Bookman* 5 (February 1923): 37.
- 31 Notebook [1954], file 4-2, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.4, NAC. For catalogue, see Vancouver Art Gallery, *Group of Seven: Loan Exhibition* (Vancouver, 1954).
- 32 Lawren S. HARRIS, "The Greatest Book by a Canadian and Another," *Canadian Bookman* 5 (February 1924): 38. (I am indebted to Charles Hill, for reminding me of this pertinent quotation).
- 33 "Theosophy and Art," file 6-33, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.6, NAC.
- 34 COOK, *The Regenerators*, introduction, and 152-263; LARISEY, *Light for a Cold Land*, 20. In the wake of the Scopes trial, Bland resolved this dilemma by suggesting that evolution could be reconciled with a belief in God; see "May Hold To Evolution And Also Christianity," *Toronto Daily Star*, 27 July 1925.
- 35 Lawren HARRIS, "Sir Edmund Walker," *Canadian Bookman* 6 (May 1924): 109.
- 36 Lawren HARRIS, "Artist and Audience," *Canadian Bookman* 7 (December 1925): 197-98; "Capital and Labour," file 5-5, "Theosophy and Art," file 6-33, and "Scientific Materialism, Futility of Materialism," file 7-10, LSH, MG 30, D208, vols. 5, 6, 7, NAC.
- 37 See Merrill DENISON, *Harvest Triumphant: The Hundred-Year Story of Massey-Harris* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1948), 225-29.
- 38 S. Fraser LANGFORD, "The Gospel of Augustus H. Strong and Walter Rauschenbusch," *The Chronicle* 14 (January 1951): 3-18.
- 39 Paul M. MINUS, *Walter Rauschenbusch: American Reformer* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 157-176.
- 40 Donald GOERTZ, *Walmer Road Baptist Church, 1889-1989* (Toronto: Walmer Road Baptist Church, 1989), 33-55.
- 41 LARISEY, *Light for a Cold Land*, 2-3, states that Alanson Harris joined the Baptist church at the age of eighteen. For Elmore's views, see Clark H. PINNOCK, "The Modernist Impulse at McMaster University," in Jarold K. ZEMAN, ed., *Baptists in Canada: Search for Identity Amidst Diversity* (Burlington: G.R. Welch, 1980), 193-207.
- 42 "Dr. Salem Bland to Speak so Refuse Use of Church," "Last Congregational District Meeting," "Express Confidence in Dr. Salem Bland," 14 and 16 Apr. 1925, *Toronto Daily Star*; Address to the Toronto Theosophical Society, 9 Sept. 1928, Salem Bland Papers, 86.037c, Box 2, file 173, Archives of Victoria University, University of Toronto.
- 43 William Quan JUDGE, *Echoes of the Orient: The Writings of William Quan Judge*, comp. by Dara Eklund (San Diego: Point Loma Publ., 1975), 1: 352, for reprint of an article published under the name Rodriguez Undiano.

- 44 Augustus BRIDLE, "Pictures of the Group of Seven Show 'Art Must Take the Road,'" *Toronto Daily Star*, 20 May 1922, cited in HILL, *The Group of Seven*, 318, cat. 62: "It is the idea, not the fact, of destitution and of dirt that attracts Harris. He has no eye for the sordid details of squalor."
- 45 F.B. HOUSSEY, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926), 182-186; Notebooks [1920s], LSH, MG30, D208, vol. 2, unpaginated, NAC. I am indebted to Larry Pfaff, Art Gallery of Ontario, for drawing to my attention Salem BLAND's review copy of Houssey's book, which is held in the Gallery's archives. See also: The Observer [Salem [BLAND]], "F.B. Houssey's Story of the Group of Seven," *Toronto Daily Star*, 11 February 1925; "New Volume Vigorously Champions Group of Seven," *Toronto Daily Star*, 11 December 1926.
- 46 Fred HOUSSEY, *Views and Reviews of Finance and Economics*, ed. E. Burnham Wyllie (Toronto: Macmillan, 1937), xii, 140-50. By this date the *Toronto Star* was a Liberal newspaper.
- 47 "Changing Ideologies," n/d, file 5-6, LSH, MG30, D208, vol. 5, NAC.
- 48 ADAMSON, *Lawren S. Harris*, 114; Augustus Bridle, "The Drama of the Ward," *The Canadian Magazine* 24 (November 1909): 3-8, shows that the cultural diversity of the Ward had been of interest to Torontonians for over a decade.
- 49 *Ibid.* For other interpretations, see LARISEY, *Light for a Cold Land*, 69-77; HILL, *The Group of Seven*, 110, 198, 318, 323.
- 50 Roger J. MESLEY, "Lawren Harris' Mysticism: A Critical View," *artsmagazine* (November/December 1978): 12-18.
- 51 "Theosophy and Art," file 6-33, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.6, NAC.
- 52 Robert AYRE, "Lawren Harris Gives Warning of Pitfalls," *Montreal Daily Star*, 24 June 1950.
- 53 "Theosophy and Art," file 6-33, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.6, NAC.
- 54 "Capital and Labour," appears to be dated January 1905, but more likely January 1925, Notebooks 1922-25, file 5-5, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.5, NAC.
- 55 Notebook incorrectly dated 1910-1914, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.2, NAC; HILL, *The Group of Seven*, 323, cat.96, for Lawren S. HARRIS, "Dr. M'Avoy's Fight to Save Glace Bay from Starvation," *Toronto Daily Star*, 25 Apr. 1925.
- 56 HARRIS, "Dr. M'Avoy's Fight."
- 57 John MELLOR, *The Company Store: James Bryson McLachlan and the Cape Breton Coal Miners 1900-1925* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1983), 253-72.
- 58 "Star Opens Relief Fund for Miners' Families," "More Funds Needed to Help NS Miners," "Contributions Asked for Hungry Children," "Urge Help be Sent to Cape Breton Sufferers," and "Contributions Asked for Those in Distress," *Toronto Daily Star*, 30 Mar., 15, 18, 23 Apr., 26 May 1925.
- 59 MELLOR, *Company Store*, 22, note 32, for *Report of Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons*, 1925. Mellor suggests that McAvoy made this declaration to the House of Commons, but the text does not record such a statement having been made.
- 60 HARRIS, "Dr. M'Avoy's Fight"; Joan MURRAY and Robert FULFORD, *The Beginning of Vision: the Drawings of Lawren S. Harris* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982), 76-81, includes three drawings labelled "Glace Bay, Halifax, c.1921-1922," which are presumably attributable to the 1925 trip rather than the 1920 visit.
- 61 "Disdainful of Prettiness New Art Aims at Sublimity," *Toronto Telegram*, 6 May 1926.

- 62 "Does Lawren Harris Dip His Brush in the Crucible that Forms Canada?" *Toronto Telegram*, 29 May 1926.
- 63 "History Repeats Itself in Cape Breton," *Canadian Forum* 5 (July 1925): 293-94. The Harris print appeared on p.303.
- 64 Jack GRANATSTEIN and Peter STEVENS, *Forum: Canadian Life and Letters, 1920-70, Selections from The Canadian Forum* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972); Allen MILLS, "The *Canadian Forum* and Socialism, 1920-1934," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 13 (Winter 1978/79): 11-27; Margaret DAVIDSON, "A New Approach to the Group of Seven," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 4 (Nov. 1969): 9-16.
- 65 "Art in Canada," file 4-12, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.4, unpaginated, NAC.
- 66 "Community Centres for the Arts," 1942, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.5, NAC.
- 67 "The Creative Individual and a New Order," file 5-12, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.5, NAC.
- 68 "Democracy and Art," file 5-15, LSH, MG30, D208, vol.5, NAC.

Le portrait du révérend Salem Bland

Un autre voyage spirituel pour Lawren S. Harris

Jeremy Adamson écrivait en 1978, dans un catalogue de la Art Gallery of Ontario sur l'œuvre de Lawren S. Harris, que «la classe sociale de l'artiste et sa fortune personnelle, ainsi que son intérêt pour la pensée ésotérique (la théosophie) militaient contre la politisation de sa vision artistique». Pourtant, des citations notées par l'artiste dans ses carnets suggèrent qu'il voyait l'art comme une activité qui pouvait «recréer la vie des hommes en un semblant d'ordre divin naturel». Ainsi, l'art pouvait non seulement exprimer la spiritualité, mais aussi transformer à la fois l'artiste et le spectateur. En termes nationalistes cela voulait dire: «Si vous pouvez changer les idées des gens, vous pouvez tout changer, mais vous n'y arriverez qu'en changeant d'abord les vôtres». Le nationalisme si intimement identifié au Groupe des Sept était, pour Harris, la voie de la connaissance de soi, aussi bien sur le plan personnel que social.

Si nous acceptons le principe que l'art, pour Harris, était à la fois une forme de communion et de communication, ses œuvres peuvent être vues comme des représentations codées de sa spiritualité. Ses portraits, surtout, sont empreints d'une certaine révérence. La fortune de Harris lui permettait de n'accepter que les commandes qui lui convenaient. Aussi, le portrait saisissant de ressemblance du pasteur méthodiste Salem Bland, exposé pour la première fois en août 1925, peut être vu comme une marque de son «grand respect pour [Bland]... comme exemple de guide spirituel». Ce portrait réussissait tellement bien à communiquer le message de l'artiste, qu'un critique l'a décrit comme une «pierre de touche» de «pur symbolisme spirituel» qui en troublait beaucoup parmi ceux qui le regardaient.

Si le portrait de Bland est un témoignage de respect, la question se pose: le respect de quoi? À la conférence générale de l'Église méthodiste au Canada, en 1918, le pasteur Bland avait contribué à la rédaction d'une résolution qui demandait «la reconstruction sociale complète» de l'économie canadienne, axée sur la concurrence et le profit, en un système fondé sur la coopération et le service. En approuvant cette résolution, la Conférence montrait sa sympathie pour l'«évangélisme social» qui cherchait à renouveler le christianisme évangélique en le rendant plus approprié à la vie quotidienne. Un an plus tard, en 1919, le pasteur Bland se présenta devant la Commission royale sur les relations industrielles, présidée par le juge en chef du Manitoba, Thomas Graham Mathers. La

Commission devait étudier le problème du malaise social croissant dans le sillage de la Première Guerre mondiale et de la révolution russe. Bland proposa de changer le système de profit en un système de propriété publique lorsque les conditions s'y prêtaient, et suggéra de former des comités conjoints pour assurer des pratiques industrielles responsables. La future législation du travail, disait-il, devait prendre en considération la journée de huit heures et la semaine de quarante-quatre heures. Il fallait aussi prévoir une part du budget pour la sécurité de la vieillesse ainsi que de l'assurance en cas de maladie, de chômage ou de mort accidentelle. La Commission royale venait à peine de mettre fin à ses audiences lorsqu'éclata la grève générale de Winnipeg.

Comme plusieurs ministres évangéliques de son temps, Bland était en sympathie avec les griefs de la classe ouvrière. En 1920, il publia une brochure intitulée *The New Christianity*, dans laquelle il soutenait que «la tâche distinctive de l'époque était d'abolir le capitalisme moderne afin de réaliser pleinement la démocratie». Ses idées étaient fondées sur les écrits américains contemporains sur l'évangélisme social, le *social gospel*, qui mettaient en cause l'éthique économique des capitalistes de l'âge d'or, dont les vastes fortunes avaient été bâties sur l'exploitation de leur propre main-d'œuvre. Cinq ans plus tard, Harris, héritier de l'empire de machinerie agricole Massey-Harris, peignait un portrait qui exprimait clairement son estime pour le pasteur méthodiste. Que révélait-il de la spiritualité de l'artiste et de ses idées sur la justice sociale?

Mary Vipond a montré que l'artiste et le modèle partageaient un même intérêt pour la prise de conscience nationale. Elle a comparé les arguments mis de l'avant par le Groupe des Sept, pour expliquer leurs œuvres, avec les arguments de Bland à l'appui du mouvement œcuménique chez les pasteurs évangéliques, qui a abouti à la formation de l'Église unie du Canada en 1925. Il y avait aussi d'autres points communs. Bland avait écrit dans le *Toronto Star* un article sur la quatrième exposition du Groupe des Sept, dans des termes que Harris a rapporté dans ses propres carnets: «J'avais l'impression que l'âme canadienne me révélait quelque chose de secret, de noble, de beau que je n'avais jamais deviné — une force, une indépendance, une profondeur et un mysticisme que je n'avais jamais soupçonnés». Harris, quant à lui, a rappelé son propre héritage évangélique dans un commentaire ironique lors de l'ouverture de la rétrospective du Groupe des Sept, à Vancouver en 1954: «Je n'ai pas encore réussi à m'émanciper de l'influence de mes ancêtres pasteurs, alors je reste enclin à moraliser chaque fois que j'en ai l'occasion». Alors que l'artiste avait peu de sympathie pour la religion institutionnelle en Ontario, il croyait que l'aube d'une conscience spirituelle verrait «les humains sous leur meilleur jour, vivant et exprimant un esprit en aucune manière matérialiste».

Une telle condamnation du matérialisme peut paraître incongrue de la part de quelqu'un issu d'un milieu aussi fortuné, mais l'empire Massey-Harris avait été

bâti sur des pratiques industrielles responsables, telles que congés payés, partage des profits, mesures de santé et de sécurité, ainsi qu'une cantine mobile pour améliorer le moral et la productivité. De plus, l'église baptiste Walmer Road, financée à l'origine par la famille Harris, avait été l'hôte d'un des chefs de file du mouvement *social gospel* aux États-Unis, Walter Rauschenbusch, qui, en 1910, avait prêché du haut de la chaire qu'avait autrefois occupée le pasteur Elmore Harris, oncle de Lawren. Non seulement l'évangélisme social était-il acceptable aux yeux de prémillénaristes conservateurs comme le révérend Elmore, mais il attirait aussi ceux qui s'intéressaient aux nouvelles formes de spiritualité, comme les membres de la Société de théosophie dont Harris faisait partie.

En 1920, alors que Bland publiait *The New Christianity*, Harris explora les quartiers pauvres du port de Halifax et produisit *Black Court* et *Elevator Court*. Ces tableaux étaient beaucoup plus sombres que tous ses sujets urbains antérieurs. Selon Fred Houser, ami de Harris et théosophe comme lui, ces œuvres marquaient une césure dans la carrière de l'artiste. Elles jetaient une «note discordante» parce qu'elles «réclamaient le changement et ne montraient qu'irrévérence et mépris pour la gloire de la cupidité [responsable de tels lieux]». Toujours selon Houser, ces tableaux jetaient bas tout idéalisme superficiel et «ne pouvaient pas avoir été créés sans laisser de cicatrices sur la nature émotive de l'artiste». Le fait même qu'une partie de la société pouvait vivre dans une telle misère laissait supposer la pauvreté spirituelle de ceux qui ne faisaient rien pour corriger cette situation.

Alors qu'Adamson soutient que ces tableaux n'étaient pas des messages politiques et que d'autres ont suggéré que Harris cherchait à fixer une vision permanente d'harmonie par-delà la misère et la saleté, le catalogue de la récente exposition du Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, *Le Groupe des Sept. L'émergence d'un art national*, souligne un article écrit par Harris pour le *Toronto Star*, en 1925, après une visite à la communauté de Glace Bay, Nouvelle-Écosse, alors frappée par une grève. Cet article parlait du révérend McAvoy, ancien employé de la fonderie Massey-Harris à Brantford devenu ministre baptiste, qui faisait de son mieux pour procurer le nécessaire aux familles affamées des grévistes en lutte contre la British Empire Steel Corporation, compagnie qui exploitait les mines de charbon et la production d'acier au Cap Breton, en vertu d'un monopole octroyé par l'État. Harris ne mâchait pas ses mots:

La vie réelle de l'endroit présente les aspects les plus défavorables de notre civilisation tant vantée, et ils sont accentués du fait qu'ils sont complètement dépourvus de tout caractère séduisant ou romantique. Ce que nous voyons ici, c'est la dure réalité qui se cache sous la machine industrielle et ce n'est pas beau à voir... Ces gens vont au bout de leurs forces pour s'en sortir, ils cherchent partout un rayon d'espoir, ils fouillent tous les hommes pour trouver une solution qui peut-être n'existe pas. Ils font constamment face à la

famine, à la vue de femmes et d'enfants qui souffrent de misère, de privations et de faim, au découragement absolu, à la perte complète de foi en l'humanité.

Plus tard, la même année, Harris peignit *Miners' Houses, Glace Bay*, qu'un critique a décrit comme «une puissante satire du servage industriel». Puis, après la mort d'un gréviste, victime de la police de la compagnie, Harris publia un dessin intitulé *Glace Bay* dans la revue *Canadian Forum*, où il représentait une mère émaciée serrant ses enfants contre son cœur. Dans le même numéro paraissait un article anonyme intitulé «History Repeats itself in Cape Breton» (L'histoire se répète au Cap Breton). L'auteur déplore l'absence d'un code d'éthique dans l'industrie et suggère que:

...si des progrès doivent s'effectuer dans notre conscience sociale par le moyen des forces morales, il semblerait que nos institutions religieuses organisées en seraient les agents naturels. L'Église unie du Canada a été formée récemment et a envoyé son premier missionnaire en Chine. Nous suggérons respectueusement qu'il y a une tâche aussi importante mais plus ardue, beaucoup plus près que Canton ou Pékin et qu'un deuxième missionnaire pourrait porter le message chrétien au directoire de la British Empire Steel Corporation.

Harris a déclaré plus tard que l'art ne devait jamais «prêcher les valeurs spirituelles, mais incorporer la vie de l'esprit comme une expérience vivante et harmonieuse». Mais il croyait aussi que

...le but de toute nation qui professe des intentions civilisées devrait être le souci des besoins matériels de tous ses ouvriers et des plus faibles, qu'il s'agisse d'enfants ou encore de femmes ou d'hommes rendus invalides par la maladie ou l'âge. Son but devrait être aussi de permettre aux personnes de réaliser leurs besoins individuels en culture et en créativité dans une atmosphère de liberté d'esprit. Le premier sans le second ne produirait qu'une humanité terne ou dangereusement insatisfaite.

Il croyait que le rapport entre l'art et l'identité était fondé sur le postulat que tous les aspects de la vie participent d'une unité commune. C'est le type de raisonnement qui a conduit les tenants de l'évangélisme social à demander l'accomplissement du royaume de Dieu dans cette vie plutôt que dans l'autre. Bland et Harris voyaient tous deux les valeurs spirituelles comme une force pour une vision et une force communes. Leur engagement envers la réalisation de soi selon l'ordre divin était le lien qui les unissait.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette