

A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE VOICE: ESSAYS ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF DOROTHY LIVESAY

Edited Lindsay Dorney, Gerald Noonan, and Paul Tiessen. Waterloo, Ont.: University of Waterloo Press, 1986.

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A Public and Private Voice: Essays on the Life and Work of Dorothy Livesay is a selection of papers from the 1983 conference at St. Jerome's College at the University of Waterloo, devoted to her work. The title of the symposium *Dorothy Livesay: The Evolution of Canadian Poetry* generates several possibilities for the interaction of its two parts. Is it Livesay's work which is to be treated within the context of Canadian poetry? Or is her writing seen as somehow exemplary of that development? (Given the span of types and time in Livesay's writing, one is forgiven a momentary suspicion that here Livesay's poetry, and Canadian poetry, are conceived to be one and the same). The title of the published papers also alludes to the plenitude and reach of her production, and raises questions about the relationship of history to literature, the "public" to "private," here grammatically yoked but semantically, perhaps logically, at odds, as the ensuing division of "life" and "work" reminds us. In their titles and preface the editors assume, as many previous commentators have not, both Livesay's status as a canonical figure in English-Canadian literature and the equal value of her "documentary" and "lyric" production, correcting a common tendency to read as though there were two Livesays, one public, one private.

To demonstrate how they are compatible, then, is in one way or another the task of each of the nine pieces in this volume. It is a question which Livesay herself asks and elaborates, in poems, plays, and essays; it is a question central to women's lives and feminist theory. But these terms, I suggest, cannot so readily achieve critical resolution any more than they can in literature, or in life, and there may be especial and further problems created by the proposed linking of them through "voice".

The collected critics ally close reading to biographical commentary — a method which interestingly recapitulates the problem it addresses. Jonathan C. Pierce notes a valuation of Livesay's lyric poetry at the expense of the documentary. (Pierce's counter-balancing is, however,

limited by the retention of a distinction between "personal" and "political" which Livesay's own work challenges). Joyce Wayne and Stuart Mackinnon note that "Dorothy Livesay is the only one of the first group of Canadian modernist poets who is woman, western, and socialist," and track the various stages of her political career. Lee Thompson presents Livesay as "teacher, social worker, literary critic, anthologist, cultural historian, fiction writer, editor, activist, and journalist," and notes her hybrids of analytical poetry and passionate prose. Rota Herzberg Lister examines Livesay's Piscator-inspired *agitprop* productions, her social realist plays, and the later politically engaged radiodramas. Livesay has maintained an interest in public radio for its educational and cultural potentials, as Paul Gerard Tiessen and Hildegard Froese Tiessen demonstrate; equally, they show, she has explored the medium itself, through her iconoclastic dramas, innovative readings, and collaborations with the composer Barbara Pentland.

Paul Denham also concentrates on this "documentary" aspect of Livesay's work, by taking as his starting place the poet's own definition of the Canadian documentary poem as "based on topical data but held together by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements." While Denham asserts that her best work "derives from the coalescence of the lyric and the documentary impulses," a somewhat impressionistic close reading inhibits demonstration of their inter-working. Dennis Cooley does attempt precise prosodic analysis of the lyric poems, linking developments in Livesay's style to the evolution of her poetic personae; both, for Cooley, in the direction of a greater naturalness. While Cooley sees his comments as "descriptive rather than judgemental," there are several schemes at work *a priori* — a valuation of a poetic voice which approximates speech, and a characterization of the non-phallic as immature or frigid. That this essay describes, for example, the thoughtful and tentative early verses as wearing "sit-tight dresses" — "these poems do not admit many things, do not admit to many things" — and that he reads a rhetorical turn as symptom of "sexual denial," is made all the more disturbing by Cooley's tendency to equate the female poetic personae with Livesay herself.

Two essays deserve special note, and point out directions for further new work on English-Canadian poetry. David Aranson's placement of Livesay within modernism begins with a necessary re-definition of that movement in Canada

and an argument that it must be treated as part of an international modernism. While this causes Aranson to ignore native literary *avant-gardism* (the verse experiments of Carman and Roberts in the '90s, for example), it does open the door to cross-border "influence" studies and the tracking of a women's tradition of Canadian literary modernism. Aranson looks, suggestively, at the work of little-known Canadian literary modernists (including Livesay's mother Florence Randal Livesay, Louise Morey Bowman, and Constance Lindsay Skinner), to trace connections to such American modernists as Harriet Munroe and Marianne Moore, and the American "little magazines." Dorothy Livesay, Aranson suggests, may be seen as rejecting Eliotic "high" modernism in favour of Imagism — a modernist mode which was especially congenial to women writers, but which occasioned Livesay's rejection from the foundational *New Provinces* anthology and her later exclusion from the canon.

Ed Jewinski puts the central, if muted, issue of this volume — and of the lyric itself — in a deconstructionist-informed reading of Livesay's later love poems in which, Jewinski says, "there is a clash between the grammatical and the rhetorical assertion of the 'self,' the entity called 'I.'" Terms and working premises of the criticism — the authenticity of voice, the stability of the self, the mimetic relation of poet to persona — are shown to be already destabilized and always at stake in Livesay's verse, contended in plays and repetitions, shifts of tense and person, contradictions and interrogations.

In her contribution to *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker), Mary Nyquist suggests that a feminist consideration of "voice" and the lyric must be concerned with the material conditions which allow — and do not allow — the female speaker to speak. Jewinski's concluding celebration of a wordless, almost mystical, areferentiality as "the dynamic, contradictory, inarticulate sense of self at the heart of Livesay's lyricism" must then, itself, be problematized. It may well be that through reading of Livesay's sustained analysis of the conditions of women's cultural production, we will best come to understand her relation of "public" to "private."

Editor's Note: see on p. 135 of this issue Dorothy Livesay's poem "The Jest of God."