

# Dorothy Livesay's Poetic Re/vision: Reading Binaries, Lesbian Love, and Androgyny in *The Self-Completing Tree*

by Tanya Butler

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In the prefatory remarks to her final major collection of poetry, *The Self-Completing Tree* (1986), Dorothy Livesay states that "This is the selection of poems that [she] would like to be remembered by" (3). In making this statement, which contains a ring of finality, Livesay implicitly accepts responsibility not only for the selection of individual poems included in *The Self-Completing Tree*, but also for the arrangement of the chosen poems. Given her previously stated aversion to revision of her work on the grounds that revision destroys a poem's representation of a specific artistic and historical moment,<sup>1</sup> the considerable effect that selection, revision, and reposition in *The Self-Completing Tree* bring to bear on Livesay's final poetic vision, and on her representation of gender binaries, lesbian love, and androgyny in particular, is surprising.

As Antje Rauwerda argues in her essay examining the intersections of race and sexuality in *The Unquiet Bed* (1967), the reading of a poem can be deeply affected by its bibliographic context (103). Referring to the work of Neil Fraistat on collections of Romantic poetry, Rauwerda makes the point that repositioning a poem (into a bibliographic context that differs from the one in which it has been previously published) often revises the way in which it is read. If a poem, or a collection of poems, is an artefact that represents a specific stage of the poet's artistic vision, the selection, grouping, and ordering of the poems in *The Self-Completing Tree* represent something of an active artistic creation in itself. In observing that "poems published within the same volume inevitably interact," Fraistat suggests that the poet can "either attempt to control the chemistry of that reaction or passively accept the results" (4). Thus the artist's role in arranging and revising a collection of previously published poems results in what Fraistat calls "contextual architecture" or the creation of "a larger

whole fabricated from integral parts" (4-5). The "architecture" that Livesay actively creates in *The Self-Completing Tree* therefore deserves study as a text in itself. Specifically, I want to examine how sexuality is represented in this collection, and how the representation of lesbian love in Livesay's poetic career seems to change somewhat through the revision or altered context of her poems. As a result, this new representation suggests a new poetic vision that seems to encompass and transcend a strictly chronological reading of Livesay's entire body of work that privileges lesbianism as the solution to conflict in heterosexual love.

In *The Self-Completing Tree*, Livesay states that "the plight of women politically and socially" remains one of the "most passionate concerns" to find expression in her poetry (3). Livesay's preoccupation with sexuality and the performance of gender roles is clearly visible throughout her artistic career, though the resulting poems take different forms in different stages of that career. The early lyrics of *Green Pitcher* (1928) and *Signpost* (1932) display an engagement with woman's dilemma between a desire for autonomy and a desire for union in a love relationship. This concern for the precariousness of female autonomy resurfaces after Livesay's documentary phase in *New Poems* (1955) and beyond, to explode in an explicit celebration of physical love in *The Unquiet Bed* that is reiterated in *Plainsongs* (1969) and *The Phases of Love* (1983). Finally, in *Feeling the Worlds* (1984), Livesay moves away from the heterosexual love poetry of the past to the new territory of lesbian love poetry, suggesting that lesbianism is crucial to the culmination of her feminist vision.

Thus, while it is possible to chart a chronological progression, particularly in Livesay's feminism, through her poetry from the 1920s to the 1980s, such a chronologically focused reading is largely resisted by the organisation of *The Self-Completing Tree*. The grouping of the poems in this final collection is offered as thematic rather than chronological, for as Livesay states: "Rather than being strictly chronological, [*The Self-Completing Tree*] is wrapped around certain themes that I see recurring throughout the years" (3). In contrast, the retrospective collections of poetry that she published earlier are arranged somewhat differently, adhering primarily to a chronological format. The first collection, *Selected Poems of Dorothy Livesay, 1926-1956*, published in 1957, consists of eight numbered parts that roughly combine chronological order with thematic division. The lack of titles or prefatory remarks for the parts of the volume leaves the thematic grouping largely to the reader's imagination. In the 1972 *Collected Poems: the Two Seasons*, the poems are divided into chronological sections, with those poems previously published in other collections grouped under the titles of these respective

collections. Those poems not previously published in other collections are inserted in a fashion that maintains the chronological integrity of the collection, though these sections are titled, thus suggesting a semi-thematic grouping. As the publisher's remarks about *The Woman I Am* (1977) indicate, this collection displays an overarching concern for "the problems of being a woman and a creative artist." *The Woman I Am* is also broken into chronological sections, with only one section not designated chronologically. Its title, "Five Poems for Alan Crawley 1887-1975," indicates some kind of thematic grouping in this section only.

In contrast, *The Self-Completing Tree* is divided into seven sections that do not necessarily represent chronologically sequential stages in the poet's artistic vision. As Livesay indicates, poems from different collections and periods are interspersed with one another, prioritising thematic coherence over chronological happenstance. In her review of *The Self-Completing Tree*, Sandra Hutchison notes that this lack of chronological arrangement results in a text where "experiences are set free from the constraints of time and place" (206). Individual poems are not dated and there is no indication as to which poems were published in what collections. While some sections contain many poems from one or two periods, such as "The Unquiet Bed: Fire and Frost" and "Struggle: the Documentaries," the opening section, "The Self-Completing Tree" begins with a poem published in 1964, directly followed by a poem published in 1932. Furthermore, the order that places "The Unquiet Bed" before "Struggle" is an inversion of their chronological order. Livesay possibly favoured the inversion in an attempt to preserve a sense of continuity between the two sections, "Rites of Passage" and "The Unquiet Bed," that deal with relationships between men and women. This order has the effect of eliding the traditional bisection of Livesay's love poems caused by her "political" poems of the 1930s and 1940s. While an exhaustive catalogue comparing the original context of each poem's publication with its position in *The Self-Completing Tree* is beyond the scope of the present paper, the degree to which this collection revises the course of Livesay's poetic vision seems clear at a casual glance.

Critics such as Debbie Foulks, Peter Stevens, Pamela Banting, Dennis Cooley, Prem Varma, Lee Briscoe Thompson, and Nadine McNinnis have, with varying results, discussed the progression of Livesay's love poetry. Much of this critical material was written before Livesay's explicitly lesbian poems were published, however. Thompson, McNinnis, and Roxanne Harde are three of the few critics of the love poetry who seem aware of its lesbian component, which, according to Thompson, was present as early as 1979 (108). McNinnis,

though, is the only critic to chart exhaustively all the stages of Livesay's feminist vision, from the early lyrics of the 1920s and 1930s, to the passionate poems of physical love introduced by *The Unquiet Bed* in 1967, and to the quieter poems of lesbian love from *Feeling the Worlds* in 1984. While clearly pointing out where each phase draws upon the one before it, McInnis seems to see each stage as superseding the previous one. In a strictly chronological reading, those poems dealing with heterosexual love *are* succeeded by those dealing with lesbian love. This chronological emphasis sustains a reading of the lesbian poems as a negation of the heterosexual poems, and the resolution in the later (lesbian) poems as an effacement of the conflicts visible in the earlier (heterosexual) poems, leading McInnis to the conclusion that "the solution is erotic love between women" (88). A cursory examination of the order of the poems in *The Self-Completing Tree* seems to support this kind of reading: the poems dealing with conflict and tension in love are located in the middle of the text, largely in the "Rites of Passage" and "The Unquiet Bed" sections, while the explicitly lesbian poems are found at the end of the collection, in "At the Finish." This parallel between textual order and chronological order might therefore be read as a progressive path to enlightenment which culminates in the replacement of heterosexual love with lesbian love.

But closer examination of the issues raised by the context of some of the heterosexual poems in this collection, along with a careful look at the representation of the lesbian poems as they are reproduced here, presents an alternative reading for the role that Livesay eventually accorded to her lesbian poetry. In fact, the opening poem, "Zambia: the Land," while ostensibly about the African landscape, holds the key to the poetic vision of the text as a whole, as indeed the collection's title (*The Self-Completing Tree*) implies. I will argue here that the key to the collection by which Livesay asked to be remembered evolves out of the conflicts and tensions of the heterosexual poems, and through the lesbian poems as they are presented here. This final vision is ultimately neither heterosexual nor lesbian, but comes closest to the vision of self-completion through androgyny anticipated by the early poem, "On Looking into Henry Moore."

The two sections in *The Self-Completing Tree* that include the most conflicted heterosexual love poems are "Rites of Passage" and "The Unquiet Bed." "Rites of Passage" deals with the individual's initiation into the state of heterosexual union, or "the search for a relationship between a man and a woman" (71). "The Unquiet Bed" section takes several poems from its title collection, and others from *Plainsongs* and *Phases of Love* (from which the subtitle, "Fire and Frost" is taken). It represents a fairly intense treatment of some of the themes

introduced in the "Rites of Passage" section, and contains the most sexually explicit poems Livesay published. These poems include a celebration of heterosexual union and Livesay states that "[b]ehind the passion there is a growing sense of the polarities that exist between a man's nature and a woman's" (113). Both sections include poems that illustrate Livesay's preoccupation with binary gender constructions and the tensions that arise from them, tensions against which the later lesbian poems seem to be writing.

### **I: Gendered Binaries**

"The Husband," written between 1948 and 1953, published in *Collected Poems*, and included in the "Rites of Passage" section, is a classic example of Livesay's preoccupation with gendered binaries. This poem uses colour imagery to illustrate the binary opposition between man's nature and woman's, manifested in the tensions between the husband and wife. The husband, characterised ironically as a "guardian angel" who is also "a forbidden man," is "banned from the garden," or denied access to the wife's sexual favours, denying the same access to others in his turn (80). Combining colour with essentialist Christian imagery, the speaker describes the circumscribed and dogmatic attitudes of the husband: "Presbyterian, he paints the earth more black / the heaven more radiant white / than my plain eyes perceive" (80). This absence of colour in the husband's world view suggests a bleak existence for the wife, while his aspiration to the blinding concatenation of colour found in heaven removes his focus from earthly love for his wife, and directs it toward an intangible, deified object. The inflexible and hyperbolic binary of the husband's values system plays off an additional binary between the joyless, monochromatic dogma of the man and the polychromatic diversity of the woman described in the second stanza: "My landscape's technicolour: paradise, / the plummetings and plumes from colour's prism" (80). Her words evoke a further binary tension between a prelapsarian existence in "paradise" and a subsequent plummet from grace, associating the woman with the fertility of gardens and innocent nakedness and the man with a dogma of original sin which entails rigid adherence to behaviour within "arbitrary gates." There appears to be little opportunity for resolution between the two polar opposites, and the woman states that her only "freedom lies within," a somewhat circumscribed and dissatisfying anticipation of the self-completion of later poems (80).

"Other" is another prime example of Livesay's attraction to binary constructions. Published in *New Poems* (1955) and also located in the "Rites of Passage" section, its title describes the alienation between man and woman that stems from their disparate desires. The poem

represents through geographical imagery the apparently irreconcilable difference between male and female conceptions of woman's nature. "Other" opens and closes with the line "Men prefer an island," bracketing the woman's characterisation of herself with the man's expectation of the woman. Section i describes the man's preference for a partner who is contained, bounded, and focused inward:

Men prefer an island  
with its beginning ended;  
undertone of waves  
trees overbended.

(89)

All movement and sound is muted where the woman's voice is a murmur or "undertone." The prospect of trees weighted or "overbended" is echoed by imagery in the next stanza of internalisation in roads "forever winding inward." Section ii, however, gives expression to the woman's experience. This section is expansive, as the woman is allotted five stanzas in which to describe herself, in contrast to the three stanzas required to exhaust the man's desires. The language in these stanzas is sweeping and exuberant, as the woman exclaims,

But I am a mainland  
O I range  
from upper country to the inner core  
from sageland brushland marshland  
to the sea's floor.

(89-90)

The emphasis here is on a multiplicity of experiences and on unlimited range of motion through time and space. The woman, associated with finite land forms and natural phenomena (islands, shells) in the first section, is here identified with a variety of more vital land forms representing a diversity of internal and external experiences. Her relationship to the landscape, and thus to herself, is intimate and described in sensual language:

Tell me a time  
I have not loved,  
• • •  
a prairie field  
where I have not furrowed my tongue.

(90)

The image of tongue as harrow connects sensuality with potential

fertility, another reminder of the woman's extensive abilities that seem to transgress the limitations desired by the man. But she goes on to stipulate her ultimate impregnability, described in terms of a barricaded space:

a place where none shall trespass  
none possess:  
a mainland mastered  
from its inaccess.

(90)

These lines echo "The Husband," where the woman's ability to ban her husband from the garden, denying him access to herself, is the source of her freedom.

Despite the speaker's articulate and vehement description of woman's nature and her ability to prevent unwelcome intrusion, the poem ends flatly with the reiterated statement, "Men prefer an island." Regardless of the woman's ability to articulate her experience, the man's desire for something else remains unchanged. The poem ends bleakly, without any apparent hope of communication between the man and woman, and without any prospect of resolving this binary characterisation. Furthermore, this poem, unlike "The Husband," moves beyond the confines of a single marriage to include all men in the binary. And while the woman is given ample space in which to voice her needs and desires, men are relegated to silence while she imposes her interpretation on them. So long as there is only one voice speaking, no dialogue between the binary opposites can occur.

"Widow," though a later poem from the year 1958-1959, is another example of one voice from a relationship speaking. It describes the effects of an amputated binary relationship which result in complete self-negation, and is therefore appropriately located in the "Rites of Passage" section. The speaker, a widowed woman, continues to experience desire after the death of her husband, but is unable to achieve satisfaction "without the seed" of a male lover (96). Her single state, rather than being celebrated as autonomy resulting in self-completion, is suffered as deprivation and results in violent imagery:

But the body is relentless, knows  
its need  
must satisfy itself without the seed  
must shake in dreams, fly up the stairs  
backwards.

• • •

This head from this body is severed.

This female body, without its counterpart, the male body, is the extreme illustration of one half of a binary left in isolation. Imbalance reigns when the female principle is bereft of the male principle, and the outcome is here characterised negatively, in terms of bodily possession and dismemberment.

"The Difference," published in *Signpost* (1932), displays Livesay's early interest in slightly more rigid verse forms (this is an unrhymed sonnet which uses the traditional division between octave and sestet to distinguish between the needs of two lovers), and immediately follows the first poem in the first section of *The Self-Completing Tree*. While it is another example of a binary construction between two ways of loving, and like "Other," indicates with its title a focus on alterity, no explicit reference to the gender of either lover is available in the poem. In the context of other poems in *Signpost*, the reader might assume that the speaker is female and the beloved is male, but this is not necessarily the case when the poem is read in "The Self-Completing Tree" section of this collection, where articulated strife between the sexes is less strident. Unlike "The Husband" and "Other," "The Difference" uses a binary construction that is not explicitly bound to essentialistic male and female characterisations. This, along with the common tree imagery, might explain why "The Difference" is located in "The Self-Completing Tree" section, rather than in "Rites of Passage" as one might expect. The speaker of the poem tells the beloved, "your way of loving is too slow for me," dependant as it is on a plodding and almost scientific observation through one full year before love is bestowed (7). In contrast, the speaker's way of loving is immediate, and is therefore capable of loving "a falling flame, a flower's brevity" (7). So while the speaker and the lover are diametrically opposed at this point in the text, the reader is free to associate the speaker and the lover with individual—and even idiosyncratic—ways of loving, without being compelled to accept the forms of gender determinism inherent in poems such as "Other."

"Bartok and the Geranium," originally published in *CV* in 1952 and included in *New Poems* (1955), is located in "The Poetry" section, a section devoted to "poems that deal with the creative experience" (191). In a 1978 interview with Alan Twigg, Livesay says that "A poem like 'Bartok and the Geraniums' might have meaning for always. It's a male/female poem, but it's also about art and nature" (135). But in the prefatory remarks to "The Unquiet Bed" section of *The Self-Completing Tree*, Livesay characterises the poem somewhat differently: "Culture versus nature is what an earlier poem, 'Bartok and the Geranium,' is all about" (113). While the male/female



binary is clearly present, underscored by a nature/culture binary, Livesay seems to want to emphasise the poem's statement about the nature of art, and obscure the gender politics at play. "Bartok and the Geranium" is one of Livesay's most frequently anthologised poems, and might well be anticipated in this selection. By planting a clear statement about the poem's meaning before a section in which the reader might *expect* to find it ("The Unquiet Bed," where Livesay states there is "a growing sense of the polarities that exist between a man's nature and a woman's" [113]), and by placing the poem in a section which emphasises its concern with nature/ culture, Livesay conspicuously guides the reading away from gendered binaries. She, in effect, cross-references the poem in this collection. This is the first strong indication that in shaping the whole selection of poems for *The Self-Completing Tree*, Livesay may be trying to underplay this consistently strong emphasis on gender binaries in her early work in order to achieve a balance with later themes of lesbian love, androgyny, and self-completion.

No other poem emphasises the disparate natures of man and woman so clearly as "Bartok and the Geranium." The first stanza identifies the geranium as female, and describes her nature as silent and passive: "She has no commentary / Accepts, extends" (213). Her figure takes on traditional manifestations of feminine costume in "furbelows" and "bustling boughs." The second stanza identifies the music as male, and describes his nature as active and ambitious, "never content with this small room." The music's aggressive desire to "speed higher and higher still / From galaxy to galaxy" throws into sharp relief the geranium's sedentary nature, confined as she is to her pot, gazing "Towards the pane." Alternately describing female and male entities, using polarised qualities of light/dark, rest/motion, silence/sound, and matter/energy, this poem represents a binary construction of the sexes that appears as dogmatic as biological determinism. These two opposites can, for the moment, "together breathe and be," but after the energetic music spends itself in an ecstasy of sound and motion, the geranium is left alone in silence and light. No enduring union or communication between the two seems possible.

## **II: Lesbian Love**

If the pain of gendered binaries was a "rite of passage" through which the younger poet needed to pass, lesbian love appeared in her late poetry like a healing balm to soothe those early wounds. Many of the poems in "At the Finish," the final section, are from Livesay's later years, and this is the section where the explicitly lesbian poetry appears, apparently offering a resolution to the binaries that pepper the centre of the text. But through alteration of the poetry's content or

context, "At the Finish" in fact echoes many of the themes introduced by the first section, "The Self-Completing Tree," providing an overarching vision of androgyny that seems to tie together both this text and much of Livesay's poetic career.

Thus "Arms And The Woman," from *Feeling the Worlds*, is the only explicitly lesbian love poem not revised or recontextualised in some way for *The Self-Completing Tree*. The title is a play on George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, itself an allusion to *The Aeneid*, and uses the multiple meanings of "arms" to contrast male and female experience. In Shaw's play and Virgil's epic, "arms" of course refer to weapons, whereas in Livesay's poem, "arms" represent the bodies of two female lovers in an embrace. The act of lesbian love is used to write against the aggressive and traditionally masculine enterprise of war: "by these crossed swords / we make a peace" (271). "Arms And The Woman" does suggest a binary construction, in implicitly characterising woman as pacifist (enacted through making love) and man as aggressor (enacted through making war), but at least the tension between opposites seems to be resolved for the speaker through her ability to create peace with an act of love. A same-sex union affords her a form of agency that understandably leads McInnis to the conclusion that "lesbian love is everything [Livesay's] persona wishes heterosexual love could be, because the energy of the physical exchange is informed not by dominance but by mutuality and clarity" (88).

But the new context (or revision) of Livesay's other lesbian poems frequently has a dramatic effect on the way in which they are read. For example, "The Merger," located directly after "Towards A Love Poem" and "Arms And The Woman" in *Feeling the Worlds*, resonates with these lesbian love poems in its original context:

When I was two people  
I sought to rival the other. . . .  
Now I am *one*  
I go hand in hand  
with myself

(SCT 110)

"The Merger"'s new location at the end of the "Rites of Passage" section of *The Self-Completing Tree*, and within the context of the explicitly heterosexual poems found there, obscures any lesbian connotations it might once have had. Where the "two people" might have referred to a heterosexual couple in a love relationship, they might now be read as the woman's division of self experienced in a heterosexual marriage. Where the "one" might have indicated an

emancipatory single-sex relationship (where the reference to hands echoes the coupling enacted by hands in what was once the previous poem, "Arms and the Woman"), it now might be read as a single woman's experience of autonomy.

"Towards A Love Poem" is an example of an explicitly lesbian love poem from *Feeling the Worlds* that was revised for inclusion in *The Self-Completing Tree*. In the second stanza of the original, the speaker addresses the beloved, "O my sister / surrogate daughter / undine," clearly indicating that the beloved is female (FTW 34). The speaker rejoices in her discovery of a female lover, who is like an

Unknown Plant  
discovered in my garden  
not to be weeded out  
but guarded protected  
(34)

Ironically, this entire stanza has been "weeded out" for the later version, resulting in a love poem that, while not explicitly heterosexual, is no longer explicitly lesbian either. The remaining lines, however, are free of the conflicted male/female principle that characterises so much of the earlier poetry. The speaker describes the beloved as an "early morning listener," suggesting levels of communication that were before impossible, and while the act of love is not described with torrid passion, the "affirming kiss" suggests a new level of internal peace for the speaker.

"The Enchanted Isle: A Dialogue," first published in 1979 in *Room of One's Own*, has apparently also been edited for this collection to remove the most explicit suggestion of lesbian content. As Thompson indicates, Livesay was clearly writing lesbian poetry before she published *Feeling the Worlds*, though some of the lesbian references from earlier years are easily missed. "The Enchanted Isle," for example, originally contained a reference to the beloved as female in the address, "affairée," in the second line (120). When the poem appeared in 1983 in *The Phases of Love*, only two of six sections were retained from the original. This version did not contain the stanzas that discussed the "affairée" or a reference to "grey hair upswept" that also suggests the lover is female. The version offered in *The Self-Completing Tree* more closely resembles the original, with only two sections cut and the stanzas originally containing references to a female lover preserved. The word "affairée" has been omitted from the final version, though, leaving only the reference to the beloved's "grey hair upswept" and the indication of their mutual maternal experience ("We've succoured our young") to suggest that this could be a lesbian

love poem.

So while McInnis's study posits the lesbian love poems of *Feeling the Worlds* as "a political statement for a whole new order" (90), the degree of arrangement and revision in *The Self-Completing Tree* suggests that lesbian love is not Livesay's final and radical solution to the conflicts visible in the heterosexual love poems. Instead, her final retrospective collection offers a vision that is part androgyny, part self-completion, through identification with organic life forms. This final vision still contains the binary constructions that caused such strife in earlier poems, but these opposing forces are now seen as coexisting and creating balance.

### III: Androgyny

"On Looking into Henry Moore," first published in *Fiddlehead* in 1956 and then in *Selected Poems*, was written just a few years after "Bartok and the Geranium" but takes a startlingly new approach to the ever-present binary constructions. "Henry Moore" is located in the first section, "The Self-Completing Tree," and seems to anticipate the artistic vision that holds the whole text together. Livesay's poem takes its title from Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," and contains the same sense of visionary experience found in that sonnet. In her interview with Twigg, Livesay names "Henry Moore" as another of her poems that will "stand the test of time" and describes it as "a poem which predicts the androgynous future" (135). Indeed, it does more than stand the test of time; this poem does seem to anticipate, if not the future of humanity, at least the future and final vision of Livesay's own work.

Henry Moore, British sculptor, is known for his many reclining nudes that combine the human form with other organic shapes, and display apertures and depressions in unusual places. Moore's work tends to contain integrally balanced yet conflicting shapes, as he notes: "The sculpture which moves me most is full blooded and self supporting, fully in the round, that is, its component forms are completely realised and work as masses in opposition" (70). Livesay explains to Twigg what she saw on looking into Moore's sculpture: "I think he was androgynous. He saw the humanity of man and woman, the complete thing, which I've been striving to express" (135). The binary oppositions in so much of Livesay's work recur in an expression of "the complete thing":

When I have found  
passivity in fire  
and fire in stone

female and male.

(27)

But where unresolved tensions dominated "The Husband," "Other," and "The Difference," this poem speaks of a future resolution of polar opposites. In "Bartok and the Geranium," male and female principles experience only transitory resolution; in "On Looking into Henry Moore," the resolution is still hypothetical, but when realised, will not be transitory. This resolution between polarities heralds a new, phoenix-like life form: "I'll rise alone / self-extending and self-known" (27).

Appropriately, the next stanza uses a tree to illustrate this phenomenon of union arising out of paradox. The speaker explains that "[t]he message of the tree is this: / aloneness is the only bliss" (27). After stipulating that self-knowledge is not the same as self-adoration, the possibility of blissful "aloneness" is demonstrated through the metaphor of the tree, once more describing polar opposites but now emphasising their union in one entity:

Rather, to extend the root  
tombwards, be at home with death  
But in the upper branches know  
a green eternity of fire and snow.

(28)

Resolution between accepting death and embracing life, between snow and fire, is described as a "green eternity." The propriety of a plant life form as metaphor for this new being is clear, given the self-perpetuating nature of most plant life. Like the phoenix, procreation or continuation ("a green eternity") is assured without the necessity of a heterosexual partner or a completing other. Although Hutchison interprets the recurring image of the tree in this collection as solely feminine, "the quintessential symbol of the beneficent feminine principle that animates the world of creation," (206) Prem Varma points out that Jung identifies the tree as having a "bisexual symbolic character" and furthermore, "the embrace of lovers is described symbolically by means of the tree symbol" (22). In direct contrast to the woman in "Widow," completion is achieved in a single androgynous entity, the self, resulting in "woman in man and man in womb" (28). The final line unites the genders in an image of fertility and perpetual rebirth.

"'Geranus' . . . Crane," a later poem published in *Feeling the Worlds* (1984) and located in "The Self-Completing Tree" section, similarly connects androgyny with rebirth. Using the symbol of a

geranium ("like no other bird / [turned plant]") named after the crane, Livesay echoes the phoenix imagery of "On Looking into Henry Moore" (25). Flower and bird are interconnected in a way that suggests another resolution of binary opposites in reciprocal metamorphosis between plant and animal. Though the geranium symbolises woman ("a wild witch girl she seems"), traditionally feminine perfumes are eschewed in favour of an earthy scent of androgyny: "its blossom scent / not sweet hysterical / but acrid herbal healing" (25). Again, Livesay's choice of plant as symbol is appropriate: if stored indoors during the winter, a geranium goes into a state of hibernation, looking "yellow dried and dead" (25). When replanted in the spring, apparently new life rises out of the old plant, like a phoenix rising out of the ashes of its immolated parent. "'Geranus' . . . Crane" seems open-ended, since rebirth and self-perpetuation allow the new being "to steal the final word" (25).

The literal final word of this collection, the final section, closely mirrors the themes of the first section, "The Self-Completing Tree." "The Sybil," the penultimate poem in the volume and apparently first published here, follows the revised lesbian love poems. Here, the speaker claims an identity that encompasses both sexes, declaring, "I am the woman / you longed to be — / and the man you challenged" (274). While the speaker claims androgynous qualities, the silent auditor seems to be a woman who is still confined to the traditional gendered binary. Her relationship to men seems fraught with conflict and she desires the speaker's androgynous qualities. But the distance between her experience and the speaker's is considerable. The allusion to the prophetic sibyl suggests the speaker, like Moore's art, represents humanity's potential for androgyny, a future that requires nothing less than "small miracles" to "shatter the facts" of current gender roles (274).

"Syzygy" is the final poem in *The Self-Completing Tree* and is apparently first published in this collection; given its position in the text, "Syzygy"'s statement about sexuality and love should be carefully examined. McInnis reads the poem as a continuation of the lesbian love poems preceding it, arguing that "the female lover is simultaneously 'Lover brother sister friend'" (89). But the characterisation of the lover as both male and female does not seem to suggest categorically that the lover is female. McInnis's assumption rests on the poem's proximity to the lesbian love poems and her own agenda in offering lesbian love as Livesay's redemptive answer to earlier poetic struggles with heterosexuality. Since the lover cannot be unequivocally identified as male or female, the speaker deliberately leaves this apparently crucial point ambiguous. In doing so, the lover's gender becomes less significant, placing priority on syzygy, the

"conjunction or opposition" of two bodies. The polarities of earlier poems are, again, not absent, but are now rendered unproblematic with the positive question, "Have I lived this long / just to be finding now / my *opposite completion*?" (275, italics from original).

In using for its title the natural phenomenon of syzygy (in which the sun and moon are either positioned on the same side of the Earth or on opposite sides of the Earth, in both cases resulting in the spring tide), the collection's final poem makes no clear statement about lesbianism or heterosexuality. Rather it echoes the hypothetical vision of androgyny suggested in "On Looking into Henry Moore," although in the case of "Syzygy," the phenomenon has already been achieved. Rather than referring to the mythological phoenix, "Syzygy" refers to the movements of celestial bodies that have been "always there." The final lines suggest the novelty, but also the reality, of this experience, once thought fantastic and only theoretical, as the speaker asks the beloved, "impel me forward / without fear" (275). And this positive vision of progressive reconciliation is clearly mirrored in the first poem of the collection, "Zambia: The Land."

"Zambia: The Land" is the poem from which *The Self-Completing Tree* takes its title. Originally published in 1964 in *The Colour of God's Face*, "Zambia" arose from Livesay's three-year sojourn in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. In its original location, this poem was part of a suite about Zambian landscape and society, later revised for publication in *The Unquiet Bed*. The suite was divided into four parts: "The Land," "The People," "The Prophetess," and "The Leader." "The Land" was then broken into three unnamed subsections, as it is here in *The Self-Completing Tree*. "The People," in contrast, was broken into three titled subsections: "Village," "Funeral," and "Wedding," documenting different aspects of Zambian life as Livesay saw it. The final two sections, "The Prophetess" and "The Leader," focus on the sometimes tumultuous religious life of the period.

On the back cover of *The Colour of God's Face*, the text announces itself as "a personal response to the land, the people, the religion and the politics of an emerging nation." Measuring the level of Livesay's personal response to Africa in these poems, Fiona Sparrow argues that "the poem in *The Colour of God's Face* which seems to speak most about herself, 'The Land,' is left out of the suite as it appears in *The Unquiet Bed*" (22). Sparrow's explanation for Livesay's omission of "The Land" when the rest of the suite is republished is an "acknowledgement of its personal references," which Livesay might have viewed as inappropriate, given the anticipated documentary genre of the new Zambia suite (26). As Rauwerda points out, Sparrow does not explain why "The Land" might be considered too personal for

documentary (121); it contains no personal pronouns, for example. Noting the striking similarity between the imagery used in "The Land" and in "The Second Language," a poem that is explicitly personal and suggestive of a romantic attachment to a Zambian man, Rauwerda argues that the overly personal nature of "The Land" may result from the poet's association of this work with her own desire for this man (120-21). Though it is difficult to make a conclusive argument either way in the matter, there is some basis for reading "The Land" as a somewhat personal poem, in contrast to the more impersonal poems in the Zambian suite. "The Taming"<sup>2</sup> is the only other Zambia poem from *The Unquiet Bed* to be included in this collection, and it, like "The Second Language," may also be viewed as a personal response to Africa, given the speaker's use of personal pronouns and the sexual content of both poems. Thus, while Livesay's revisions of the Zambia poems for *The Unquiet Bed* may indicate a desire to avoid a personal response to Africa, the selections chosen for *The Self-Completing Tree* seem to indicate the reverse. Just as the "personal" lesbian poems introduced the potential for resolution of earlier binary constructions, this response to the Zambian landscape (rather than to the people) contains elements of the same resolution between binaries.

The organic symbol continues to be the site of Livesay's resolution of polar opposites. In particular, in "Zambia: The Land," the poet again seizes on the tree as the appropriate metaphor for self-completion, as she did in "On Looking into Henry Moore." Furthermore, binary constructions are still present, but are integral to the concept of self-completion. The land is specifically characterised as female ("Implacable woman / the land reclines" [5]) and the sun may be interpreted as embodying a male principle.<sup>3</sup> Both the land and the tree experience the polar extremes of November and April, and the poem concludes by positioning the tree in fire and ashes:

you dance in fire and ashes  
over world's mouth  
dance

(6)

Once again the poet invokes an organic entity, one that contains both the "dry leaves" of November and the "fat leaves" of April, without simultaneously invoking destructive tensions between the two extremes.

Instead, "Zambia: The Land" is laden with references to fertility and reproduction, as "in a green swing upwards / the soil yields— / the land is dancing" (5). By day, the trees are "still" but by night, they



"burst out suddenly / and fructify / with ripe moon-silvered fruit" (5). When the fig tree's "fruit forms clusters / and shoots dark red fingers / at the lusty sun," the speaker (and the reader) is unable to determine if it is summer or winter. To similar effect, Livesay's revisions of the lesbian poems often result in an inability to determine if the love relationship is heterosexual or lesbian; it may be either one. Thus I argue the solution to the tensions of the poems discussed earlier in this paper is not a privileging of either a female or lesbian principle over a masculine or heterosexual principle. The resolution is located in the speaker's very unwillingness to prioritise one principle over the other. As in "On Looking into Henry Moore," paradoxes are resolved by balance in one entity, and "[t]he message of the tree is this: / aloneness is the only bliss" (27). In "Bartok and the Geranium," male and female principles found temporary union "in this room, this moment now" (213). But in "Zambia: The Land," the peace achieved is restricted neither spatially nor temporally. This peace is integral to the tree's composition: "Happy the self-completing tree / that brews, in secret, / its own seasons . . ." (6).

The result of the tree's inherent ability to complete and perpetuate itself is happiness and the celebration of joy in dance "in fire and ashes / over world's mouth / dance" (6). The last line is not punctuated, reiterating the force of the ellipsis in the penultimate stanza in leaving the poem open-ended. The joy expressed in this poem and its open ending mirrors the lack of fear in "Syzygy," and its speaker's request to "impel me forward" (275). The restrictive and negative endings of "Other" and "Widow" in the centre of the text are counteracted by the open-ended poems that bracket them, providing a balanced poetic vision.

So while a strictly chronological reading of Livesay's work that reads *The Self-Completing Tree* as mere collection and reproduction of earlier poems would naturally identify the lesbian poems of *Feeling the Worlds* as a solution to conflicts inherent in the earlier heterosexual poems, the title, arrangement, and revision involved in *The Self-Completing Tree* all suggest that Livesay's final poetic vision was somewhat different. The poems with the most hyperbolic or destructive binary constructions are located in the centre of the text, and these binaries are not effaced in any way. Further, while the lesbian love poems are located near the end of the text, suggesting a sort of progression, their lesbian content is downplayed, though also not effaced, suggesting that lesbianism does not altogether supplant heterosexuality. Neither of the two poems that bracket the collection privileges lesbian love over heterosexual love. Rather, they both insist on the juxtaposition of apparently paradoxical forces in one organic entity, creating harmony and a potential for joy unmitigated by the

strife and pain of the central poems. Ultimately, the result is Livesay's final balanced and self-completing text.

## Notes

I am grateful to Tracy Ware and Roxanne Harde for comments and advice about this paper.

1. In response to a question about revision of earlier work, Livesay said to Alan Twigg, "I think it's dreadful, sinful. Because that was the feeling at the moment and that's what made the poem. Earle Birney's done the same thing. He's revised and I think it's wicked" ("Matrona" 134). [\[back\]](#)
2. "The Taming" is an example of a poem where a gender binary seems to be reinforced by a racial binary. [\[back\]](#)
3. See Dennis Cooley's essay, "House/Sun/Earth: Livesay's Changing Selves" for a discussion of the sun as masculine principle throughout Livesay's poetry. [\[back\]](#)

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