

The Task of Poetic Mediation: Dorothy Livesay's Early Poetry

DIANA M. A. RELKE

THE FIRST PHASE OF Dorothy Livesay's career — the years in which she published *Green Pitcher* (1928) and *Signpost* (1932) — is generally considered her apprenticeship period. These early works, which helped to establish Canadian Modernism, are thought to have been preparation for her more important poetry of the 1960's and 1970's. While this view is undoubtedly true to a large extent, it carries with it an implicit devaluation of her first poems. But the poems contained in these volumes, along with those from the same period published for the first time in Livesay's *Collected Poems* (1972),¹ are not just intensely personal adolescent outpourings: they are also a working out of a complex and well-integrated world view which has been at the heart of Livesay's poetic vision ever since.² In these poems, Livesay creates a special role for the woman poet — a role which is not limited to the articulation of female experience but is expanded to include the task of mediating the conflict between culture and nature. In her role as poet-mediator, Livesay articulates an alternative to the patriarchal world view and its principle of opposition between male consciousness and the world which man dominates and perceives as "other."

For many Canadian writers, from Susanna Moodie in *Roughing it in the Bush* to Margaret Atwood in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," the figure of the pioneer has been emblematic of the relationship between culture and nature. Livesay makes use of this archetypal figure in "Pioneer," where the poet speaks directly to culture on nature's behalf:

He laboured, starved and fought:
 In these last days
 Cities roar where his voice
 In lonely wilderness first sang out praise.

He sits with folded hands
 And cries to see
 How he has ravaged earth
 Of her last stone,
 Her last, most stubborn tree. (*Collected Poems*, p. 53)

Here, several decades before the onset of the ecological crisis in the 1960's, Livesay takes up the task of mediating the conflict between culture and nature. Singing out nature's praises has proved a hypocritical activity for this pioneer, his song of praise meaningless accompaniment to the more important task at hand: ravaging the earth. This particular form of hypocrisy has serious implications for poetry and the culture which produces and consumes it. Countless volumes of poetry in praise of nature have been consumed right along with nature itself. Neither the Wordsworths nor the Coleridges, the Lampmans nor the Carmans, have done anything to halt the attack on nature; the roar of cities has replaced their voices just as effectively as it has the pioneer's. Little wonder Livesay rejects the Romantic nature conventions in which they worked and takes up instead the crucial task of mediation.³

Poetic mediation as a uniquely female role can be better understood in terms of anthropologist Sherry Ortner's article entitled "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in which she states that "culture (still equated relatively unambiguously with men) recognizes that women are active participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as being more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with, nature."⁴ Without giving up the belief that she is "rooted in," or has "direct affinity with, nature," Livesay perceives her active participation in culture's "special processes" as that of poet.

While the female role of poet-mediator may be unique to poetry, it is really only an extension of woman's time-honoured and universal role in culture. By shifting the traditional female role out of the narrow confines of the domestic and into a wider

sphere of influence, Livesay transforms the negative aspects of that role into positive advantages. As Ortner explains, women in virtually all cultures occupy an intermediate position, and most of their traditional duties within the domestic sphere are mediative:

... [woman's] socializing [of children] and cooking functions within the domestic context show her to be a powerful agent of the cultural process, constantly transforming raw natural resources into cultural products. Belonging to culture, yet appearing to have stronger and more direct connections with nature she is ... seen as situated between the two realms. (Ortner, p. 80)

"Intermediate," or "middle status" on a hierarchy of being from culture to nature, Ortner explains, "may have the significance of 'mediating,' i.e., performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture. . . ."

The domestic unit — and hence woman, who in virtually every case appears as its primary representative — is one of culture's crucial agencies for the conversion of nature into culture, especially with reference to the socialization of children. Any culture's continued viability depends upon properly socialized individuals who will see the world in that culture's terms and adhere more or less unquestioningly to its moral precepts.

(Ortner, p. 84)

The domestic sphere, presided over by woman, is a kind of processing plant in the service of culture. Woman's special abilities — her biological function of regeneration and the socially conditioned skills, such as mothering and cooking, which are related to that function — make her tasks as synthesizer and converter of nature crucial to the continued viability of culture. As poet-mediator, Livesay shifts the synthesizing and conversion process out of the domestic realm and into the realm of poetry. Instead of processing infants and raw foodstuffs into crucially required cultural products, she transforms traditional language and cultural attitudes into new language and attitudes crucial to the viability of both culture and nature.

In a world which views culture and nature as irreconcilably opposed, Livesay's tasks are more challenging than the traditional female mediative tasks, for the power of her agency must be ex-

erted in not just one but two supposedly opposing directions. In order to meet this challenge, she extends the limits of language through the use of poetic fictions which bridge the gap between subject and object, self and other. In this way she effects a resolution of the conflict which arises out of opposition and images a new relationship in which culture and nature exist in cooperation and mutual dependence.

The role of poet-mediator is entirely in keeping with Livesay's world view. What the Romantic nature poets spilled so much ink over in an attempt to reconnect with — namely, their legacy from Mother Nature — Livesay accepts as a given. For her, the body, not the intellect, is the ground of being, the source from which all intellectual, spiritual, and emotional experience flows. Frank Davey has labelled this vision "Heraclitean" because of Livesay's emphasis on "the sufficiency of the physical universe."⁵ But Livesay did not consciously choose this world view from the variety of prepackaged philosophies available to her. Indeed, as she says in one of these early poems, "philosophies / Have never darkened me. / I live in what I feel and hear / And see" (*Collected Poems*, p. 68). In other words, the vision which may seem to owe much to Heraclitus grows directly out of Livesay's personal experience as a woman; whatever its relationship to classical philosophies it is primarily a feminist vision.

The tasks of poetic mediation are also in keeping with Livesay's belief in literature as a vehicle for social change. In her depiction of the conflict between male and female she communicates her belief that the opposition between culture and nature is destructive to both realms. "Biologically speaking, [men and women] *are* different," Livesay maintains; "Any biological differences affect one's point of view."⁶ But despite their differing points of view, in Livesay's vision male and female are not naturally opposed; as she has said: "I feel that men and women are complementary; they really do need each other."⁷ The unnatural opposition of male and female in patriarchal culture, like the antagonistic opposition of civilization and the natural world, is presented in her poetry as one of the central problems of human existence. This unnatural opposition is at the heart of the conflict between wo-

man's heterosexual needs and her equally important need for personal autonomy.

Livesay begins her attack on the hierarchical and oppositional relationship between culture and nature, male and female, within the arena of poetic language, where she attempts to break down the hierarchical relationship between language, a product of human culture, and that which language is made to appropriate — namely nature. The human tendency to appropriate nature by means of language is addressed by Margaret Homans in her study of women poets and the Romantic tradition: "Hierarchy or relativity in language is fundamentally the same as appropriation in language, because both fulfill the need for . . . the primary to posit a secondary. . . . [The] use of nature as the ground for human meaning is also appropriative . . . because it subjects nature to human usage and denies its separate identity."⁸ According to Homans, Emily Dickinson understood that nature is an autonomous entity. Dorothy Livesay's respect for nature's right to its own identity places her in the Dickinson tradition. Indeed, Livesay's foremother may even have influenced her directly in this respect. For example, Livesay places the title of her poem " 'Haunted House' " in quotation marks, suggesting that it has a specific literary source.⁹ That source is almost certainly Emily Dickinson's "What mystery pervades a well!", a poem which, as Homans writes, "is often cited as the extreme case of Dickinson's wariness about human efforts to possess nature" (p. 189). The relevant phrase appears in the closing stanzas:

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.
To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.

Homans points out that the terms "her ghost" and "her haunted house" are inappropriate descriptions of nature, and that in choosing these terms the poet demonstrates the impossibility of ever knowing nature on its own terms: nature will always be in

many respects "a stranger." Our relationship with nature is paradoxical: "Her apparent presence seems to invite knowledge but her absence makes knowledge impossible." This poem challenges what Homans calls "the mistaken belief that nature participates in the human community of understanding" (p. 189).

Similarly, in Livesay's "Haunted House" nature is a stranger. In addition to affirming nature's autonomy, this estrangement also emphasizes the persistent alienation of nature from culture:

If people cannot stay in this sun field
Of wayward grass,
If people cannot live
Where ghost winds pass,
Wild raspberries know how.

Deep in July
The thick down-hanging canes
Bring mockery to the house half fallen down
With roof awry:
Wild raspberries are sweet with wind
And the bees' hum
Around this green sun field
Where footsteps never come.

If people go away
Or even fear to pass,
Wild raspberries and grass
Are here to stay. (*Signpost*, p. 30)

Like Dickinson, Livesay seems to suggest that the natural world and the human community exist in a state of mutual alienation. "Wild raspberries" have knowledge that is inaccessible to human beings; that knowledge assists nature in resisting human efforts to possess it. As the juxtaposition of flourishing raspberries and dilapidated house suggests, culture may attempt to possess nature but nature ultimately thwarts those efforts; culture comes and goes but nature is "here to stay." For Livesay, the tasks involved in transforming this state of mutual alienation into mutual cooperation are twofold. First, she must explode the illusion that culture can possess nature; we may invade it and occupy it but this does not mean that we know it on its own terms. Getting to know nature on its own terms is the second task, which is carried

out through a process of self-reflection; for Livesay, becoming conscious of nature on its own terms means becoming conscious of self, and this can only be achieved by identifying herself with nature.¹⁰

Livesay performs her first task by demonstrating that nature is not subject to definitions imposed upon it by human language. As many of her poems assert, we may see and hear the other species in nature, both plant and animal, but we cannot possess them by naming them. Yet if a poet wants to write a poem about nature's inaccessibility to poetic language she must name nature even while admitting that naming it does not bring it into her poem. A useful device for conveying this contradiction is paradox: "Whether or not the contradiction is resolvable," explains Homans, "paradox articulates the possibility of pure contradiction, which . . . typifies relations between the human and nature" (p. 189). The paradoxical relationship between human language and nature informs Livesay's "Secret":

How lovely now
Are little things:
Young maple leaves —
A jet crow's wings.

I have been lost
These many springs:
Now I can hear
How the silence sings. (*Green Pitcher*, p. 5)

Singing silence is an image which appears repeatedly in Livesay's poetry. The paradox of singing silence helps to explain how nature can keep its "little things" a "Secret" from the poet even while she names those things. This paradoxical presence/absence of nature is contrasted and thus given emphasis by the non-paradoxical presence/absence of the poet: she has been absent for many springs but is now present in the poem. In the process of getting lost and finding herself again she has discovered the "secret" to being a poet: being a poet means knowing precisely what is and what is not accessible to one's art.

"I Saw My Thought" is another poem in which nature eludes language:

I saw my thought a hawk
 Through heaven fly:
 On earth my words were shadow of
 His wings, his cry.

How many clouded days
 Precede the fair —
 When thought must unrecorded pass
 Through sunless air. (*Signpost*, p. 33)

The direct equivalent of a thought is a hawk. Yet the hawk's elusiveness immediately exposes this direct equation of nature/bird and human thought as a fiction, for "words" are mere "shadows" of the natural objects they describe: there is no direct equation but rather a huge dislocation between bird and thought — between nature and the word imposed upon it. The hawk disappears into the heavens; the poem is only its shadow on the page. Just how faint that shadow is, is conveyed in the second stanza: so elusive is nature to poetic art that the days of its absence from poetry are without number. "I Saw My Thought" is a key to understanding all of Livesay's poems which address the limits of poetic language. Taken together, these poems can be seen to debate the definition of poetry as a mere shadow of the reality which inspires it.¹¹

Traditionally, poetry is an art which attempts to separate time from its content, and in terms of nature poetry this means taking nature out of the temporal context which is its vitality and imprisoning it on the printed page — in effect, killing it into art. A poem ironically entitled "The Prisoner" is intentionally overloaded with the kind of poetic diction often used by poets to achieve this end. The poem works in opposition to its title in that it demonstrates the impossibility of ever making nature "The Prisoner" of timeless words:

These days like amethysts slip through my fingers,
 Pale and cool, with a wind ruffling the rough
 Brown grasses of the fields.
 These days, grown passionless
 As the stones of amethysts,
 Yet clear, limpid, and lovely,
 Slip past as my arms rise vainly
 To seize for one instant the beating wing of meadow-lark —

Slip past and fall through my eager fingers
 I know not where.
 For I cannot follow this falling, nor chase, even
 The unseen lark through its heaven. (*Collected Poems*, p. 55)

Nature casts its shadow over this poem in the form of simile and abstraction. Despite the poet's efforts to entrap the content of "These Days" in diction such as "Pale and cool," "rough / Brown," "passionless," "clear, limpid, and lovely," and even to harden time itself into an image of "amethysts," both time and its content of wind, grass, and bird escape her linguistic grasp. Not even one instant of time is accessible to her art. That most important of all moments is represented here, as in "I Saw My Thought," by the bird/muse of poetic inspiration whose complete dislocation from the earthbound poet is emphasized in the words "unseen" and "heaven." Nature's escape from the poet is also conveyed through the shift from visual imagery in the first six lines to the aural in the last five. Nature disappears from sight and leaves only the sound of "beating wing." Soon this too disappears and language alone remains. Unable to manipulate nature, she manipulates words: in the phrase "follow this falling" the emphasis is on wordplay, not nature.

In "Fable," neither nature nor human beings are subject to the laws of poetic convention:

I saw a poppy in a field
 And could not let it blow
 As it had blown the summer through
 Gaily to and fro.

I saw a farmer on the road
 And could not let him be
 Till I had gazed my full at him
 And he had gazed at me.

Now must the flower fade too soon,
 The farmer turn away,
 And I for theft have gained no more
 Than on an empty day. (*Signpost*, p. 51)

The farmer is as inaccessible to the poet's art as the poppy. While both flower and farmer cast their shadows here, in reality the flower fades and the farmer turns away. The illusion that time

can be separated from its content is alluded to in the closing line. The phrase "empty day" is an image of time without content; however, the notion that time can exist without content is a fiction — or, perhaps, a "Fable." But this fable/fiction is useful here because it invites a comparison between itself and the day which has as its content farmer and poppy. Time, not the poet, despite her act of thievery, remains in possession of its content. In effecting the flower's fading and the farmer's turning away, time causes both to evade the poet's grasp.¹²

The disappearance of the human figure in "Fable" demonstrates that Livesay's understanding of the dislocation between words and their referents is not limited to language's relation to nature. However, despite her realization that human beings are as elusive to language as nature is, she exploits language's fictiveness as a device for maintaining the balance between her identification with nature on the one hand and with humanity on the other.¹³ She names herself with the words used to name nature but in understanding that actual nature is not the same as the words used to name it¹⁴ she turns the central paradox of female existence into a poetic mask, or fiction, through which she examines the destructive consequences of the conflict between male and female and, by extension, culture, and nature.

The nature image Livesay most frequently uses in the maintenance of her poetic mask is the tree. Paradoxically, she uses the tree as a personal symbol without imposing her own femaleness onto actual trees and without accepting the tree's inarticulateness as her own. By a further turn of the paradox, she can also exploit what we understand as the tree's qualities — silence, rootedness in space, remoteness from culture — to convey her sense of herself as a woman: silenced, trapped in male definitions, banished from the centre of cultural experience. In "The Difference," a sonnet which reiterates the sentiments expressed in "'Haunted House,'" Livesay uses the tree as personal symbol to make a statement about temperamental difference between lovers which can also be read as sexual difference and, on another level, as the opposition which results from culture's objectification of nature:

Your way of loving is too slow for me.
For you, I think, must know a tree by heart

Four seasons through, and note each single leaf
 With microscopic glance before it falls —
 And after watching soberly the turn
 Of autumn into winter and the slow
 Awakening again, the rise of sap —
 Then only will you cry: "I love this tree!"

As if the beauty of the thing could be
 Made lovelier or marred by any mood
 Of wind, or by the sun's caprice; as if
 All beauty had not sprung up with the seed —
 With such slow ways you find no time to love
 A falling flame, a flower's brevity. (*Signpost*, p. 19)

The habit of "microscopic" scrutiny which the speaker ascribes to the lover she addresses is suggestive of the way in which culture possesses nature by objectifying it, clinically observing it, and entrapping it in scientific and economic definitions. This is the way culture comes to "know a tree by heart" (i.e., by rote) without ever knowing it in spirit. The tight octave in which this tree is trapped only serves to emphasize the way nature is made to conform to culture's definitions of it. The sestet suggests the arbitrariness of the rules governing culture's conclusions about what is and what is not worthy of its approval. This approval is awarded on the basis of the arbitrary hierarchies which culture imposes on nature: these false hierarchies are conveyed in the poem through the contrast between "A falling flame, a flower's brevity" and the enduring tree, whose very endurance condemns it to human scrutiny and, ironically, earns it the dubious honour of culture's approval. The phrase "microscopic glance" is a contradiction in terms which effectively points out that the discrepancy between nature and human knowledge of nature is as vast as "The Difference" between a four-season long microscopic examination and a momentary glance. But culture harbours the illusion that given enough time and a powerful enough microscope it can know nature thoroughly. This illusion is, in the end, culture's loss; the beauty of flame and flower is lost to culture because it does not understand that their brevity *is* their beauty. This is the result of culture's faulty perception of time. The octave presents the human perception of time as an observable continuum; by contrast the sestet presents the eternal present, which is nature's time: past,

present, and future are contained simultaneously within the seed. The inability of the lover (and culture) to perceive time in this way causes him to miss the fact that beauty is not relative in nature but, rather, equally present in seed and tree.

On the level of the nature-culture relationship in "The Difference," Livesay's identification with nature allows her to have more knowledge of nature than does culture as a whole. This knowledge, expressed in the sestet, qualifies her to speak to culture on nature's behalf. As poet-mediator she warns culture that unless it gives up its illusions that it can possess nature by objectifying it, it (culture) will forever miss much of what nature has to offer. On the level of the male-female relationship in the poem her gender carries the authority of experience. What she articulates in the subtext on behalf of womankind is the female experience of having to endure male scrutiny, of having to wait for male judgement to come down on whether or not she meets its conditions of worthiness. The division of women into hierarchies of worthiness is a fact of female existence in patriarchy.

Livesay uses the tree as a personal and specifically female symbol in many of her poems.¹⁵ But to interpret the tree narrowly as female is to miss the wider meaning she sometimes attaches to this symbol. Responding in an interview to a question concerning the nature imagery in her poetry, Livesay says that

... of the natural images, the tree is central because it has roots; underground roots to the basic elements of life and death. Everything that dies goes to the earth and the tree is reaching to new universes, in a sense, and towards the sun with its branches, and the tree doesn't flourish by itself very often. The tree needs company, other trees. And, of course, according to archetypal patterns, trees in a sense are people. A tree is the symbol for man. . . . [It is also] The tree of life. And, of course, it's the Garden of Eden symbol — it's absolutely fundamental.¹⁶

With regard to the tree as Livesay's personal symbol, this image of the tree as reaching out in two opposing directions is entirely in keeping with her role as poet-mediator, for the tree in this image is a conduit, or link, between two realms. Further, earth and sun between which the tree mediates are archetypal symbols of woman and man which Livesay uses in her poetry.¹⁷ Her use

of the generic term "man" in her definition of the tree as symbolic of "people" is useful to us because it points out that, unlike sun and earth, which do not change their symbolic gender meanings in her poetry, tree can sometimes symbolize man as well as — or instead of — woman, depending upon the context of the poem in which it appears and upon the tree's relationship to other symbols in the poem.¹⁸ The tree's need for "other trees" is in keeping with Livesay's belief in man and woman as complementary rather than opposed. Finally, the Garden of Eden which the tree often evokes is itself a complex symbol, for it sometimes suggests the patriarchal Garden of the Christian Bible while at other times it is the garden of nature to which Livesay flees when her identity is threatened.¹⁹

"Alienation" reads like a feminist enquiry into what really happened when Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise :

What was it, after all,
The night, or the night-scented phlox?
Your mind, or the garden where
Always the wind stalks?

What was it, what brief cloak
Of magic fell about
Lending you such a radiance —
Leaving me out?

What was it, why was I
Shivering like a tree,
Blind in a golden garden
Where only you could see? (*Signpost*, p. 11)

There is no God present in this "golden garden" of Eden, except in the form of a stalking wind and a sinister "magic" which transfers all knowledge to Adam, leaving woman more like the tree stripped of its fruit of knowledge than like the temptress Eve. This "Alienation" of Eve from Adam expresses the conflict between woman and man. Robbed of power and denied Adam's privilege of naming, woman is doubly alienated from the "garden," that cultivated space which represents civilization as opposed to the natural wilderness. Further, the "Alienation" of the tree of life from male consciousness — "Your mind" — which this poem can be seen to depict, is at the heart of the nature-cul-

ture conflict. In terms of Livesay's cosmology, what is required is an expansion of male consciousness to permit the inclusion rather than the "Alienation" of nature/woman.

Livesay's "Pioneer," examined earlier, concerns the vulnerability of trees and what they symbolize for the poet. Isolated from the landscape he has helped to destroy, the pioneer now "cries to see / How he has ravaged earth / Of her last stone, / Her last most stubborn tree." This is Livesay's clearest and most profound statement regarding the nature-culture conflict. The sentiment expressed in "'Haunted House,'" where culture is portrayed as fleeting and nature as the constant, seems naïve by comparison. In "Pioneer," culture's civilizing impulse has erased nature. And given all the tree's associations — woman and man, humankind as a whole and the poet herself — the implication is that culture's blind determination to eradicate nature is suicidal.

During the course of "Hermit," a long dramatic monologue, the speaker expresses a sentiment similar to that in "Pioneer":

— The things you farmers fear: wind and sun
 Rain, even, and snow; they're welcome here.
 All things are welcome here: men, silence,
 Or a crowd of eager boys coming from school.
 Take silence, now. You think I'm lonely, yes:
 Because, near to the land as you have to be,
 You do not feel yourselves at one with it.
 You have grown out of it, forgetting that
 Man has a kinship with each stone, each tree
 Which only civilization drove him from:
 If he returns, he'll find no loneliness. (*Collected Poems*, p. 19)

Nature's processes should not be feared but welcomed as signs of sustained vitality. The presence of silence evokes that paradoxical presence/absence of nature which always indicates that nature is here on its own terms rather than the poet's. The word "forgetting" is significant, for to lose one's memory is to lose one's identity. In "forgetting that / Man has kinship" with nature, culture has in effect erased its own identity.

If the tree is a symbol of Livesay's connection with nature, then the house represents her relationship to culture. The house is an appropriate symbol for woman's place in culture not just because

she spends so much time there but also because man doesn't.²⁰ In keeping with Livesay's position at the crossroads of culture and nature, "Threshold" presents an image of woman balanced between the domestic and the natural world; she is attempting to balance the rewards and sacrifices of domestic life:

This is the door: the archway where I stopped
 To gaze a moment over well-loved fields
 Before I sought the fire within, the bright
 Gold sunlight on the floor, and over all,
 Upstairs and down, some clear voice singing out
 Music I knew long since, but had forgot.
 This is the door, the threshold of my way
 Where I must watch the early afternoon
 Cast shadows on the road of morning's light,
 The gardens and the fields of noonday sun.
 This is the door, where others quickly pass,
 But where my feet seek out a resting-place —
 Balanced for this brief time between the thought
 Of what the heart has known, and must yet know.

(*Signpost*, p. 27)

The potential threat of domestic isolation and entrapment prompts this speaker to review her transition from "well-loved fields" to domestic space. The phrase "This is the door" appears three times, as if she wants to fix in her mind that a door is not just an obstacle to freedom but also a connection — an "archway," a "threshold" — between two realms. She notes that nature can inhabit domestic space in the form of "bright / Gold sunlight on the floor" but does not forget that she "must watch the early afternoon / Cast shadows." One of those shadows is apparent in the image of others who can quickly pass on to new experiences while she must remain. Balanced against this is the sense of security which home offers. The reference to recalling long-forgotten impressions, or "music," associated with the house seems to suggest that domestic space is a primal part of her identity. This is, of course, in keeping with the fact that for most of us identity formation begins in the domestic setting; the woman who returns to the domestic realm upon marriage is, in more than one sense, returning home. In terms of Livesay's poetic, it

is significant that the poem ends in a state of suspended animation, for it emphasizes the need to integrate one's connections with nature and home.²¹

The relationship between house and nature in "Green Rain" is an expression of complementarity rather than opposition between culture and nature:

I remember long veils of green rain
Feathered like the shawl of my grandmother —
Green from the half-green of the spring trees
Waving in the valley.

I remember the road
Like the one which leads to my grandmother's house,
A warm house, with green carpets,
Geraniums, a trilling canary
And shining horse-hair chairs;
And the silence, full of the rain's falling
Was like my grandmother's parlour
Alive with herself and her voice, rising and falling —
Rain and wind intermingled.

I remember on that day
I was thinking only of my love
And of my love's house.
But now I remember the day
As I remember my grandmother.
I remember the rain as the feathery fringe of her shawl.

(*Signpost*, p. 32)

Getting in touch with oneself again after a disappointing love affair is a healing process in which inner conflict is resolved. In this particular case the process also involves getting in touch through memory with one's matrilineal heritage and disengaging oneself from unhappy memories of a rainy day, a lover's house, and disappointed hopes. The "half-green of the spring trees" is an image of promise only half-fulfilled which the poet dismembers and "re-members" as the "feathery fringe" of her grandmother's shawl. But more important, this is also a union of woman and nature on the visual level. Their union on the aural level is achieved through the association of indoor and outdoor sounds: the "rising and falling" of grandmother's voice intermingles with

the sound of "Rain and wind"; this aural image also unites the natural world with the cultural enclosure, as do the "green carpets" and the presence of nature's paradoxical silence in the house. These visual and aural images of union imply continuity rather than opposition between culture and nature.

Woman becomes united with house as well, through a cluster of comforting memories of grandmother's house filled with all the familiar objects which the poet identifies with her. This complex union on several levels is achieved through the mantra-like repetition of a cluster of key words and phrases associated with house, memories, matriarch, and nature: these are all the essential ingredients of female identity. The two dominant phrases, "I remember" (repeated six times) and "my grandmother" (repeated four times), are dislocated throughout the poem until the penultimate line, where they complete the re-membering process by uniting. This tangle of associations is Livesay's most complex expression of woman as the uniting force between culture and nature.

Although Dorothy Livesay's poetry has gone through several phases over the course of her long and distinguished career, she has never really given up her role as poet-mediator. Her poetry of the 1930's and early 1940's is in many ways a reformulation of her original vision in socialist terms. Similarly, her African poems of the late 1950's and 1960's derive much of their power from the poet's appreciation of the close relationship between nature and culture which she perceived in Zambian society. Since the onset of the women's movement in the late 1960's, Livesay's concern with the ideology inherent in existing language has intensified. As suggested by the following lines from "Winter Ascending," published in the present decade, Livesay is more committed than ever to alerting us to the folly of diminishing the environment which nurtures and sustains us:

Men have called the country
by their names
The names grew
taller than trees
than clouds they are
more memorable

The passionate naming
 is how we fool
 nature —
 fool ourselves?²²

In perceiving nature (and, by extension, women) as "other" rather than identifying with it, man has imposed false definitions upon it — definitions which have become more highly valued than the reality they purport to define. As Livesay continues to tell us, it is only through identification with both self and other that we will finally achieve a resolution of the conflict between woman and man, nature and culture.²³

NOTES

- ¹ Quotations from Livesay's poetry, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from *Green Pitcher* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1928); *Signpost* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1932); and *Collected Poems: The Two Seasons* (Toronto, Montreal, and New York: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1972).
- ² Several critics — perhaps not always intentionally — trivialize Livesay's earliest poems by calling them almost exclusively personal and private and calling her later poems profound because universal. See esp. M. W. Steinberg, "Dorothy Livesay: Poet of Affirmation," *British Columbia Quarterly*, No. 24 (Oct. 1960), 9-13; Peter Stevens, "Dorothy Livesay: The Love Poetry," *Canadian Literature*, No. 47 (Winter 1971), 26-43; Jean Gibbs, "Dorothy Livesay and the Transcendentalist Tradition," *Humanities Association Bulletin* 21, No. 2 (Spring 1970), 24-39; Robin Skelton, "Livesay's Two Seasons," *Canadian Literature*, No. 58 (Autumn 1973), 77-82; Debbie Foulks, "Livesay's Two Seasons of Love," *Canadian Literature*, No. 74 (August 1977), 63-73. I argue that there is more profundity and universality in Livesay's early work than is generally recognized.
- ³ The conflict between culture and nature, always a significant theme in Canadian literature, is presented in gender terms in D. G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), which traces this theme in many major Canadian writers: "The antagonism between nature and culture [in Canadian literature] is part of a larger drama involving the whole of western culture. . . . Rather than accept the world as it is, western man has sought to transform it, to refashion the world in the image of his ideal. Certainly he has enlarged his understanding of nature to an astonishing degree, but more often than not he has used this understanding to consolidate his power over nature rather than to extend his communion with her. He has persisted in opposing to nature the world of ideas, the world of his ideal, and in his idealism he has tended to become exclusive rather than inclusive, arrogant rather than humble, aggressively masculine rather than passively feminine. In extremes he has declared total war on the wilderness, woman, or the world of spontaneous impulse and irrational desire" (p. 57). This is the conflict, expressed in universal terms, between male and female in patriarchal culture. Although Jones does not mention Livesay, this is the conflict she undertakes to mediate in her poetry.

- 4 Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 69.
- 5 Frank Davey, *From There to Here* (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcépic, 1974), p. 168.
- 6 Bernice Lever, "Interview with Dorothy Livesay," *Canadian Forum*, No. 55 (Sept. 1975), 50.
- 7 Marsha Barber, "Interview with Dorothy Livesay," *Room of One's Own* 5:12 (1979), 15.
- 8 Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 188.
- 9 Livesay revealed her familiarity with Emily Dickinson's poetry in an interview (Dorothy Livesay to Sandra Djwa and Diana Relke, 24 Jan. 1986).
- 10 Feminist philosophers of science are developing new ways of seeing and knowing nature through a process of self-reflection. In "Feminism and Science" (1982, rpt. *The Signs Reader* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983], pp. 109-22), Evelyn Fox Keller explains that feminist scientists take their lead from radical critiques of science that question "the very assumptions of objectivity and rationality that underlie the scientific enterprise" (p. 112). The male ideology of mastery and dominance of nature is at the heart of what radical and feminist scientists call the objectivist illusion. However, to dismiss rationality and objectivity as products of a purely male consciousness is to risk "viewing science as pure social product; science then dissolves into ideology and objectivity loses all intrinsic meaning" (p. 113). Keller describes this rejection as a "nihilistic retreat [which] is in fact provided by the very ideology of objectivity we wish to escape. This is the ideology that asserts an opposition between (male) objectivity and (female) subjectivity and denies the possibility of mediation between the two. A first step, therefore, in extending the feminist critique to the foundations of scientific thought is to reconceptualize objectivity as a dialectical process so as to allow for the possibility of distinguishing the objective effort from the objectivist illusion. . . . In short, rather than abandon the quintessentially human effort to understand the world in rational terms, we need to refine that effort. To do this, we need to add to the familiar methods of rational and empirical inquiry the additional process of self-reflection. . . . [W]e need to 'become conscious of self'" (p. 114). In mediating the conflict between culture and nature through personal identification with both realms, Livesay also mediates "the opposition between (male) objectivity and (female) subjectivity," effecting an epistemological shift from inevitable opposition and the objectivist illusion to an alternate epistemology that recognizes the "objective effort" even while it incorporates the "process of self-reflection."
- 11 Two other poems directly addressing the limits of poetic language are "Sympathy" (*Green Pitcher*, p. 1) and "The Net" (*Collected Poems*, p. 21). "The Net" uses the traditional identification between woman and nature to suggest that to imprison nature by means of language is to imprison women by the same means.
- 12 A similar failed attempt to capture a farmer in the net of language is the subject of the appropriately entitled "Impuissance" (*Green Pitcher*, p. 4).

- ¹³ This need for balance is described in precisely these terms by Livesay herself: "For me, the true intellectual is a simple person who knows how to be close to nature and to ordinary people" ("Song and Dance," *Canadian Literature*, No. 41 [Summer 1969], 45).
- ¹⁴ I borrow language from Homans's statement on Dickinson's understanding of the limits of language (pp. 192-93).
- ¹⁵ See, for example, "The Shrouding" (*Collected Poems*, p. 17), in which the conflict is between (female) elms and (male) sun.
- ¹⁶ "Interview," *Canadian Forum*, 49.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, "Sun" (*Signpost*, p. 7).
- ¹⁸ See, for example, "The Invincible" (*Green Pitcher*, p. 3), in which the opposition of power and powerlessness expressed as the relationship between invincible trees and maternal earth encourages a reading of tree as male.
- ¹⁹ The female speakers in "A Country Mouse in Town" (*Green Pitcher*, p. 1) and "Song from the Multitude" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 58-60) desire to escape into nature in order to restore themselves to themselves.
- ²⁰ In the appropriately entitled "Symbols" (*Collected Poems*, p. 21), the female speaker feels "Importunate without" a house, and her hasty decision to inhabit one results in isolation because her mate is not to be found there.
- ²¹ See also "Wilderness Stone" (*Signpost*, p. 24), which presents an image of the extremes on either side of Livesay's place at the junction of culture and nature; from her perspective neither the wilderness isolated from culture nor the house isolated from nature is habitable.
- ²² From "Winter Ascending" (Prince George, B.C.: Caledonia Writing Series Broadsheet, ca. 1981).
- ²³ The author gratefully acknowledges the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its assistance.