

Dorothy Livesay:

Resident Writer Speaks Out

In this letter to the editors of Escalator, Dorothy Livesay, UNB's resident writer, comments on contemporary poetry.

It is heartening that *Escalator* saw fit to introduce into its pages some of the work in poetry and prose produced by the summer school class in Creative Writing. Indeed, I note that all the shorter poems and shorter prose pieces came from *Bottlenecks*. But since that material has gone through all the processes of writing and re-writing and class criticism I do not wish to comment on it here. What I would like to do is to set down some of the principles we used in tackling writing, so that they might be considered by other poets working on their own. Our basic premise was that writing can be communication or expression; or it may be both at once. The example I like to use is the newspaper. Every day it communicates facts, often in dramatic or narrative form. Further, it expresses ideas, in the form of comments on news, in its editorials, letters to the editor, analysis by experts on matters of public concern such as pollution, education, war and peace. Newspapers go further and offer many examples of persuasive writing through advertising. And it is quite possible to take a series of slogans from these advertisements and compose them into a poem. (I have some good examples of this, done in a creative writing class). In short, the newspaper combines both communicative and expressive writing. It may tell you the facts about a product and it may also involve you in an emotional reaction to them.

No matter what media is used — the printed page, radio, television — in "creative" prose or poetry — we are dealing with the same two modes: the communicative and the expressive. There is no reason therefore why a poem should not deal with all the material that a newspaper deals with — and more. A poem should

be 'topical' in the sense that it is dealing with matters of concern "pollution, education, war and peace", but they *may* do so. They may also deal with the poet's inner emotional response to these data; or with his personal relationships, which have always been difficult but which are much more difficult today. The old values have slipped away. We live in a fragmented world.

But perhaps, instead of talking *about* all this I should give some examples. Here then is a short poem by Abraham Klein, an unusual Canadian poet whose work dates from the forties but who is still very "contemporary."

Filling Station

With snakes of rubber and glass
thorax,
like dragons rampant
statistical red with ambush
they ambuscade the highway.
Only in the hinterland, and for
neighbors,
the extant blacksmith drives
archaic nails into the three-
legged horse.
But on Route 7
the monsters coil and spit from
iron mouths
potent saliva.
(beyond the hills, of course;
the oxen, lyric with horns, still
draw
the cart and the limping wheels).

Notice that the poet is seeing the landscape of today metaphorically. He is creating a myth out of his comparison between the "lost" pioneer world of man, plough, oxen and the new technological world of the machine. And he lifts us above the area of prose statement — plain communication — to another level, that of expressionism. I believe that Bob Dylan is doing essentially the same thing when he writes, in his song *The Gates of Eden*:

Of war and peace the truth just
twists
Its curfew gull it glides
Up on four-legged forest clouds
The cowboy anqel rides

With his candle lit into the sun
Though its glow is waxed in
black
All except when neath the trees
Of Eden.

And every stanza in this song has some vivid metaphorical twist that lifts the everyday into the world of poetry, as:

The lamppost stands with folded
arms
Its iron claws attached
or

The motorcycle black madonna
Two-wheeled gypsy queen

If I were asked to sum up what it is that is important to know about poetry in the mid-twentieth century I would say that one should study the manifestos of two earlier movements. First, about 1910, there was *Imagism*, whose creed was as follows:

1. To use the language of Common Speech, but to employ always the 'exact' word not the merely decorative word.
2. To create new rhythms — as the expression of new moods.
3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject.
4. To present an image.
5. To produce a poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite.
6. Concentration is the very essence of poetry (i.e. cut out every word that does not wake the sensed).

To this manifesto one might add many of Ezra Pound's statements in his *ABC of Reading*; and finally William Carlos Williams remarks about *Objectivism* (taken from his autobiography):

But, we argued, the poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its meaning by the very form it assumes. Therefore, being an object, it should be so treated and controlled — but not as in the past. For past objects have about them past necessities — like the sonnet — which have conditioned
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