

Di Brandt / REVISITING DOROTHY LIVESAY'S *THE HUSBAND*

Dorothy and I were drinking coffee in The Green House in the library tunnel at the University of Manitoba. It was the summer of 1991. The cafeteria was closed. We were trying to content ourselves with foul-tasting instant dispenser brew. Dorothy was passing through town on literary business, I was researching a project in the Elizabeth Dafoe Library upstairs. Coffee with Dorothy was a cultural event: she was a keen-eyed matriarch of the Canadian literary scene, full of strong opinions and news. That day she was worried about the experimental writing being done by west coast women writers such as Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland. Though she had been highly experimental all her life in her own life and work, she mistrusted the theoretical shift toward poststructuralism and deconstruction that had occurred in the mid-80s. She also tended to be harder on women's writing than on men's, perhaps in part because she cared about it more. These were writers whose work I admired, so we were immediately in disagreement.

Changing the subject, I mentioned her novella, *The Husband*, which I had recently read and liked. Still, I ventured, I have a question for you about the ending. I was convinced by everything except the part at the end where Celia, the narrator, sends away her sweet young secret lover and goes back to her unattractive depressive ageing husband. I don't understand why she did that, after feeling so creatively energized by the love affair. I expected a sharp reply, but instead Dorothy sighed. Your question confirms for me what I felt all the time, she said. The editors convinced me to change the ending, to make it less dramatic and more conventional, more conciliatory toward the husband. I didn't want to, but they thought it would sell better that way. But it hasn't really done that well, and I wonder how many other people feel as you do. (In fact the novella received mixed reviews, a number of them enthusiastic.)

I was amazed. Was this the same Dorothy whose feisty poems took

on the whole world, unflinchingly facing down factory owners and literary critics and motorcycle gangs, and single-handedly rewriting the code of what's permissible to say about women's sexuality in Canadian print? Of course I didn't know then the history of the novella, how it had taken years to find a publisher for it. Indeed, I had little sense then of the kind of stamina it had taken for her to create her astounding *oeuvre* altogether, going so persistently and courageously against the grain of the acceptable mainstream with the slimmest of institutional support throughout her long, prestigious career.

The Husband was written during Livesay's writer-in-residency at the University of New Brunswick in 1967, the year she won the Governor General's Award for Poetry for *The Unquiet Bed*. Several versions of the manuscript were collected among her papers at the University of Manitoba Libraries' Department of Archives and Special Collections along with a wealth of other unpublished works (as catalogued in *The Papers of Dorothy Livesay: A Research Tool*, 1986). Several publishers have since recognized the merit of many of these works and brought forth new publications, including, most importantly, *Archive for our Times: Previously Uncollected and Unpublished Poems of Dorothy Livesay*, edited by Dean Irvine (Arsenal Pulp Press 1998), and *The Husband* (Ragweed 1990).

Why did she leave so much high quality writing unpublished? Livesay may have felt *The Husband* was too experimental in both style and subject matter to be acceptable to a Canadian audience at the time of its writing. There is evidence that the manuscript was submitted to Ryerson Press in 1967 and rejected (*Papers* 179), which is surprising given the success of *The Unquiet Bed* published by Ryerson that same year. As with much of her unpublished work, one has the sense that she spent much more time and energy writing, than organizing submissions to editors. Livesay's prefatory "Author's Notes" in the book refers delicately to the twenty-three year hiatus between the writing of the manuscript and its publication, alluding to the distance she often must have felt between the cosmopolitan outlook of her writing and the guarded Canadian milieu: "this [a forty-five-year-old woman's marriage of estrangement to one of reconciliation, through the medium of an intense love affair with a

younger man] had been an acceptable theme in European literature, especially in France, but I believe that in the sixties and seventies it had not yet been explored in Canada. Happily, by 1990, my contribution will have seen the light of day."

The novella is epistolary in structure, consisting of a series of letters written by Celia, a middle-aged housewife and sometime artist, married to an ageing and retired husband named Hugo, who has recently suffered a debilitating stroke and is recovering slowly and without grace. The couple has come from Toronto to Fredericton for a few months in order to be close to Hugo's brother and sister-in-law, George and Lily, and the university community they are part of, and presumably, to reconnect with the landscape of Hugo's childhood during his convalescence. ("You have to hand it to an author who can reveal the plot in her foreword and still have you tap-dancing through a book to see how it turns out," comments Christina Montgomery in her review for *The Vancouver Sun*).

Celia's letters are addressed to various people close to her, her stepson David (Hugo's son from a previous marriage), her sister Maudie, her former art teacher Max, whom she likes to call "cher Maître." There are also occasional "Notations," private observations sent to no one. The novella documents a fall and winter in the life of Celia and Hugo, during which, feeling displaced in the provincial Maritime town and desperate for spiritual companionship while nursing her morose invalid husband, Celia falls into an emotionally satisfying romantic liaison with a young English boarder named John. After several months of erotic and intellectual companionship between them, Hugo suffers a bad fall, looking for his wife in the night (in fact she was upstairs in her bed, alone, but had left a light on by accident in the living room downstairs), and ends up in the hospital with a broken leg.

At this point, stunned by the accident, Celia realizes her first loyalty and duty is to her husband, despite convincing evasions of this point to both John and Maudie previously. "I see more clearly now that my loyalty is to Hugo," she confides to Maudie, "because he needs me the most. It is mainly because of me that he has kept going, kept from wishing himself dead . . . there's no way 'round it, is there? You cannot put your own desires first." She firmly and

abruptly dismisses John, for his own sake, as she puts it, not hers: "You must be free to find your own mate, your own age" — a statement we must surely hear as fraught with ironies, at best, given the highly problematic discrepancy of ages in her own marriage.

The novella ends with a hasty — this is where I find it most unconvincing and unsatisfying — brief gesture of reconciliation between Celia and Hugo. We are asked to believe that the fall has somehow improved this depressed man's spirits, that having to nurse a broken leg as well as paralyzed one is (mysteriously) uplifting! "Hugo seems much more philosophical — almost his normal, pre-stroke self." Celia, for her part, is suddenly, inexplicably, willing to abandon her own interests, in order to devote herself to "cleaning, cooking, reading to Hugo; or listening to radio or TV, with him." This after nearly a hundred pages of high tension over the lack of enough room to pursue her own desires sexually and artistically in this marriage. Even her plans for painting are, as she tells Maudie, "in blackout," and she hardly has time to write letters now. We might read this outcome as desperate or tragic (as indeed Barbara Gowdy does in her perceptive review for *The Globe*, calling the home Celia must return to a "prison"), except that the final letters are liberally sprinkled with words like "happiness" and "joy," and the novella ends on what is surely meant to be a symbolic, hopeful note: "Hugo had got the fire going."

I am interested in this novella from a readerly point of view, despite its failed ending — with its strangely Calvinist belief in the notion of happy catastrophe and sudden guilty retreat from its own premise, namely, the importance of women's desire — for many reasons. Generically, it is a delicate experiment in telling a complex story through simple but intensely poetic language that somehow belies its slim length: it is a novel written by a poet. The epistolary structure, always difficult to manage plotwise, here becomes the occasion for a series of opinion pieces by Celia which are part essay, part exclamation. Yet in their profoundly dialogic nature, they achieve the kind of intersubjective communal sensibility we associate with oral and dramatic works. The narrative moves along quickly without a lot of external events happening, driven by Celia's intense inner experiences. It is preceded, unusually, by a list of "The Cast,"

in which only Celia is designated by profession: "The Artist." The rest of the characters (in an interesting reversal of social conventions *vis a vis* gender) are named only by their social relation to her: "Her Elder Sister," "Her Husband," "Her Boarder." (And indeed we never do find out what Hugo's profession was before he retired.) In other words, it is a profoundly cross-generic, hybrid, and slyly experimental text that offers illuminating insights into the limits and possibilities of both genre and gender.

The character of Celia is startling to readers accustomed to Livesay's ebullient assured poetic and public voice. Livesay has taken care here to underline the constraints of women who are conventionally married and find themselves in restrictive social situations. Celia is more keenly aware of these constraints than some wives might be, having had a tumultuous relationship with a young "wild" lover, Michael, in her youth. She has also grown up, as she recalls to Maudie, "rootless" and "bohemian," in strong contrast to the genteel landed folks she finds herself surrounded by in Fredericton. It is fascinating (and wrenching) to see the spiritual contortions Celia undergoes trying to play the patient dutiful wife to the morose depressive Hugo, while desperately, one might argue heroically, trying to keep her own adventurous passionate artistic spirit alive.

It is tempting, of course, to speculate about the autobiographical nature of *The Husband*. The "First Draft" manuscript is unapologetically listed under "Autobiographical Fiction" in the Archives catalogue. Pamela Banting confidently asserts in the accompanying archival note that the novella "derives from Livesay's love relationship with a younger man during the 1960s" (*Papers* 173-181). As far as I can see this claim is made without evidence, and contradicts the highly stylized nature of the work. Yet surely we must hear in Celia's intense frustrations, her repeated self-questioning and frequent apologies, particularly to her sister Maudie, a version of the kind of frustration Livesay herself must have felt, and has expressed in her memoirs, living for years in an emotionally unsatisfying marriage, and prevented for many years from earning her own living due to arcane marriage laws. On the other hand, Celia's character is much less self-assured than the Dorothy Livesay

we are accustomed to encountering in her essays and poems.

Kristjana Gunnars, in an archival note on Livesay's bibliographical clippings, observes that almost all newspaper profiles on her work described her "as either someone's daughter, someone's wife, a housewife, and later as someone's mother and grandmother. Seldom is the writer spoken of as a writer only." Dorothy Livesay, comments Gunnars, "has always faced some form of conflict between her self-image and her strongly held convictions. Her press and journal coverage goes a long way in explaining this conflict" (*Papers* 22). Celia's highly conflicted self-identification as dutiful wife, on the one hand, and expressive artist, on the other, can in this sense be read as a version of Livesay's own long-time struggle to be both a woman and a free spirit in Canada in a time when these categories were considered to be mutually exclusive.

As to the motif of the rejuvenating love affair, I am interested to see, a decade after the publication of the novella, how many women around me are acting out variations on this theme, having secret affairs to renew themselves in unsatisfactory marriages, then going back to their husbands; juggling the personal satisfactions of long-term secret affairs with the public obligations and privileges of marriage, with varying degrees of comfort; or finding the secret affair to be a perhaps unconsciously intentional dramatic action that propels them outside of marriage.

Perhaps, as Celia observes to John, the French and the Italians are "much more reasonable about these matters" than Canadians, accepting triangles as a normal part of the marriage arrangement. Certainly the notoriety around the Clinton-Lewinsky affair these past two years suggests that North Americans in general are not comfortable with a narrative involving adultery (even in the much more conventional configuration of older married man and single young woman), however many people are actually indulging in versions of marital unfaithfulness secretly. Here, as so often in her career, Livesay seems to be in the vanguard of arguing for women's independence and freedom, both professionally and erotically — though not without a sense of accompanying social responsibility, caring for those one has committed to caring for, not taking advantage of the young, and so on. The novella does not end with

death for the heroine, as it would have a hundred years ago (even in France), but with a restoration of domestic peace and harmony.

The Husband holds many additional delights. The cosmopolitan, literate Celia indulges in keen observations about the social niceties of New Brunswick society, steeped, as she experiences it, in provincialism. One of the novella's prominent themes (one might argue its major theme) is a multifaceted discussion about aesthetics. There is the lively ongoing conversation with John, the young lover, about the relative merits of objectivism and expressionism. He, as the "poet," is a mouthpiece for a modernist imagism; his collection of poems is called *Still Lives: a precise delineation of the object seen*, a poetics to which Celia, painter and narrator, adds Livesavian socialist consciousness and passion: "I fear, the artists in this area," she writes to Max, "although experimental and original, have not come to terms with such subject matter. Could it be that emotion is lacking? The feel for the please [*sic*] of work, that you'd find in Russia or China?" Elsewhere she engages in issues of gender and technology and spiritual transformation in art. Livesay's deep connection with nature, similarly, what we might now call her ecopoetic concern, finds eloquent expression in Celia's lyrical description of the rural landscape around Fredericton.

What was the unconventional and less conciliatory original ending of the novella? How much would it change our reading of this innovative text? This question took me eventually to the University of Manitoba Archives, where I was astonished by several things. First, by how little the manuscript was changed from the "First Draft," except for the ending. This made identification of the editors' interventions a relatively easy task. More astonishing by far was the discovery of how radical these interventions were, not in terms of number of pages, which are relatively few, but in terms of altering the text's meaning. The publishers/editors at Ragweed at this time were Laurie Brinklow and Louise Fleming. When I asked Ms. Fleming by telephone whose idea the revisions were, she said "It was a collective decision." To what extent the editors were influenced by Desmond Pacey's earlier critical comments on the manuscript, expressing what were evidently similar views, is something I can only guess at. (It was Pacey, then Vice-President at

UNB, who facilitated her writer-in-residency there in 1967; Livesay presumably requested his commentary on the manuscript at that time. It appears among Livesay's papers in an undated four page note (*Papers* 82)).

The original ending is so dramatically different from the published one that I am tempted to make you, dear reader, guess at it. However, since its revelation is after all my main point, I shall have to forego the suspense — in a moment. In fact, there are two versions both marked "First Draft." I assume the tidier of them is in fact a second draft, and have identified them here as First Draft A and First Draft B, respectively. There is also an unmarked file of incomplete and disordered draft pages, presumably an earlier version in progress. In the comments following, I have chosen to work from First Draft A, which in almost all respects is identical to B in terms of content.

In First Draft A, then, Celia and Hugo carry on extensive conversations during their reconciliation after Hugo's accident, both in the hospital and later after he comes home, which establish several key points. First, they read together and discuss a passage written by "Colette's husband" (presumably a chapter from Colette's third husband Maurice Goudekot's memoir, *Close to Colette*), which addresses the question of disparity in ages between marriage partners, among other things. This has been Hugo's suggestion. Afterwards, he comments on the husband's devotion to Colette's writing career and haltingly apologizes to Celia for not offering her more similar support in her artistic endeavours: "I've been thinking . . . if you had had more of a break . . . from the demands of the family — my family, that you took on?" [typos corrected from the original].

His question brings tears to Celia's eyes. "He had never before admitted anything like that," she observes; "Why Hugo," she responds, "I didn't think you cared . . ." "I care," he replies, stroking her hair. It is the first sign of renewed tenderness between them, though we have been prepared for this moment by the image of Hugo's eyes lighting up whenever Celia comes into the room in the hospital several pages earlier.

Celia is more deeply implicated in Hugo's fall in First Draft A

than in the book. There are two differing accounts of what happened. In the first, described in a letter addressed "To David," Celia hears, from her bed, her husband getting up in the night and starting down the hall (they sleep in separate rooms). Following him to the stairs she sees that he doesn't have his cane, and cries out "Hugo!" whereupon he slips and falls halfway downstairs to the bottom. In the second account, addressed "To Maudie," she is woken by the crash of Hugo falling and rushes to the stairs.

I assume Livesay intended the second account to be a glossed over version of what really happened, since Celia is clearly on the defensive in this letter to the sister, who is after all privy to her affair. (It is, however, the first and only time we perceive the narrator as unreliable, which introduces some ambiguity in terms of authorial intention.) In both accounts Celia feels a certain guilt for Hugo's accidental injury, which is absent in the book, and this guilt precipitates her return to him — though it doesn't stop her from experiencing heightened passion for John and enjoying several more erotic encounters with him.

In fact, the separation from John is presented as a much more passionate and wrenching event for Celia in the manuscript than in the book. Compare the rather cold-hearted goodbye note to John in the published version: "Please! It is finished, John. Not only for my peace of mind, not only for Hugo's need — but because of you, also. There is no future for you, with me . . . In time you will see reason" (77), with this emotional declaration from First Draft A:

To John:

Now it is hitting me hard! I am in chains — more so than ever before. I cannot get out at all. I cannot see you.

Thank you for phoning. At that hour, it is safe. He hears nothing.

O my dear. Every meeting with your voice, even, arouses me again. It seems unbelievable that I cannot touch you, also. So I begin to see that the situation is impossible. I want you too much. (77)

There is a light-hearted moment in the hospital in First Draft A, where Celia surprises Hugo “sitting up, not in — but beside the bed!” There are chrysanthemums on the table, the radio is playing, Hugo is smiling. Celia expresses her delight, only to hear a voice behind her saying, “It was not such a difficult job, after all.” The voice, it turns out, belongs to “a very young, trim nurse, with straight short reddish hair under her cap.” As she and Hugo teach each other, Celia feels a kind of twinge, “to think it was not I who could give him back his *élan*, but a young girl.” So there is a hint at re-establishing a dynamic of equality in their relationship here; this episode is followed by tender gestures between Celia and Hugo, evidence of their love for each other returning.

There are several other changes from manuscript to book, such as the regrettable deletion of a particularly playful, erotically charged, slightly naughty conversation between Celia and John, which I cannot resist quoting in its entirety here, given its spirited levity, so necessary to a text shot through with many kinds of grief:

- Why do you lie there just shaking with laughter?
- Because you're so ridiculous.
- I'm not ridiculous.
- Not, 'a subject for ridicule,' but *ridere*, to laugh. You're a laugh, my dicky.
- Tweet! . . . If I'm dicky, you're batty.
- The eminent Mr. Batty.
- Because you're batty to take up with dicky.
- Take care, or I'll beat you up — with my bat.
- No. But seriously, John!
- Yes?
- Are you paying attention?
- I am all ears — see!
- Well then: why do you love me?
- Because you are so ridiculous.
- And I love you for the opposite reason!
- What's that?
- You're so serious?
- Am I really?

- Yes . . . And gentle.
 - M-m-m. Doesn't sound very masculine.
 - But you are a man, as well. You take control. And that's really why I love you!
 - I wouldn't be surprised . . . No one has ever found out before, how to handle you . . . Is that it?
 - I guess so.
 - You little shrew, you.
 - My parents didn't believe in corporal punishment!
 - Well, I don't hold with those new-fangled, modern methods — Come here, you! Now I will beat you up. I will!
- (First Draft A 68)

There is also the revision of several letter headings from "Unsent Letter" or "Notations. Unsent Letter" to simply "Notations." This was one of Pacey's ideas: "I find the device of an unsent letter rather bothersome," he noted in his commentary on the manuscript. "Would a better way be to intersperse journal or diary entries with the letters? A woman might put into a diary what she would not put into letter" (3). Yet several reviewers of the book commented on the breakdown of the epistolary structure in the Notations. Personally, I find the notion of the unsent letter much more poignant in the context of Celia's consistent efforts at communication and their frequent frustration. I also disagree with another comment of Pacey's, which Livesay and her editors happily did not take up: "could anyone report dialogue in such detail!" Pacey clearly has not spent a lot of time with women whose oral memory for conversation is often astounding — my own mother could quote lengthy conversations with considerable accuracy even forty and fifty years later. And what about the vivid sense of memory that is after all the basis for all autobiographies and memoirs? (Happily, not all of Pacey's other suggestions have been taken. He takes exception, for example, to Livesay's critique of Maritime educational practices: "You begin," he complains, "from a prejudice (how acquired?) that NB is old-fashioned and behind the times" and goes on to boast, "I was the first matriculation examiner in Canada to break away from

the old formal grammar questions" (3). Nevertheless, Livesay's scathing description of Maritime public schools as rigid and stifling, and even the university as a place where "young people are walking about in chains . . . longing to shake them off" appears unchanged in the book (51) — raising the question of what kind of influence he actually had with Livesay or the publishers).

By far the most dramatic difference between the original manuscript and the book involves the surprise outcome of the affair with John. Shortly after Hugo returns from the hospital, he and Celia have a long heartfelt conversation in which Hugo reveals himself to be both sensitive and articulate. It becomes clear that he knew about the affair, and he gently offers her her freedom, if it is what she wants. Celia, touched, breaks into sobs and then delivers this bombshell: she's pregnant! (There is a short episode earlier in the manuscript, also edited from the book, where Celia and John briefly discuss birth control; she expresses the opinion that at her time of life, age 45, when she's begun skipping the occasional period, she probably doesn't need it anymore.) Hugo responds, surprisingly, with a deep sigh. "That's what I should have given you, Celia." Since no one else knows who the child's father is, though we suspect that Maudie at least will surmise it, they decide to keep the child and settle into their greatly altered and profoundly renewed relationship.

Desmond Pacey, in his critical notes on the manuscript (according to pagination he is reading First Draft B), questions this highly dramatic outcome to the novella: "Is it a good idea to have her get pregnant? I can't see that it adds anything, and it risks a soap opera touch." As a woman, frankly, I can't help chuckling at this remark: it seems this outcome adds rather too much than not enough for Pacey's comfort — both a baby, and a large generous apologetic gesture from Hugo! After all the risk of pregnancy is a central element of women's sexuality, and unintentional pregnancies are common. As for Celia's dramatic lack of precautions throughout this whole episode, both in terms of birth control and protecting her marriage, any woman who's been through the extended and unpredictable hormonal ups and downs of the perimenopausal will find both the sudden desire for an illicit lover

and increased risk of pregnancy during the body's last gasp of fertility and suddenly arrhythmic cycle easily credible (!) In this way, the novella's major motif might be said to be a meditation on women's experience of menopause, with Celia continuously bemoaning her age and loss of stereotypic youthful beauty, and John continuously contradicting her with hefty compliments, the largest being the gift of their mutually conceived child. How many menopausal Canadian fictions are there? Hardly any. In this deafening silence, Livesay, with typical panache, plunges ahead with exuberance and wild abandon. Think of Morag Gunn's discreet sobriety and dark lack of a sense of the future at age 47 in *The Diviners*, by comparison. (One of my young male students once remarked: "What is Morag Gunn's problem? She's kinky. She's 47 years old and still wanting sex." This was blatant ageism, of course, but it is possible that no one ever told him . . .)

Whether or not the narrative outcome of the First Draft is soap opera-ish (and aren't pregnancies, especially surprise ones, melodramatic by definition; and isn't menopause itself, for those who've been there, one long melodrama?) Livesay's outcome explains everything that's missing in the book: how Celia could bear to return to her husband; how the affair literally renewed her relationship with Hugo by providing her with a child, and him with the possibility of making amends for his former self-centeredness, and preoccupation with things other than his wife; how each of them gives up something huge and important for the sake of their renewed relationship, she her lover, he the role of father and patriarch; how their separate and shared pain and generosity toward each other in this vulnerable, truthful moment actually brings about the desired transformation in their relationship. If readers wonder how Hugo could bear to accept the parenting of another man's child, it is after all not very different from what Celia has been doing for many years, parenting his sons from another marriage.

It is so strikingly different an ending that I am moved to ask why, besides being possibly influenced by Pacey, an authority figure, the editors/publishers would have chosen to alter it in the way they did. Was it for commercial reasons, as Dorothy implied in her conversation with me? Was it because they lacked courage and chose

a less challenging (though also much less satisfying) outcome? Was it because, as usual, Dorothy's emotional range and vision far exceeded the acceptable norm? Whatever the editors' personal investment in the narrative was, it seems clear that the revised ending contradicts the whole imaginative thrust of the novella. Returning home to cook and clean and read to the husband, with her romantic secret untold and putting her own interests aside, may be an improved fate for Celia over the Victorian spectacle of lost drowned poisoned suicidal adulterous women, but it does smack, as Barbara Gowdy suggests, of "prison." Surely, the original ending is not only much more convincing but also much more consonant with the whole project of liberating women's sexual and creative desire, which includes, in Livesay's view, both the desire for emotional affiliation and family and, profoundly, self-expressions, that informs so much of this extraordinary poet's work. I challenge the publishers to re-issue the novella with its original ending (and naughty bits!) intact.

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