

Dorothy Livesay's "Catalonia"

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Dorothy Livesay was a Canadian poet who wrote extensively about the Spanish Civil War. Her poem "Catalonia" is typical of her modernist style and is a perfect example of the documentary poem that she developed. The poem, divided into five sections, follows a group of International Brigade soldiers during a fictitious tank battle for Catalonia at the end of the civil war. "Catalonia" is significant because it raised awareness of the Spanish Civil War; helped pioneer modernist poetry in a uniquely Canadian way; promoted left-leaning ideology; and acted as a call to action.

During the 1930s, many Canadians were uninformed about Spain, especially prior to the Spanish Civil War; when the war did come, many would have little background knowledge of its significance and would not be aware of details concerning the war. It seemed to be a far-off land of little significance, especially when compared to the British, French, German, and Italian empires that surrounded it. Ted Allan conveys this attitude in *This Time a Better Earth* when he notes that Canadians were "conscious of Spain for the amount of time it took us to read the newspapers or the pages of a book. Then Spain ceased to exist. It played no part in our existence or development" (4). Dorothy Livesay and other artists, however, recognized the value of soldiers fighting for the Spanish people and for the ideas that they held dear. In order to spread the message of the civil war's importance, they created works of art that informed Canadians of the conflict and the ideologies surrounding it. Livesay wrote "Catalonia" in 1939, five weeks after the fall of Catalonia, when it was obvious that the Rebel fascists led by Franco had won the war. Nevertheless, the ending of the poem makes it obvious that the speaker hopes for the fight against fascism to continue, even after the war. The final verses are typical of Livesay's poems, which often end on an optimistic note. They predict that "hands [... will] burst / Out of the

earth again, another spring!” (Livesay, 114-116) and assure the reader that the ground is “not tilled in vain with blood, [...] not fertilized in vain [...] with the] bones of young men scattered far” (106-108). Thus she is not only informing Canadians of the war in Spain, but also urging them to continue the fight against fascism.

The documentary poem, developed by Livesay herself, helped entrench a place for Canadian poets in the modernist tradition. This style, which Livesay solidified in the 1960s, is based on the long poem. The long poem blends the epic and lyric styles in a lengthy treatment of its subject (Bentley, 8-9); the documentary poem builds on this model by adding three specific characteristics. First, the purpose of the documentary poem is to inform its readers. Second, it includes a narrative that develops the poem’s themes. “Catalonia” uses a narrative about soldiers in the International Brigade to convey themes such as unsung heroism, camaraderie, and the chaos of war. Third, the documentary poem favours objectivity over subjectivity. This is a somewhat unusual use of lyricism: lyrical poetry focuses on the subjective feelings of the individual but in “Catalonia,” individuals’ feelings are portrayed as fact and play a part in an objective narrative. In addition, “Catalonia,” as Arnason argues, is characteristic of Livesay’s poems because it emphasizes social problems. When it comes to Livesay’s war poetry, however, Nicola Vulpa claims this is unusual: she argues that most of Livesay’s war poetry focuses on winning the war under the banner of leftist ideals (169), whereas “Catalonia” is her only war poem that focuses extensively on war’s human consequences (170). Because of its unique style, “Catalonia” is one of Livesay’s valuable contributions to modernist poetry in Canada and around the world.

“Catalonia” is also important for its demonstration of Dorothy Livesay’s leftist ideas. It is difficult to pinpoint Livesay allegiances within the political left since she flirted with numerous ideologies,

becoming disenchanted with some but remaining faithful to others. For instance, her leftist ideas were present in her earlier works, including her 1930 poetry collection, *Signpost*. Livesay also joined the Communist Party of Canada in 1933 and became active in leftist activist groups such as the Canadian Labour Defense League, the Canadian League Against War and Fascism, Friends of the Soviet Union, and the Workers' Unity League. Furthermore, she joined the Progressive Arts Club and became the regional editor of the radical publication, *New Frontier*. The views that Livesay espouses in "Catalonia," however, cut across any formal school of leftist thought like Marxism or Trotskyism but embrace their common suspicion of the violence of mechanization.¹ The poem suggests that soldiers and Spanish civilians alike are suffering under the mechanized nature of fascist warfare, which Livesay condemns for its inhumanity.

"Catalonia" demonstrates a rejection of mechanized violence by contrasting the naturalness of human life with unnatural, mechanized warfare.² For instance, the speaker invokes two contrasting tones in the first paragraph. The first four lines,

The flag of darkness lowers at half-mast
Blotting out the blood-stained hieroglyphs with eyes
Strained from the smoke, the flares, the rat-tat-tat
Of guns' incessant speech (Livesay 1-4),

suggest that the atmosphere of obscurity is a result of mechanical warfare. The next four lines, however, convey a feeling of ease with their depiction of a girl falling asleep in the silence of a land safe from

¹ Karl Marx opposed keeping the mechanized "means of production" (factories, for example) in the hands of the bourgeois right wing. He and other leftists did not oppose mechanization but believed the means of production were to be controlled by the working class.

² Bart Vautour discusses how Livesay included a similar contrast between the social and the natural in her poem, "Man Asleep."

war. The contrast between her sleeping “encircled by her own heart-beat” (8) and the “rat-tat-tat / Of guns’ incessant speech” (4) highlights the distinction between the soothing sound of the peaceful left and the jarring sound of the warmongering right. Furthermore, the speaker constantly juxtaposes mechanical violence with terror and the destruction of humanity. This idea is typically leftist, since the extreme political right often associated technological warfare with beauty and progress.³ Section III of “Catalonia” describes a soldier’s death within a tank, stressing that it is the oil, fire and machine-gun shots that “Burned in his lungs” (37) and “stung his shoulder blade” (42) before killing him. Similarly, section IV follows an evacuation of refugees who were displaced by “the zoom of air raids” (86). The speaker even notes how winter has taken on an artificial quality with its “steel needles” (94), though the cold is “lighter far to bear than the thrust of shrapnel splitting through the skin” (95). In this way, the poem demonstrates Livesay’s leftist views by denouncing the right wing’s violent use of mechanization.

Since “Catalonia” appeals to left-wing ideologists, Livesay uses it as a call to action. The first way the poem does this is by demonstrating how the individual can be a powerful force for change. By emphasizing the role of the individual, “Catalonia” inspires readers to fight for the leftist cause. It does so by highlighting the soldiers’ humanity, including the individual in the larger “whole,” and heroicizing individual actions. The speaker shows how each member of the battalion is not just a faceless soldier by naming them (25), including dialogue (17-20, 25-27, 70-71) and mentioning letters from home (73). In doing so, the reader is reminded that the soldiers are fellow human beings with the same unromantic actions and needs. The poem also highlights an individual

³ Walter Benjamin discusses how fascism aestheticizes the politics of violence in the epilogue of his 1936 work, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

soldier's heroism when he saves a fellow soldier, and praises the generosity of individual refugees when they "give a shawl, a shirt for covering" (100) to the soldiers. According to Robert Boylan, a "sense of history and meaning to the savagery of this war re-affirms the Loyalist cause, not with dogmatic slogans, but with a quiet dignity and realism characteristic of [Livesay's] best social poetry" (39). Such acts of selflessness represent not only the deeds of the left, but also the importance of individual actions for the cause.

Another way in which "Catalonia" implores readers to act against fascism is by drawing connections between the Spanish struggle and the Canadian reader. Doing so highlights the similarity of humans in different circumstances and shows that even "ordinary" Canadians can fight for the cause. As discussed above, the names of soldiers in the poem and their letters home connect the leftist soldiers with the Canadian reader. Section II also makes it clear that the heroic soldiers in the poem are in the International Brigades, the force with which Canadian volunteers fought. Moreover, the reference to Sorenson is reminiscent of Henning Sorenson, Dr. Norman Bethune's translator.⁴ Bethune's medical team, Sorenson included, were well-known and well-regarded figures in the leftist cause. The inclusion of these familiar Canadian names would encourage the reader to identify with the soldiers. The speaker also connects with the readers at home by describing how the only thing a dying soldier is yearning for is his comfortable bedroom back home. Canadian readers might be inclined to compare their needs and desires for comfort with those of the soldiers, and even feel guilty that they are lucky to be comfortable when their

⁴ Dr. Norman Bethune was a Canadian doctor who headed a mobile blood transfusion unit that saved thousands of lives during the Spanish Civil War.

heroes are not. Finally, the poem unites leftist readers with the symbol of the clenched fist (Livesay 29), which indicates leftist solidarity.

Dorothy Livesay's "Catalonia" represents a major contribution to Canadian poetry about the Spanish Civil War. It raised awareness of the war and its ideologies among ordinary Canadians, and continues to do so; it contributed to the developing style of modernist poetry in Canada; it demonstrated Livesay's left-leaning tendencies; and acted as a call to action for the political left in Canada.

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