

Doris Leland

DOROTHY LIVESAY: POET OF NATURE

Two differing approaches to nature have been seen as inherent in Canadian poetry. The first is interpreted as an English romantic approach that developed from pre-Confederation poetry and gained recognition as "national" poetry under the leadership of Carman, Lampman, Roberts and D. C. Scott. The second grows out of the hypothesis that Canadian poets confront in nature a "stolid unconsciousness", or a "sinister power". A. J. M. Smith and John Sutherland depicted the first approach as unrelated to our actual environment,¹ while Northrop Frye found the second to be an outcome of the Canadian poet's harsh exposure to Canadian nature.² The poetry of Dorothy Livesay does not fit easily into either of these categories. She is neither a romantic nature poet who seeks a transcendent experience of sustenance through the beauty of nature, nor a modern poet who unrelievedly confronts the horror of nature's blank face. Neither does she evade the natural environment by turning solely to the garrison of social poetry. Though she recognizes the threat in nature, she accepts it with realistic deliberation, and finds therein a source of creativity that incorporates both society and the individual imagination.

Dorothy Livesay is, without doubt, a nature poet who reveals in her poetry the essence of man's experience. Man may attempt to transcend to mystical heights, or antithetically, he may enclose himself within the trappings of human society. The answer to these often-alternating extremes, she finds, is in man's acceptance of himself as a part of nature. When integrated with nature, man can find both the satisfaction of an individual imaginative experience and the comfort of a human companionship. Through this integration creativity emerges.

An investigation of those poems which have as their theme the creation of poetry, reveals that, for Livesay, creativity seems to have two aspects. She sees it, first, as the result of a natural force to which the poet succumbs.

This is a force half-feared, half-welcomed, but it must be accepted in order to bring forth the new creation. Secondly, there is a creativity which takes place within "aloneness". This is a quiet process that works itself through instinctively, for it is the expression of the essence of natural life. No other agent is needed. These two aspects—the acceptance of a creative force, and a self-contained creativity—alternate within the poet. Livesay has apparently tried to reconcile them within the African prophetic in her poem "Zambia" to make clear the integrity of creation.

In those poems which put forth Livesay's concept of poetry—that is, what she believes the poem should say, and how it should be said—we can perceive more clearly that her poetry differs from that of the post-Confederation school of descriptive nature poets, for, along with its experimental, simplified style, she emphasizes the role of the creative imagination in both poet and reader as a conscious, rather than a transcendent, dream-like experience. Because men tend to neglect the imagination, the poetic experience may sometimes be new to them, but, she believes, it should not be strange. It can concern the realization of an individual's "ultimate truth" in unity with nature, or a communication between men who are able to accept nature as a part of themselves. We shall also find that Livesay is able to relate man to a sinister environment with an accepting objectivity which sees beyond the sense of threat.

"A Boy in Bronze" is a short, lucid poem expressing Livesay's rejection of poetic exaltation. The boy stands poised and deliberate as he aims his arrow. Like the poet who would find the words to express his thought, the boy is intent, "Too grave for ecstasy". Both poet and boy have a "growing urge/For flight", but it will be a straight, true flight.

This sense of the deliberate act is repeated in the poem "Fantasia". "Diving" is the alternative to flight, and is intentionally chosen by the poet who would use the creative imagination. The "man-made tower" which reaches for unattainable heights is rejected for "death's deliberation" in the sea, where the mind is dumb "to all save Undine and her comb. . . ."

More recent poems might indicate that Livesay is aware of her own temptation to dream, instead of being consciously creative in her writing. "Fantasia" had a hint of this tendency, for the wanderer in that poem *dreamt* of "plunging deep"; and, of course, "Prelude to Spring"—that poem which Smith felt most typified Livesay's work—dealt wholly with dreams and their accompanying emotions. However, one of her later works, "Making the

Poem", quotes Jack Spicer's warning against dream-poems, and presents his method of making the poem:

i

Dreams are just
furniture

Jack said
like words you keep pushing around
till they fit into the room
somehow

I begin
at the beginning

ii

Dreams are
personalities
the eight sides of your head
shifting in sunlight
but dreams do not reveal
they obscure

iii

The serial poem is a
progression

not a repetition
a movement
breaking through
outwards

splashing the shore
the swimmer heaves himself upwards
onto a rock
far from the highway

In this poem, Livesay subsequently reveals that her creativity is sometimes hampered by constraining tensions which wake her from a dream to a "terror at the white line". She gratefully acknowledges the advice given her by Spicer, for after the disturbed night, where "an infinitude of finishes" offer themselves to her writing (or, perhaps, to her life), she is thankful that with the years her dreams are becoming less frequent. Free from the constraint of self-concern, her poetry can break "outwards", relinquishing the poetry of the night to that in which "the dawn birds make/a thankful music". Poetry is better without dreams.

Another recent poem, "This Clowning Art", describes how Livesay

learned that making a poem is analogous to taming something wild, and, moreover, that this can be accomplished with objectivity. She can see that there is an absurdity in "wild truth", which, though absurd, is still true. The poet, like Picasso, must tame what is "insanely furious". It is possible to smile at the dangers of nature, even while accepting their truth. As Picasso's "rearing engine" takes the form of a "champing" bull which belches "fire and fuss", so the mechanical world of men is like the furious world of fierce nature which the artist tames in order to present the absurdity. And the sense of absurdity springs from a certain sense of detachment, in which the artist can write, "*Et voilà, ça m'amuse*". She concludes the poem thus:

I saw the absurd wild truth: Picasso's eye
 omnivorous, omniscient
 dot dashing messages of blazing sense.
 Let words, so shunted, colour the cool days!
 Tamed in the park, poke noses through the rails
 and lean to lick the lipstick-painted girls.³

The sound of real poetry, Livesay believes, comes from people who live close to nature. In the poem "Without Benefit of Tape" she states that their experiences—"on backwoods farms", "on midnight roads where hikers flag you down"—are so stripped of social veneer that they can manifest the realities of life. The "living speech is shouted out". The natural experience with its undertone of sinister threat, plus the sound of actual, everyday speech, is essential for poetry. The poem that uses artificial language and thoughts unrelated to the actual environment is like a tape-recording of a voice: the words may come through, but the meaning and sound are somehow altered. Because the hearer does not have benefit of contact with the immediate object, he may receive a distorted image.

Livesay is careful to use images that will make the reader eager to work with them, since she is especially concerned with man's neglect of the creative imagination—a neglect stemming from his fear and misunderstanding of nature. In "Perceptions" she contrasts the lively imagination of the child who delights in his sight, with the adults who shrink back from imaginative perceptions:

Look! the child cries:
how can you stop looking?

To aid those who would learn to relate to the images and symbols of poetry, she describes how the persona of the poem "Sun" can be perceived by

"you or any man". Her point is that the writer refrains from prosaic delineations of her passion, fertility, and freedom. These things can be known if the reader has enough sensitivity to understand that they may be felt and seen in the warmth of the sun and the signs of spring. The poet need not speak directly, for the bird sings out her thought, and her body lies as close as the wind.

A creative reader not only tastes the poem, he gives something of his own form to it by his personal interpretation of symbols and imagery. Livesay expresses this thought in "Poet and Critic":

but what I bring to them
is outside, stranger
than that spelled message
and what I seal
on the poem's mouth
is my tongue's pressure.

Though both poet and reader are involved in the interpretation of a poem, the poet has the responsibility to restrain sentimentality so that the reader can experience an appropriate emotion. In "Of Mourners" Livesay avows that she would not be a "maudlin singer" who mourns the loss of streams and fields to the devouring industrial revolution. She would prefer to employ the "gibing . . . tongue" of Chaucer as she sings of man's "grave fault"—his denial of the creative force of life, and in consequence, the maiming of the imaginative mind:

Sing deeds neglected, desecrations done
Not on the lovely body of the world
But on man's building heart, his shaping soul.
Mourn, with me, the intolerant, hater of sun:
Child's mind maimed before he learns to run.

As I have indicated above, creativity has two aspects for Dorothy Livesay. It can be achieved by the acceptance of a natural creative force—an acceptance which is nevertheless tinged with tensions and questionings; or, it can be the quiet, natural working out of an essential process within the solitary poet. The former aspect accompanies the symbolism of the sea. In the poem "Fundy" the sexual symbolism is apparent—perhaps too much so for poetic quality. Yet, the river's "wrenched" acceptance of the ocean's power vividly portrays the violence which may precede creation. One is reminded of another poem, "The Taming", and its closing line, "be woman", as well as of the pursuer and the

pursued in "Prelude for Spring", wherein acceptance of the pursuer brings delight. The final lines of "Fundy" clarify the creative act:

And sun sheds light
upon the river bed's dark name.⁴

The theme of the drowned poet in "Fantasia" reduces the aspect of struggle, although there remains the assertion that "diving" must be learned, presumably through effort. The sea remains a creative force to be accepted. There is a "fascination of the salty stare:/And death is here". It is a death to the tumultuous sensations of poetic striving, as well as to the disturbances of daily living. Through "drowning" the imagination can work in solitude, and make its changes as slowly and surely as the sea changes. Its effect is imperceptible to those who live outside the imagination, yet its creation will outlast the effects belonging to the world of the "gaudy top outspun".

Another poet, A. M. Klein, wrote on the same theme of the drowned poet in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape". Dorothy Livesay refers to his poem, and addresses him in "For Abe Klein: Poet". Perhaps because none of his poems have appeared since 1951, she refers to him as "A drowned man now . . ." who has found his solitude. His "spider's mark/on the bare table" signifies the groping, inner shaping of poems not yet fully realized. He has retreated into the imagination. There his "slain poems" may be worked through to life again, just as the sea-changes re-create life. In time they will evolve into a more perceptible form, for they now "wingless, tremble".

While the first aspect of creativity requires the motion of the sea, the second aspect is one of "self-engendering". The dominant symbols here are the tree and the geranium.

The geranium is like "generations of fire", as Livesay suggests in the poem "Roots". Its praise is sung in the recent poem, "Geranus . . . crane", whose title implies that part of the geranium's merit lies in the fact that the plant's fruit is similar to a crane's bill. It is thus both plant and bird. It is "(an earthbound bird)", a "phoenix, fires that mould". It is a plant bound to the earth, yet it "affirms the flight". It is a "she" who is healing, and eternally creative.⁵

The theme of self-engendering creativity is even more explicit in the poem "De-evolution". Livesay questions thus:

We have not thought enough
about the flower
self-engendering:

bi-sexual, we
 (the human kind)
 cannot exist
 alone

but flower (plant)
 without a meeting
 greets only the light
 lets water wash
 the encompassing seed—

Shall we as animal
 return to plant
 be all-consuming
 all-creating giant?
 (the thing
 in itself?)⁶

The "all-creating giant" does not seem an entirely comforting thought. Nature thus shown takes on an ominous aspect that is perhaps a warning to mankind (and poets) that solitude could be self-defeating. There is always the danger that the inner force will, at some point, run rampant, resulting in the grotesque. The valuable creation which results from the bi-sexual forces, such as that symbolized by the sea tide, would be non-existent if only passive plant-like creativity existed.

Yet Livesay does not omit the symbolism of the forces of water and sun from the plant's process of reproduction. The difference between the bi-sexual and the self-engendering kinds is that there is a "meeting" of forces in the former, while the latter merely "greet" the life force. The "meeting" implies a communicative interaction, while the "greeting" implies passive acceptance.

It would seem that Livesay attempts to combine the bi-sexual force and the self-engendering by making "woman" the symbol of that combination. The poem, "On Looking Into Henry Moore", uses the "message of the tree", (which is undoubtedly a phallic symbol), to lead into the concept of "one unit":

II

The message of the tree is this:
 Aloneness is the only bliss

Self-adoration is not in it
 (Narcissus tried, but could not win it)

Rather, to extend the root
 Tombwards, be at home with death
 But in the upper branches know
 A green eternity of fire and snow.

III

Take off this flesh, this hasty dress
 Prepare my half-self for myself:
 One unit, as a tree or stone
 Woman in man, and man in womb.

The final lines unify woman and man, just as passivity and fire are united in the stone in earlier lines of the poem. Man begets woman and woman begets man, thus becoming one total creativity. "Woman" as a symbol, however, may have slightly more emphasis within the poem because the persona seems to be female. In addition, the last line gives the emphasis to woman, for "woman" is the line's beginning and end.

The womanhood symbol is repeated in "Zambia", perhaps with greater clarity of meaning. The African mother, and prophetess, becomes a saviour figure, replacing the "white man's God". It is her death and resurrection through a natural force, rather than through the forces of society and the supernatural, which makes her acceptable to the African as a saviour figure. The African uses the earth as "his own hand". He says, "Use it, and live/or cut it off, and die".

The prophetess, an African woman who is "with child", returns from three days amongst the "umbrella trees", where she has experienced visions induced by the mushrooms sprung from earth. She had heard and seen the secrets of the sea, and felt the lifting power of light. Thus she proclaims to her people:

*and how I struggled
 to hold on fast,
 to listen, to stare
 till the waters fell away
 and I was hauled out safe
 into dry air.
 Look at me, look at me!
 I am as one naked, buried,
 for I who am living now
 was dead, three times,*

The poem's final lines again combine the symbol of tree and woman, as they did in "On Looking Into Henry Moore". The tree, as plant, is like a self-engendering force. With its upper branches' "green eternity of fire and snow", it can also be associated with the geranium's phoenix fire. Yet, as the male symbol combined with the woman, it is, of course, a bi-sexual force. Thus Lenchina, African mother and prophetess, becomes the natural, creating saviour:

the drums beat louder and louder
for you, Lenchina
standing by the fire now
short and stumpy
rooted as a tree
a tree singing the new hosannah!

Like the African prophetess, man can find through natural unity an equal satisfaction in the imagination and in human relationships. The imaginative experience will have none of the strains of flight into fancy; it will be like a submissive drowning, a deliberate act of the imagination that gives itself to the creative, natural motion of the sea, and then is lifted out by light. Human relationships will be based on an acceptance of nature within ourselves.

Dorothy Livesay's poetry neither seeks unobtainable meanings in our natural environment, nor does it constantly face in nature an inexplicable horror. It holds, rather, an essential message of increasing importance in today's world, for she sings of mankind integrated with nature—of mankind surviving and growing only as they accept nature in all its facets. Once integrated in this way, mankind can sing their songs together, as man with man, as poet with reader. They will sing their songs in praise of this world.

NOTES

1. John Sutherland, "Introduction to *Other Canadians*", *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*, ed. L. Dudek and M. Gnarowski (Toronto, 1967), pp. 49, 56.
2. Northrop Frye, "Canada and Its Poetry", *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*, ed. L. Dudek and M. Gnarowski (Toronto, 1967), pp. 94-6.
3. Dorothy Livesay, "Poems", *The Atlantic Advocate*, (Sept. 1966), p. 86.
4. Dorothy Livesay, "Fundy", *The Atlantic Advocate*, (March, 1967), p. 71.
5. Dorothy Livesay, "'Geranus' . . . crane", *The Fiddlehead*, 78 (Jan.-Feb. 1969), p. 5.
6. Dorothy Livesay, *The Fiddlehead*, p. 6.