The Self-Completing Tree: Dorothy Livesay and the Theosophical Muse

(a paper prepared for the symposium on the work of Dorothy Livesay to be held at Purdyfest, Marmora, Ontario, on Saturday, August 3, 2013)

by Terry Barker

In The Literary History of Canada (1976), Canadian Anarchist thinker and literary intellectual George Woodcock wrote:

"(A.J.M.) Smith and (F.R.) Scott followed (in the 1960s and early '70s) fairly predictable courses, the character of their poetry remaining virtually unchanged as they proceeded increasingly into the dimension of personal detachment; the poems they wrote after 1960 do not notably modify previous estimates of their total achievement. The case is quite different with Dorothy Livesay, who has created what is virtually a second life in poetry, as she herself appears to have recognized in devising the title for her definitive volume: Collected Poems: The Two Seasons. In her case too there has been a progression from the social to the personal, but accompanied by a radical change in her poetic style that came about when she returned to Canada in 1963 after a period of teaching in Zambia. The break in experience which her life in Africa represented was followed by a spell of linguistic research, and by a deep immersion in the resurgence of new poets and poetry which she found in progress in Vancouver on her return. . ." (Vol. 3, pp. 307-308)

At the conclusion of her memoir of the years 1909 to 1963, Journey With My Selves (published in 1991), Livesay confirms Woodcock's observation that her Zambian experience, and involvement with the new West Coast Canadian poets after her return to Canada in 1963, engendered a "second life in poetry" (in Woodcock's phrase) for her, dividing her Selected Poems (1972) indeed into the products of two different seasons of her life. She also offers details in her memoir of the nature of the poets who helped inspire this watershed in her life and work at this time:

". . . My passionate interest in Zambia sought and found release in mingling with young poets of the TISH group, who likewise were stimulated by other poets - the Black Mountain crowd. What a summer that was, mingling with Earle Birney's selection of poetry makers. I became so keen on the new movement that I applied to do an M.Ed. on the subject: 'Rhythm and Sound in Contemporary Canadian Poetry.' That thesis was accepted in 1965. More important, at that time many of my poems from The Unquiet Bed and Plainsongs were written, poems that freely expressed the pent-up passion within me. Its origin had been the Zambian experience." (Journey, p. 217)

Thus, on her own account, Livesay's "second life" as a poet was generated by her encounter with Zambia in combination with that of the Canadian version of the American Black Mountain spirit, which, latter, according to historian Martin

Duberman, elevated "the artist . . . 'as a holy person'," and regarded "the rest of the world. . . as 'utterly corrupt', unclean." (Black Mountain, p. 399). As both the poet and the commentators on her work recognized, the "self" that emerged from the Zambian/Black Mountain experience expressed a different ethos from that of the socialist "self" (that had produced her secular profession of social worker as well as her Communist politics), of the 1930s. More overtly affective, more individualistic, and more feminist, Livesay's poetic persona after 1963 chimed well with the beginnings of the Western Counter-Cultural Movement of the 1960s, which, while often using the language of the Marxist "Old Left", really found its intellectual roots in European Existentialism, as many scholars have noted.

In 1986, Dorothy Livesay published a new "Selected Poems" which she indicated in a brief preface "is the selection of poems that I would like to be remembered by." As the title (and the front cover picture showing an elderly Livesay standing with right forearm leaning on an aged tree) show, this last collection is composed of poems from every period of the poet's life, arranged thematically to illustrate the growth and development of the whole body of her work and of the life experiences from which it flowed. The contents are divided into seven sections, each preceded by a brief prose preface, and it is the first of these "The Self-Completing Tree" that provides the title (and the preface already referred to) for the book as a whole.

My brief meeting with Dorothy Livesay, mentioned in my After Acorn (p. 28), occurred in 1985, during a time when there was a great deal of academic interest in her work. As I had only a brief opportunity to speak with the poet (we were lunch companions), I asked her who or what had most inspired her as a socialist poet, and she named A.M. Stephen, the "Canadian socialist poet" of Vancouver, who had been "a theosophist first", and was "president of the Canadian Labour Defence League and activist with the League Against War and Fascism". She also noted that her "getting in touch with New Frontier (the Communist Party of Canada's cultural journal) in Toronto in 1936" had been formative.

As the poet had mentioned that her husband (Duncan Macnair) had been a Theosophist, and I was aware of the important role of Theosophy in the rise of modern ideological mass movements (including socialism and feminism), I stated in After Acorn that Livesay "had told me that she. . . had been a Theosophist first (before becoming a socialist)". (p. 28). While literally and chronologically untrue, and, indeed, a mistake in memory of my conversation with Livesay, I believe that this telescoping error helps us understand Livesay's own ultimate analysis of herself and her work in terms of a "self-completing tree."

George Woodcock, in the same historical essay referred to above, notes that A.M. Stephen, (whom he calls A.M. Stephens), died in 1942, and was a "belated Confederation poet" who had his "last unpublished verse" appear posthumously in Songs for a New Nation (1963). He also remarks that Stephen's work was "praised by (Sir Charles G.D.) Roberts", called "the Father of Canadian Literature", who himself died in 1943.

In Livesay's autobiographical reflections (Journey with My Selves), her encounter with A.M. Stephen in Vancouver in 1936, suggested by the staff of New Frontier, occurs after a period beyond Canada's borders, and marks a similar divide in her life to her return to that city from Zambia in 1963, an event which we have already considered. Having moved west to promote New Frontier after spending a year (1934-1935) in Englewood, New Jersey, as a social worker and Communist organizer, a period described in the chapter "Crossing the Border" in her memoir, Livesay contacted A.M. Stephen to help find writers, journalists and poets who might want to submit work to the magazine, and others who might want to sell subscriptions to it. With regard to the latter category, Livesay recalls Stephen as having said the following, as it turned out, fateful words:

> "I think I have just the man for you. He is a Scot from Glasgow - veteran of the Great War who first came to Vancouver around 1920 and fell in love with this young city. He met Dr. Ernest Fewster and other members of the Poetry Society and the theosophical group. Then he went off to Australia. Next we met him returning from China in 1927; and here he is again. . ."(p.153

This, of course, is a description of Duncan Macnair, an accountant who had worked in gold-mining camps in northern Ontario during the first part of the Depression, and whom Livesay would shortly meet and later marry (1937). As she recalls, what impressed her about Macnair "was his enthusiastic response to poets and philosophers", the fact that "he knew something about politics also, for he had lived and worked in China at the time of its upheavals in the 1920s", and his taste in poets and poetry, as "he knew and admired", as she did, "the poets Charles G.D. Roberts and Bliss Carman, as well as the Toronto poetry lovers associated with them", particularly liking "poets like Charlie (Roberts). . . because they toured the inner country, the north and west, meeting Canada's working people." (Journey, pp. 153-154)

The years 1934-1936 had been complicated for those associated with the international Communist movement, and possibly confusing, as the Comintern had shifted from a classical "left" strategy to a "right" strategy, both of which were described as "united front" policies, as historian John H. Kautsky shows in his study Moscow and the Communist Party of India. For Livesay, in Englewood, New Jersey, and later back in Canada during the pivotal year of 1935, and probably for her close friend Gina Watts, both of whom had accepted the Marxian "dialectical" view of history as students at the University of Toronto about 1931, the change from an alliance "from below" to one "from above" (i.e. with anti-Fascist, anti-imperialist and anti-feudal elements, however capitalist) would have constituted a disruption, but hardly a stumbling-block. For Watts, the change stimulated her to go to Spain with Norman Bethune as an ambulance driver, and with her husband, Lon Lawson, to spearhead the founding of New Frontier. For Livesay, on the other hand, as I shall argue, the result of this ideological shift was more radical, leading her to gradually uncover and affirm an earlier stratum in her psychological composition, (and in the character of the Hegelian "dialectic" itself), the theosophical.

Livesay's encounter, as a contributor to and publicist for New Frontier in 1935-1936, with the non-Marxist-Leninist socialist-theosophist cultural community of Vancouver, one of whose members she married, awakened an aspect of her radicalism that had always been present. Throughout her career as a poet a self-described Romantic, Livesay had first been influenced politically (beyond her radical father) by the Romantic Anarcho-Socialism of Emma Goldman, whom she heard lecture in Toronto when only a teenager. As Canadian chronicler Roy MacGregor has told us, in the 1920s and 1930s, Theosophy "was . . . so popular in Canada that it was known by its celebrities", such as "Dr. Frederick Banting, (Lawren) Harris (and Franklin) Carmichael of the Group of Seven, Dr. Emily Stowe, the first woman to practice medicine in this country, Saturday Night magazine editor William Arthur Deacon . . . and newspaperman Albert Smythe", father of Conn Smythe, "the long-time owner of the Toronto Maple Leafs and the man who built Maple Leaf Gardens. . ." Indeed, as MacGregor points out, Canadian theosophists of the 1920s and '30s (like those in Ireland and Germany, we might add) applied theosophical teachings to their national destiny:

> "One of the theories this elite group particularly liked directly involved Canada. According to a 1982 article by former Globe book editor William French, who was not a member, the Canadian theosophists of the 1920s and 1930s believed that the intellectual and cultural flowering that began back in ancient Greece was but the start of a long cycle that would eventually reach its pinnacle right here- with Canada's destiny to shine, as an example to the rest of the world, of a place where everything came together exactly as imagined.
> Intelligence would rule, spiritualism would guide and, of course, justice would prevail."

John Robert Colombo has published extensive research on the prominent role of theosophy among Canada's opinion-forming classes prior to World War II, particularly regarding Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven, and recently Ross King, in his Defiant Spirits: the Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven, has extended the latter aspect of this analysis, showing its American, and particularly New York, roots.

With a father, J.F.B. Livesay, who was general manager of the Canadian

Press Cooperative News Service, and a mother, Florence Randal Livesay, a journalist and translator au fait with the liberal New York literary world; Livesay must have been aware of the Theosophical thought prominently "in the air" growing up in the Toronto area in the 1920s. In her memoirs she records hearing the great Irish Theosophist, and precursor of the Dublin political events of 1916, (as William Irwin Thompson has shown), "A.E." (George Russell), while a student at the University of Toronto, and her youthful periods of residence in Provence, London and Paris (all historically centres of theosophical thought and activity) may have strengthened her awareness of the theosophical world view. But it was her sojourn in the New York region in 1934-1935, I believe, that acted as the catalyst to make Livesay, in effect, a socialist-theosophist.

Livesay's Journey with My Selves (1991) is excerpted in Jill Ker Conway's feminist-oriented In Her Own Words: Women's Memoirs from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (1999), and, interestingly, the chapter of the memoir dealing with Livesay's (as I believe) critical year (1934-1935) spent living, working and organizing in New York/New Jersey (pp. 144-151 in the original) is entirely left out. From a poetic point of view, this seems odd, as Livesay notes (on page 148 of the original book) that "at this time I made the greatest literary discovery of my life. . .(when) in a Greenich Village bookshop I found the poetry of Auden, Spender and C. Day Lewis." From an ideological perspective, however, the lacuna is perhaps understandable, as the passage reveals Livesay as both strongly attracted to the cultural life of New York, and the politics of the Rooseveltian National Reconstruction Administration (as opposed to Canadian cultural backwardness, and social welfarism), and deeply involved with the Communist Party of the United States, both as an organizer and a student (she signed up for a course in Marxism-Leninism at the Workers' School in New York).

As has been pointed out above, as John Kautsky shows, the International

Communist Movement (the Comintern, directed from Moscow), adopted a "right" strategy at this period, so that the National Reconstruction Administration could be considered as "anti-Fascist, anti-imperialist, and anti-feudal", although obviously "bourgeois", by loyal Communists (such as Livesay). Such a view may seem peculiar to those growing up in the era of the "Cold War" (particularly after 1947), for, as Kautsky outlines, the Soviet government directed the world Communist movement after that date using a policy that combined elements of both the "left" and "right" strategies, that Kautsky denominates (after its pioneering in China in the 1920s-1940s) "Neo-Maoism", an apprach that viewed the United States itself as an "imperialist" power. It was this "Neo-Maoism", of course, that eventually issued in the Canadian Left Nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s.

Livesay had followed her close friend and comrade Gina Watts (now married to Lon Lawson) to New York's Chelsea area, where the former was studying acting and directing with luminaries of the Group Theatre. As has been shown in a recent study by Columbia University Journalist professor Robert Love, The Great Oom: The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America, the influence of Dr. Pierre Bernard (real name Perry Baker)'s Tantric yoga cultural centre (called the Clarkstown Country Club), located in the outer suburbs of New York City at Nyack, New York, on the west bank of the Hudson River just above the New Jersey line, upon the theatrical, literary, general cultural, and even political and economic life of the great city, and of the United States, was at its peak during the mid-1930s. As explained by Love, "Dr. Bernard"'s teaching combined an esoteric Hindu understanding of Hatha Yoga with elements of theosophical and Masonic lore and American secular Puritan "affirmation of the body" to produce a "mind cure" that chimed well with the needs of the mass casualties of "the Gilded Age" and the ensuing Depression. Clarkstown's panacea appealed to New York's high society (the Vanderbilts were participants and financial supporters),

musicians (Leopold Stokowski, Pete Seeger and John Jacob Niles, whom Bob Dylan claimed as an influence were "graduates"), and movie stars, but it was also tailored at this time to attract the middle-classes, who, as Livesay notes in her memoir of her time in New Jersey as a social worker, were the most affected there by the Depression. "Dr. Bernard" viewed his efforts to expand his cultural (both in the physical and spiritual senses) program at Clarkstown at this period to be an expression of the "local self-help" aspect of Roosevelt's National Reconstruction effort, and its practical employment results were certainly appreciated in this way by the working and middle classes of the Nyack area.

Love's study aims to show that yoga became as American as yogurt (as it were) long before the 1960s, and throughout he points out that the particular version of yoga that appealed to "Dr. Bernard" was the Hatha Yoga of the Tantric Hindu esoteric tradition (he notes that Bernard's original name for his group was "the Tantriks") which he amalgamated with American esotericism and common sense (in its connotation of "commonly accepted opinions"). Love notes that the treatises of the Hindu Tantra (as standard reference works confirm) are outside the main current of Hindu thinking, are concerned with problems of ritual, magic and sexuality, and stress the female principle. These were the same qualities, probably derived from pre-Hindu and Mongolian sources, that made them attractive to the founders of the European and American "occult revival" of the late nineteenth century, the most prominent of whom were Madame Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, who established the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875.

Many of the themes articulated by this official Theosophy had been current in New York City and State in the 1850s, published in the writings of the "Seer of Poughkeepsie", Andrew Jackson Davis, and the "sex magician" Paschal Beverly Randolph. By the 1930s, the Theosophical movement had branched into sects and tendencies, Alice Bailey's Arcane School being

set up in New York and New Jersey in 1923, and "Colonel" James Churchward's occult historiographic popular series of theosophically-inspired "Mu" books appearing from good New York publishers regularly from 1926 until just before his death ten years later in Mount Vernon, a district just north of the Bronx. Part of this now-complex theosophical subculture was Bernard's "Tantrik Order", which had transferred to New York from Seattle in 1909-1910, obviously to locate in the current theosophical "Mecca". Both the Arcane School and, as we have seen, the Tantrik Order (as the Clarkstown Country Club), were, by the 1930s, articulating a "liberal progressive" political ideology; i.e., one that a Communist following the "right" strategy (as the Party was throughout the world from "about 1935", as Kautsky puts it) could readily support.

Livesay gives no indication in her memoir of her time in New Jersey (1934-1935) of her awareness of the considerable theosophical "climate of opinion" in New York and region then, or of the existence of the Tantrik Order/Clarkstown Country Club in particular. However, it is unlikely that she did not know of the latter, as the activities of "Dr. Bernard" and his followers were often covered in the Press, Livesay was in close contact with the theatrical and artistic communities through her friends, the Lawsons, and Englewood, her place of residence and work, is only a few miles from Nyack, the home of the C.C.C. on the west bank of the Hudson.

In her "Crossing the Border" chapter, Livesay does recall difficulties in her personal life (of a romantic nature), and problems with the composition of her local Communist Party cell, which seemed to be made up mostly of people of non-proletarian origin, as well as her resentment at the decrees that seemed to be handed down by a faceless Party Central. As a result, she records that she "dropped out of the (P)arty", and later suffered what she describes as "a sort of nervous breakdown", in which she "felt alien, far from (her) roots, and without any time to meditate or write". This led her to resign from her social work job as well, and return to Canada in the fall of 1935.

Livesay relates that "after several months' convalescence, safe in the snowy woods of Clarkson (Ontario), I began to revive and relive my New Jersey experiences", an exercise that was very fruitful for her poetic production. This interlude at her childhood home, and family country retreat, which functioned for her as "Dr. Bernard"'s Clarkstown Country Club had been doing for years for the society matrons, literary and artistic classes, and, increasingly in the 1930s, disturbed members of the middle class of New York and the United States- as a strategy for body/mind cure- prepared her for her move to the West as emissary of New Frontier, and for her discovery of the socialist-theosophists of British Columbia in 1936.

Livesay admitted that her husband, Duncan Macnair, was "more of a theosophist than a marxist", and that "he sought to temper my political rigidities", as Val Ross noted in her "Lives Lived" article in the Toronto Globe and Mail after the poet died. In passages of her memoirs related to her life after her marriage in 1937, there are respectful references to "the Cabala", to quasi-religious advice given by "a theosophist friend", and to bad omens and sorcery, which latter she had clearly believed in as a young woman (for example, in the case of an encounter with the Canadian Romantic poet, Wilson MacDonald, recounted earlier in Journey with My Selves). Indeed, during the late 1930s and 1940s, Livesay herself seems to have been gradually becoming a socialist-theosophist.

As intimated at the outset, Livesay's final poetic persona, stimulated by her experiences in Zambia and with the Canadian representatives of the Black Mountain School after her return to Canada in 1963, is proto-"New Left" and Existentialist in character, and thus more fully theosophical (or neo-gnostic) than Marxist socialist. The process of the emergence of "selfhood" (as the poet calls the discovery of the overself) is a long one, well-described by the image of "the self-completing tree" (reminiscent of occult interpretations of the Sephirotic Tree of the Kabbalah). Indeed, Livesay's original intention

in going West in 1936 had been, as she says in her memoir, "to get to the literary scene in San Francisco". As is generally accepted, it was this "scene" (as the "San Francisco Renaissance"), that later generated the Sixties Movement in the literary sense, with linking figures such as the Gnostic poet Robert Duncan associating the Black Mountain School's project with the same development. The recent scholarship of Robert Love, discussed above, argues for the New York theosophical "scene" (and especially the Tantrik Order of "the Great Oom", as the Press called "Dr. Pierre Bernard") as a third great source (and perhaps the original one) of the cultural revolution of the Sixties. And to paraphrase the title of an old pop-history TV program of the 1950s, in some important sense,"Dorothy Livesay was there".

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