

Book Reviews

Lindsay Dorney, Gerald Noonan and Paul Thiessen, eds., *A Public and Private Voice: Essays on the Life and Work of Dorothy Livesay*. Waterloo, Ont.: U of Waterloo P, 1986. pp. 140. \$17.50 pb.

A recent release from the University of Waterloo Press, *A Public and Private Voice: Essays on the Life and Work of Dorothy Livesay* will not win any awards for its design. The yellow paper cover, with its daffodil sketches, is unprepossessing and perhaps even amateurish, and the faintness of the print throughout the volume itself is frustrating. Commas and periods, for instance, are frequently indistinguishable, a flaw which occasions unnecessary ambiguity as well as eye strain. But herewith rests my major grumble with *A Public and Private Voice*. The articles themselves are solid and engaging, as is the brief but graceful introduction by the editors that provides a rationale for the essays in this collection.

Selected from papers read at a 1983 conference on Livesay at St. Jerome's College, the University of Waterloo, the articles here all tend to suggest and support the special, albeit duplicitous, relationship between life and art. Critics attempt to illuminate Livesay the person as well as Livesay the artist, for as the editors note:

From the personal details of the artist's life, . . . from events contemporaneous with the poetic inspiration, we sense more fully the poignancy behind the changing art. Subject matter and technique, we are reminded, are not abstract transactions of form and style; they arise and change out of personal hurt and emotional depths.

Not that these essays seek to prescribe a one-to-one relationship between life and art: the more effective articles suggest connections rather than boldly and baldly state cause and effect. And with regard to Livesay's work, a biographical approach is felicitous. Though more Eliotic writers, of course, abhor the intrusion of biography, Livesay sanctions this perspective. As these essays rightly indicate, Livesay's double commitment is to "her art, and to the world in which it works." Public and private realms dovetail;

"Livesay's interest in restructuring forms of poetry has the same root as her interest in restructuring forms of society." Determined to comment on topical data, Livesay expresses in both her lyrics and her documentaries her deep-rooted social concern. The editors offer another, related reason for exploring the figuration of dancer and dance:

... these essays indicate that the academic process is not what it often is taken to be (and sometimes is): the dredge and whirl of critical analysis which vanishes into thin air. The emphasis here in this blending of biographical data with poetic construct is upon criticism's roots in real life.

The range of essays attests to Livesay's divergent interests and skills. Indeed, my only quibble with the choice of articles is the lack of a strong feminist reading of Livesay's work. As Livesay's writing becomes even more woman-centred, this absence may prove to be problematic. Still, the scope here is impressive. While David Arnason tries, as does Jonathan Pierce, to place Livesay's contributions in the context of a re-tailored modernism, and Livesay's biographer, Lee Thompson, deals with Livesay as journalist, Joyce Wayne and Stuart Mackinnon write of the impact on her career of Livesay's leftist politics. Rota Herzberg Lister treats Livesay's growth as a political dramatist, Paul Gerard Tiessen and Hildegard Froese Tiessen examine Livesay's work with radio, and Paul Denham, Dennis Cooley and Ed Jewinski examine Livesay as poet.

Upon scrutiny, however, these categories break down. In particular, the split between the social writer and the introspective lyricist, the public and the private artist, dissolves. Illustrating this dissolution are Livesay's own radio documentaries. In her 1968 presentation to the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English at the meeting of Learned Societies at York University, Livesay borrowed the term "documentary" from John Grierson of the National Film Board and suggested that the most interesting Canadian forays into the field of the long poem are documentaries, not narratives or epics. Documentary poems are "based on topical data but held together by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements." Paul Denham seizes on Livesay's handling of the term "documentary," and argues persuasively:

In Livesay's own definition, the documentary may contain the lyrical: it is not necessarily an exclusively public form. It is a "mixed" form which implies a certain kind of material and certain attitudes, an assertion that the writer is not "all by himself," but committed to a social order to which he feels responsible. The documentary, then, is the poem of social responsibility, but social responsibility may make room for private experience.

Of the essays in this volume, the most intriguing is Dennis

Cooley's adumbration, in Livesay's poetry, of the poet's changing selves. Through a number of close readings, Cooley notes that "[though] the changes in Livesay's women are not neatly divisible . . . we can discern a growing presence and strength in her female protagonists." Livesay's personae, not her person *per se*, are the focus of Cooley's study. This sensitive re- and/or de-construction of Livesay's fictional selves forms a requisite counterpart to the more "fact"-oriented essays of Lister and Thompson. Or, to recast this notion: Cooley's subtle inclusion of biography (i.e., his assumption that art and life are mutually informing) supports well the intent of this collection. To paraphrase D. G. Jones, Cooley's comments "close the air" between the public and the private in a manner which must be close to Livesay's heart.

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A. M. Klein, *Literary Essays and Reviews*. Ed. Usher Caplan and M. W. Steinberg. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987. pp. xxix, 424. \$40.00; \$19.95 pb.

For several years, the A. M. Klein Research and Publication Committee has been sifting through the voluminous papers left by a Canadian writer noted until recently for three modest volumes of poetry and one short novel, rather than for the scores of essays, reviews and editorials that he wrote as a journalist. Through the Committee's efforts, however, we can now see how intensely Klein lived a life of letters in the midst of his other occupations and duties. To their collections of his social commentary (1982) and short stories (1983), they now add this anthology of literary pieces. It contains about two-thirds of his published writing on literature, written between 1927 and 1954, and divided by the editors into topics: Jewish literature and culture; Jewish folk culture; the Bible; literature and the arts; Canadian literature; American, European and English literature; and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Since these categories overlap, they impose a convenient if misleading system on what were for Klein recurring and interwoven themes.

This volume exhibits the same high editorial standards as the first two. There is a minimum of visible intrusion, fussing or alteration but plenty of information readily available. As well as sources and emendations, the editors gloss the numerous biblical, literary and Talmudic quotations; they explain sayings, incidents and figures from Jewish history and from *Yiddishkeit*; they translate the various languages that Klein loved to display. They also provide a few biographical comments and parallels to his other works, comments which are easy to overlook yet often prove revealing. It is interesting

to learn that Klein's library contained more books by Ezra Pound — a poet whose fascism and anti-semitism he detested — than by any other writer apart from Joyce. On the whole, I think it safe to assume that the reader requires careful guidance through the elegant tangle of names and quotations. While it is important to identify figures such as Ben Bag-Bag, Li-Tai-Po and Zunz, I wonder if it is necessary to explain Blake, Bathsheba, Baudelaire, Chagall or Houdini. In any case, Klein's writing is so full of echoes and allusions that it is hard to know where to begin or to stop. For example, on page 99 the editors identify a quotation from Renan and a reference to the Bible but overlook two other biblical allusions and a paraphrase of Browning, all in a single paragraph. Such playful, rampant or couchant (my only attempt at a Kleinism in this review) intertextuality became second nature to Klein. It demonstrates how his thinking was suffused by literature; how restless he was to explore and assimilate diverse experience; and how his own style, with its endless borrowings, word play, syntactical inversions, archaic diction and witty neologisms, became a natural means of expression for him.

For the most part, this book confirms what we already know about Klein's preoccupation with Judaism, Israel, the holocaust, Joyce, the depressed state of Canadian literature, the lofty standing but sad fate of the poet. A few essays, which have been quoted by critics but were difficult to find, are now available: "The Bible's Archetypal Poet," "Marginalia," the painfully, triumphantly detailed analysis of *Ulysses*, the reviews of A. J. M. Smith, Irving Layton, Karl Shapiro and Robinson Jeffers. There are few surprises in the collection but many insights and many pleasures. Let me comment on three striking points.

The first, which is the most elusive, is the quality of mind expressed in essays often written hastily as exercises in journalism rather than as academic studies. Klein displays an intellectual ebullience that can be quite extraordinary. He has an appetite for facts, information, knowledge, clever phrases, odd names, and — usually — a faith that all this material can and must contribute to a coherent system of thought. We see this curious, critical, optimistic quality of mind in a comment on Ben Hecht's study of anti-semitism: "Mr. Hecht, impeccable prestidigitator with words, becomes so fascinated by his verbal felicities that he lingers too long upon his several subjects, embellishing, concocting wisecracks, indulging in masochistic ironies, and generally squeezing to the last drop whatever cuteness there is in tragedy" (242). The insight is striking, partly because of the way it is expressed — even the rhythm of the sentence is effective — partly because of its final, shocking oxymoron, and partly because it reflects on Klein's own style. He

too loves verbal felicities but he is not seduced by them, certainly not when considering a serious topic. There is fine discrimination in his observation, which he places in the service of a moral as well as an aesthetic conscience. This is the second point that strikes me in this collection. Again and again we see Klein challenging and reaffirming the necessary connection between the aesthetic and the moral dimensions of art. He was writing when various formalist theories, notably the American New Criticism, derided those intrusive fallacies by which biographical, intentional and moral judgments interfere with the precious autonomy of art. Klein was aware of these theories, as he shows when he praises Robinson Jeffers the craftsman, but condemns "Mrs. Jeffers' son" (235). Nevertheless, he is convinced that literature is inescapably moral, and constantly seeks ways to test its worth and worthiness. The third point, however, contests this effort. As in some of his later poems, we occasionally glimpse a radical doubt that corrodes the optimism of his intellectual and moral faith. Perhaps the intellectual and aesthetic systems that he delights in constructing have no necessary validity. Perhaps beauty, truth and decency are not allied. Investigating the Bible manuscripts reveals the maddening possibility that they testify to no divine authority, only to the misleading interpretations, translations and betrayals of their scribes. A dialogue on poetic form disputes but cannot quite pacify the chaos that it debates. The essay on Kafka discloses a pervasive ambiguity that leads from rejection to deprivation to "the final nullification" (277).

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Books Received

- ACORN, MILTON. *I Shout Love: and other poems*. Ed. James Deahl. Toronto: Aya Press, 1987. pp. 96. \$9.00 pb.
- BARANCZAK, STANISLAW. *A Fugitive from Utopia: The Poetry of Zbigniew Herbert*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987. pp. 163. \$22.50.
- BLASER, ROBIN and ROBERT DUNHAM, eds. *Art and Reality: A Casebook of Concern*. Intr. Northrop Frye. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1986. pp. xvi, 240. \$12.95 pb.
- CRAIG, TERENCE. *Racial Attitudes in English Canadian Fiction: 1905-1980*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1987. pp. xii, 163. \$23.95.
- CURNOW, ALAN. *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*. Ed. Peter Simpson. Auckland: Auckland UP, 1987. pp. xxvi, 337. NZ\$32.50 pb.
- DEAHL, JAMES, ed. with intr. *The Northern Red Oak: Poems for and about Milton Acorn*. Toronto: Unfinished Monument, 1987. pp. 80. \$10.00 pb.
- HUGHES, KENNETH JAMES. *Signs of Literature: Language, Ideology and the Literary Text*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1986. pp. 229. \$12.95 pb.
- JONES, LAWRENCE. *Barbed Wire and Mirrors: Essays on New Zealand Prose*. Dunedin, N.Z.: U of Otago P, 1987. pp. 278. NZ\$29.95 pb.
- KODAMA, SANEHIDE, ed. *Ezra Pound and Japan: Letters and Essays*. Redding Ridge, Ct.: Black Swan, 1987. pp. xvi, 256. \$25.00.
- SPIEGEL, HARRIET, ed. and trans. *Marie de France: Fables*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987. pp. viii, 282. \$14.95 pb.
- TERRY, R. C., ed. *Trollope: Interviews and Recollections*. London: Macmillan, 1987. pp. xxxiv, 257. £25.00.
- THOMAS, M. WYNN. *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987. pp. 313. \$22.50.
- WOODCOCK, GEORGE. *Northern Spring: The Flowering of Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987. pp. 318. \$16.95 pb.
- ZIMMERMAN, LEE. *Intricate and Simple Things: The Poetry of Galway Kinnell*. Champaign, Ill.: U of Illinois P, 1987. pp. xiv, 246. \$19.95.