

The lay of the land: Turbulent flow and Ted Harrison

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Résumé: *A partir d'un examen des illustrations de Ted Harrison, lesquelles échappent à la tentation des "discours totalisants" du début du siècle, L. Paul établit la théorie de la plurivocité de la lecture du texte écrit et visuel.*

Ted Harrison's pictures are often described as "surrealist" or "magic realist" or "primitive" or "naive" or "childlike"—all terms emphasising their unlikeness to pictures that might be described as "natural" or "real."¹ While I'd never be so foolish in this post-structuralist age as to try to define in absolute terms any of those signifiers—aware as I am of their arbitrariness—I would like to suggest that Harrison's pictures are a lot more "natural" than they seem.

What you see depends on how you look. If you look with eyes informed by late twentieth-century chaos theories of new physics, then Harrison's pictures don't look so abstract any more. Instead, they begin to fit into categories increasingly being used to define the natural world.

Chaos theories describe—in the new mathematical terms of fractal geometry—what are now known as self-similar structures. Those natural shapes include tree bark, snow flakes, cloud formations, mountain ranges, waves, the turbulent flow of water as it tumbles over rocks, and other recursive but never identical structures: constantly shifting shapes that defy conventional predictability.

Benoit Mandelbrot invented fractal geometry (both the name and the method) in 1975, to describe the natural shapes Euclidean geometry can't: "Clouds are not spheres," he explains, "mountains are not cones, coastlines are not circles, and bark is not smooth, nor does lightning travel in a straight line" (1). Although I have no evidence at all that Harrison had ever even heard of Mandelbrot or fractal geometry, I couldn't help being struck by the fractal way in which Harrison describes his own work: "There are no straight lines in nature," he says simply in an interview with Lamont Bassett.

I first began to think of Harrison's pictures as chaotic landscapes when I realized they reminded me of weather maps: isobar bands of colour, coding shifting barometric pressures. I found myself thinking of his pictures as "dynamic and nonlinear, yet predictable in [their] very unpredictability." That's a phrase I borrowed not from art criticism, or from a review of Harrison's work, but from a description—by Katherine Hayles in *Chaos bound: Orderly disorder*

in contemporary literature and science—of the way chaos theory enables us to re-vision the world (143).

Chaos theory provides a new language, as well as a new set of categories, for shapes that are constantly shifting, constantly in flux. Chaotic shapes are turbulent, as Katherine Hayles points out, “circling around in eddies and backwaters, responding to disturbances that affect the macroscopic qualities of the stream as it splits into tributary streams or converges into a swelling flood” (25). Harrison’s style too is chaotic, turbulent, predictable in its unpredictability, a style in tune with contemporary culture. It’s Harrison’s style I want to talk about, style as Perry Nodelman describes it: “that which is distinct about a work of art—that which transcends the implications of its specific codes and marks it out as different from other works” (77). What’s distinctive about Harrison’s work is the way it escapes—from conventions of naturalistic landscape painting on one hand and from the conventions of abstract art and colour field painting on the other.

Instead, Ted Harrison’s pictures embody the unstable, indeterminate, unpredictable cultural sensibilities—including chaos theories—that inform late twentieth-century thought. That’s one of the reasons I think Harrison’s books are so successful. They represent an escape from what Katherine Hayles describes as the “totalizing discourses” of the earlier part of the century. In our world of radical change, as totalizing discourses dissolve, we begin to pay attention to the chaos in our images as well as in our landscapes.

Harrison’s characteristic isobar bands, for example, no longer just look like exercises in colour theory. Instead, what chaos theorists call “a complex relational dynamic” emerges, and the polysemic rhythms of the landscape play across emotional, musical and linguistic scales. It is in *The shooting of Dan McGrew* (1988) where I think the complex relational dynamic of Harrison’s contemporary idiom can be most clearly demonstrated—so I’ll use it as a paradigmatic text.

A chaotic tour through *The shooting of Dan McGrew*

The credit for the inspired marriage of Harrison and Service goes to Ricky Englander and Valerie Hussey, publishers of KidsCan press. They invited Harrison to illustrate *The cremation of Sam McGee*, and the book was a hit when it was published in 1987. I’ve chosen to focus on the sequel, *The shooting of Dan McGrew*, because I think it’s where Harrison seems most in his element, playing consciously across the verbal and iconic representation. He tells visual jokes. His pictures swirl and eddy in the turbulent flow of chaotic landscapes—not just in his illustrations of rivers, or of undulating plains and mountains, but also of music. And patterns of memory. And images of cold.

Even though I’ve never been north of the tree line, I suspect I’m experiencing something of the rhythm Harrison felt pulsing up from the landscape. In “Images

of the north,” an article Harrison wrote about his own work, he claims that it was “a strong subtle force emanating from the land itself” that enabled him to escape the control of his ordered English training in landscape art. Harrison likens his awakening to the landscape to that of Saul of Tarsus, when the scales fell from his eyes (and he turned into St. Paul). Like Saul/St. Paul, Harrison says that he was able to revel “in a new world of colour and form that had formerly remained unknown” (17).

Devotees of chaos theory often use similar terms to describe their awe at awakening to a world they had looked at but not seen before. For instance, see *Chaos: Making a new science* by James Gleick, for an account of similar awakenings by several mathematicians and physicists as they make chaos theory into a kind of new religion. Harrison recognizes that for all its apparent simplicity and orthodoxy, there is something profoundly transgressive in his work: something partly held in the isobar bands of the design and something partly held in the colour.

For some clues on the transgressive nature of colour, I turned to Julia Kristeva. In “Giotto’s joy,” Kristeva suggests that “color might ... be the space where the prohibition foresees and gives rise to its own immediate transgression.” Her explanation of how that transgression happens is so apt I’ll quote it at length:

It achieves the momentary dialectic of law—the laying down of One Meaning so that it might at once be pulverized, multiplied into plural meanings. Color is the shattering of unity. Thus it is through color—colors—that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic, and so forth) that it, as conscious subject accepts. Similarly, it is through color that Western painting began to escape the constraints of narrative and perspective norm (as with Giotto) as well as representation itself (as with Cezanne, Matisse, Rothko, Mondrian). Matisse spells it in full: it is through color—painting’s fundamental ‘device’ in the broad sense of ‘human language’—that revolutions in the plastic arts come about. (221)

As I thought about Harrison’s illustrations for Service’s *The shooting of Dan McGrew*, Kristeva’s lines kept pulsing through my mind: “pulverized, multiplied into plural meanings;” “shattering of unity;” “the subject escapes its alienation within a code.” And against Kristeva’s lines rang the following ones from Service’s *The shooting of Dan McGrew*:

While high overhead, green, yellow and red,
he North Light swept in bars?
Then you’ve a hunch what the music meant
... hunger and night and the stars

It wasn’t much of a surprise to find Harrison himself talking about the “coloured lines of variety and rhythm” in his work, and how he had relaxed into them gradually, as he realized that the brisk, vigourous (virtually code for a male-order and colonial) attitude he had originally brought to his work wouldn’t do for this

new landscape, which resisted the dominating, domineering techniques he had brought with him from England. Harrison knew, as Emily Carr, or the Group of Seven painters before him had known: the techniques of English landscape painting weren't going to work for him in the Canadian landscape either. It is probably also worth remembering here that Western landscape art itself was something we couldn't 'see' until the seventeenth century. Until then landscape was just something people passed through, not particularly a thing of beauty or even something worth looking at.

There are other kinds of re-visioning going on in his work too. For those of us who grew up in a world of abstract expressionist art and formalist criticism, for example, Harrison's work might look a lot like an exercise for a Joseph Albers colour study—according to my colleague Jennifer Pazienza, an art education professor at the University of New Brunswick where I teach. I owe the insight and many tips on art criticism to her. Other tips on looking at pictures in picture books I owe to Perry Nodelman and Jane Doonan. With my critical debts acknowledged, I'm ready to take a kind of chaotic walk through the frontispiece of Harrison's *The shooting of Dan McGrew*. I'm going to demonstrate the complex relational dynamics at work between that picture and the others in the book, as well as between the historical and symbolic codes.

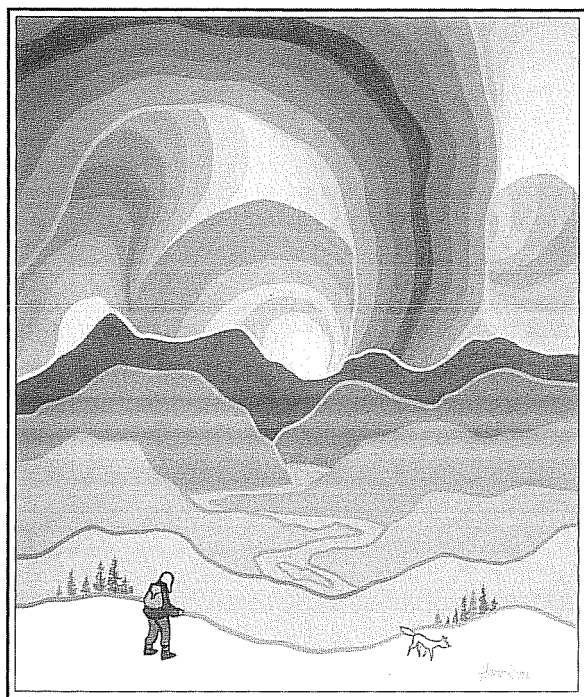


Figure 1

The frontispiece (figure 1) appears to be hallmark Harrison. Isobar colour bands that look—as my friend Jennifer says—like a Joseph Albers colour theory study. To demonstrate just how typical the picture is (and how accurate the reading of Harrison as an artist playing with colour theory), I'll quote part of a review of two of Harrison's other books. The reviewers, Bernard Schwartz and JoAnn Sommerfeld say that "Harrison uses bold and colourful lines to break simple shapes into three dimensional surfaces. The colours are brilliant,

showing a full range of shades and tints of one or more colours. For example, often the skies are divided into bands of varying shades and tints of blue or purple, and often the sun punctures the surface” (30). As you can see, that description works well for the frontispiece of *The shooting of Dan McGrew*—though Schwartz and Sommerfeld do not specify the picture to which they refer.

Even though the article goes on to make reference to the colours of the Arctic night sky and the shapes of Innu art, there is still only a one-to-one correspondence drawn between the pictures and their referents. I think that there is a more complex relational dynamic at work, one that makes the colour bars resonate across historical, cultural, symbolic and musical scales and makes visible the turbulent world of Service’s verse and the turbulent world that inspired it. Here’s how it works.

At the centre of the frontispiece to *The shooting of Dan McGrew* is a yellow dot. The sun. The midnight sun. On the horizon. Because the pink, blue and purple sky-colour bands arc around the dot of the sun, following the curve of the

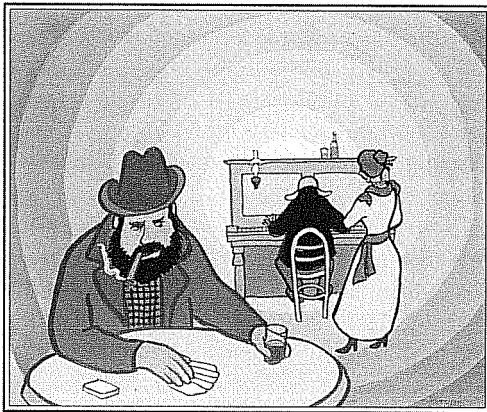


Figure 2

the circle, the sun becomes the light at the end of the tunnel or at the end of a cave. Later in the story, the yellow dot turns up in a different phase, as a yellow moon with the stars and the Northern Lights dancing around it.

The sun of the frontispiece also crosses into the semantic code and goes through a series of incarnations within the story. It becomes the gold “poke” that belongs to the miner “fresh from the creeks, / dog dirty and loaded for bear.” The miner (who wears

a yellow hat, incidentally another sun echo, in the frontispiece and throughout the story) carries his poke into the Malamute Saloon, and spills its contents on the table. Then it disappears for a while. But it turns up again in the last frame, waving from the hand of “the lady that’s known as Lou” as she sets sail from the Yukon in a pastel sky.

The sun shifts again. In the scene in which the miner plays the piano (figure 2), it radiates circles of warmth and music in the frame opposite the lines:

Then on a sudden the music changed, so soft
 that you scarce could hear;
 But you felt that your life had been looted clean
 of all that it once held dear;
 That someone had stolen the woman you loved.
 that her love was a devil’s lic;
 That your guts were gone, and the best for you
 was to crawl away and die.

In the illustration, Harrison places the piano player and Lou in the background, facing away from the beholder (a term I've borrowed from Jane Doonan). Dan McGrew is malevolently in the foreground, facing towards us, dressed in blue, seated at a blue table, but casting a sidelong glance back at Lou and the Miner. Is this a scene of jealousy? Of revenge? In the introduction to the book, Harrison asks, in a post-structuralist way, about the love triangle (if that's what it is) in the text. He explains that:

our imaginations are left to fill in the missing elements. What relationship does the miner have with the flouncy dancehall lady named Lou? Why is Dan McGrew the object of such insane hatred? Was it love, lust, enmity or greed?

Harrison's pictures address the relationships between Dan McGrew, the miner and Lou. While it is true that all (good) illustrators are trying to enter into conversation with the text, I like the way Harrison teases out the elements of unpredictability, of the gap, of the unexplained. They radiate. And the Northern lights (from the passage cited above) "swept in bars" with their teasing double play. Bars of music. The bar in the saloon. And a "silence you could almost hear."

Harrison sets up what I think of as triads of illustrations that reflect each other. The initial frontispiece triadic image of the sun (as point of collision) between land and sky becomes charged with the Lou-Dan McGrew-miner triad. The landscape holds the tension that culminates in the shooting of both Dan McGrew and the miner, and Lou's cheerful exit with the gold poke.

I know I've moved a long way from the dot of the sun at the centre of the frontispiece, so let me run that interpretive sequence again. The yellow dot at the centre of the frame reverberates through the story and through our image of the landscape as: sun; moon; gold poke; and Yukon gold. It also resonates with the miner who is at the lower left of the frontispiece—although we don't know he is the miner yet, or that he is about to fight to the death with Dan McGrew. We only know he is the miner when we recognize the clothes and the trademark yellow hat (my mind flicks past but rejects a yellow-hatted connection with the man who lives with Curious George). The gold poke ends up waving from the hand of "the lady that's known as Lou" at the end of the book, as she sails off into the sunset.

Now for the chaotic reading. Harrison takes the sun, sets it in a turbulent land-of-the-midnight-sun, then plays through the connections between the sun, gold, the dance of the Northern lights, the sound of the piano music, and the turbulent conditions of the time. After all, the landscape leads not just to gold or to the bar, but to the deaths of both Dan McGrew and the miner. Turbulent times. As Kristeva says, the unity of "one meaning" is "pulverized" and "multiplied into plural meanings."

Forgive this very long reading of the sun. The next bit, I promise, is quicker, as I suggest how other chaotic patterns work in the frontispiece. I'm onto the yellow/orange river now, as it moves more or less vertically up from the bottom

of the page. The yellow river. The yellow brick road? The streets paved with gold? The gold-laden river of the Yukon gold rush? The Yukon gold rush? A colour that “escapes the censor” as Kristeva says. It is the road to that ambivalent sun in the centre of the picture.

The river splits the series of wavering horizontals that move up and back towards the horizon. The colours modulate from a purplish white at the bottom through increasingly deepening blue/mauve tints, with the most saturated midnight blue horizontal running across the centre of the page. By putting a dark outline around the light blues and a light outline around the light blues, Harrison invites the beholder into the depths. The muted horizontals of the land curve gently up to meet the cave like curves bending down over the sun to meet at the horizon. The downward curving caves of pink and blue sky meet the upward horizontals of the muted hills. The beholder is taken deep inside. The miner begins at the left. And the wolf intelligently walks off at the lower right. These characters are, as Harrison calls them, “argosies,” floating in the landscape. Harrison tosses this particular argosy man through the landscape, echoing Service, and re-vising him.

In contrast to the sun/sky/land collisions that charge the Northern landscape, Harrison sets another troubling disturbance into the picture. Memory. In figure 3, (which precedes figure 2 in the text), Harrison draws a pastel circle of memory around a charming scene of what is supposed to be a remembered home. The pastel image is set against some conflicted lines about women and home:

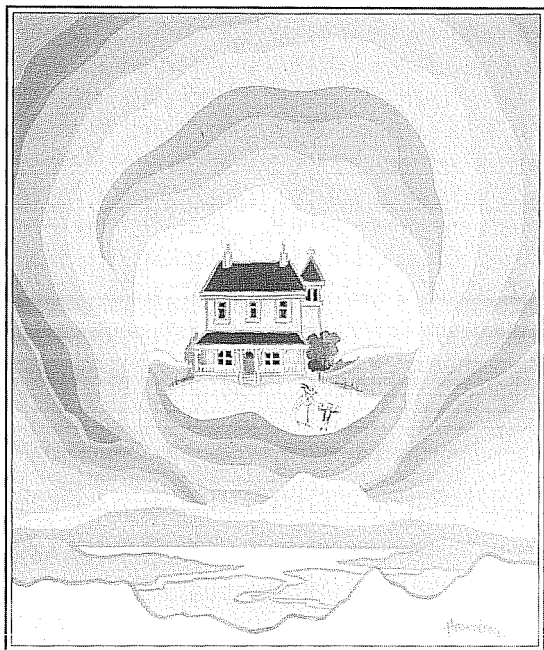


Figure 3

But oh! so cramful of cosy joy; and crowned
with a woman's love—
A woman dearer than all the world, and true
as Heaven is true—
(God how ghastly she looks through her rouge, / —the lady
that's known as Lou)

In the introduction, Harrison writes what amounts to a gloss on his representation of the text. "The stern, unrelenting cold," he says, "must have sent the weakest to the wall, and home, ever present in memory, took on an aura almost transcending that of paradise itself." So by setting his pastel perfect images of home jarring against the ghastly textual harshness of Lou's rouge, he constructs a cruel reminder of both memory's treachery—and of Lou's.

The whole scene is like a funhouse inversion of paradise, as well as of the frontispiece. Harrison echoes the warm pinks and mauves that are the deepest, farthest places in the frontispiece illustration. But the pastels of the picture counterpoint the harshness of textual reference to the rouge on the aging face of Lou. Those pastels appear at the end too, loosened, waving in the breeze as Lou waves from the prow of the ship.

Throughout my long exegesis of the frontispiece, I've been trying to demonstrate the complex relational dynamics in Harrison's pictures that make those isobar colour bars resonate across several registers. Memory. Music. Radiating heat and cold. History. Greed. Love. The tensions between the landscape and the people who inhabit it.

Harrison captures the spirit of our age. And that, says another Ted, Ted Hughes, is what imaginative artists are supposed to do: they give expression to "what everybody in the group shares in a hidden way, or needs to share." Hughes says that it is as if the imaginative works themselves "were a set of dials on the front of society, where we can read off the concealed energies" (iii). As we prepare to enter the new world of the twenty-first century, the turbulent, chaotic works of contemporary authors and artists—Ted Hughes and Ted Harrison among them—are making visible the concealed energies of our society. I'll not talk about Ted Hughes any more here, but if you're interested, I talk about chaos theory in the works of Hughes, Randall Jarrell and Gertrude Stein in articles in *Signal* and the *Children's literature association quarterly*.

Contemporary critics are, I think, the people charged with the responsibility of finding a contemporary idiom to redescribe works of artists. Chaos theory—with its focus on complex relational dynamics and turbulent flow—provides one such idiom. I suspect that twenty years from now, when people talk about Harrison's pictures, it won't be in terms of their abstraction but in terms of their naturalness. And that naturalness will be informed by the way we've learned to look at turbulent patterns of nature as described by chaos theory.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Judith Saltman, *Modern Canadian children's books*, or Pierre Berton, Introduction to *The cremation of Sam McGee*.

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