

From Transnational Politics to National Modernist Poetics

Spanish Civil War Poetry in *New Frontier*

Every so often particular events in world history reverberate through far-flung cultural formations, political organisations, and popular imaginaries. Although such large-scale events are perhaps becoming increasingly frequent, accessible, and fleeting in an era of rapid space-time compression and capitalist globalization, these events make their way into global consciousness in ways that so-called everyday life cannot. Assessing the impact of such an event or moment, as it causes unique reactions in multiple spheres, rests in part on our ability to take stock of not only the immediate circumstances surrounding the event but also the ways in which the dynamism of the moment gets harnessed and redirected. The Spanish Civil War (1936–39) was such an event and moment in world history. By providing a case study of poems written by Canadians about the Spanish Civil War, I show how the poetic fight against fascism departed from mere commentary on the events in Spain to become a catalyst for a metapoetic expression of modernism in Canada. While this is a study of the poetry about this war in a single magazine, it is also a project that aims to get a glimpse of the role it played in shaping the larger Canadian poetic imaginary. Further, this study aims to show how the poetic incorporation of a transnational event into a literary problematic can lead to palpable changes in the field of Canadian literature.

The poetic fight against fascism in *New Frontier*, an English-language periodical published in Toronto from April 1936 to October 1937, was taken up in ten poems by contributors A.M. Stephen, Margaret Day, Leo Kennedy, Dorothy Livesay, and Kenneth Leslie. Building on the scholarship of Nicola Vulpe, James Doyle, Candida Rifkind, and Dean Irvine, I argue that these ten

poems contribute to theorizations of a path for Canadian poetics through the use of metacommentary on poetic production and that they accomplish three different things. First, the poems written by Stephen and Day each critique and recalibrate what they take as traditional poetic practice. While Day evokes British Romanticism in particular, Stephen takes aim at the mythologized construction of Spain in the larger poetic imaginary. Second, the poems of Livesay and Kennedy, read alongside their essays in *New Frontier* on the role of the poet in Canada, are aligned with the evocation of a markedly modernist poetics. Reading Kennedy's poetry in relation to his manifesto "Direction for Canadian Poets" (June 1936) and Livesay's alongside her article "Poet's Progress" (June 1937) invites consideration of the ways in which they were setting a distinctly modernist path for Canadian poetry that not only engages in the political arena but also attempts to realign the poetic arena as political. Finally, Kenneth Leslie's "The Censored Editor" reconsiders the traditional role of truth and beauty in poetry while at the same time enacting a modernist parable. The poem is concerned with loyalty and solidarity, to be sure, but the poem also does the work of conflating literary and editorial production as a mode of engagement with both beauty and politics. Although the Spanish Civil War poems in *New Frontier* approach the topic differently, they all work out a version of a modernist metapoetics in Canada.

While my argument focuses on the poetry about the Spanish Civil War in *New Frontier*, it is important to acknowledge the other ways that the antifascist cause saturated the pages of the magazine. Starting in September 1936, not an issue was published that did not give some sort of comment on the war. The material on Spain came in the form of editorials, short stories, reportage, translations of Spanish literature, letters from Spain, interviews, book reviews, illustrations, as well as poetry. Although the editorial, cultural, and political history of the magazine is complex, the generic and political scope of the material exhibits a popular-front character. The Popular Front emerged in the late 1930s as a broad leftist coalition of political organizations across party lines and political philosophies in opposition to fascist and far-right groups. Writers and politicians saw tactical advantages in coalition building; the conflict in Spain became one of the key rallying points of popular-front politics in the late 1930s.

As part of the transnational politics of the Popular Front, a formation of cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies arose to become what Michael Denning calls the cultural front, which "referred both to the cultural industries and apparatuses—a 'front' or terrain of cultural struggle—and to the

alliance of radical artists and intellectuals who made up the ‘cultural’ part of the Popular Front” (xix). Denning uses this model to explain how common tropes and forms emerged. To account for these unique characteristics Cary Nelson, in *Revolutionary Memory*, offers the model of a “poetry chorus” for conceptualizing leftist poetry in general. He suggests that for literature of the left, “the historical conditions of both production and reception are sometimes fundamentally interactive, reactive, and responsive. A poet who seeks in part to be an instrument in a larger musical composition is not pursuing the same aesthetic as one who thinks only of a solo performance” (7). Canadian poets who published in *New Frontier* diverged from individualist production in their attempts to use poetry as weapon against fascism and complacency. Giving a critical reading of the poetry about the Spanish Civil War in *New Frontier* does not stand in for a comprehensive critical history of the journal as a whole, but it does allow for a reading that gives insight into the tenor of *New Frontier’s* larger literary and cultural politics while also highlighting a moment when transnational politics occasioned a deep reconsideration of Canadian poetics.

Vancouver-based politician, poet and novelist A.M. Stephen’s¹ elegiac poem “Madrid” was published in *New Frontier* in May 1937. “Madrid” communicates a pointed political critique as well as an aesthetic reflexivity that work simultaneously in the poem. The poem addresses the real threat of the “creeping Fascist horde” (19) while simultaneously providing metacommentary on artistic production to engage with the way that Spain had until then been constructed in poetic discourse. In other words, Stephen provides, in the body of his own poem, a critique of an unreflective mythologization of Spain. The poem is, in one sense, a conventional elegy. Formally speaking, it consists of nine quatrains in iambic tetrameter with rhyming second and fourth lines. In another sense, the poem is highly critical of its own form while, at the same time, it makes further developments on the elegiac innovations of earlier war poetry, particularly the poetry of the Great War. Within Stephen’s poem is an implicit critique of exotic constructions of Spain in favour of a socialist second coming. The treatment of Spain in Stephen’s poem shifts in both temporality and in the figuration of the public spaces of Madrid. The poem shifts from four stanzas of an inclusive self-admitted mythologizing of “last night”—“Our Spain, a castle of delight, / We built of visions wrought in air” (9–10)—to five stanzas of earnest physical action in the present moment, where “Comrades in life and death are those / Who, on highroads of romance, / Have left the fragrance of a rose”

(22–24). Stephen suggests that the typified romanticization of Spain in the poem's characterization of the poetic performances of "last night" denies the capacity for solidarity both in politics and poetry. For Stephen, a poetics of solidarity—poetry of the Popular Front—is one that envisions a socialist future opposed to metaphysical meditation on abstract beauty. By providing this metacommentary, Stephen exposes an ideal inasmuch as he envisions a poetics beyond his own poem.

Notably, "Madrid" is an elegy, not for Madrid and "her" people but for the "armies of the workers' dead" (29) who are yet defending Madrid. The scene of Madrid is not overtaken by "Red Death" (18) and the "Fascist horde" (19) as Candida Rifkind suggests ("Labours" 196); rather, the fascists are, in the poem's constructed present moment, as yet only crouching "at her gate" (20). While the poet mourns for those comrades who even in death "Acclaim the Cause that will not die" (36), the anticipation of victory is achieved through the evocation and misappropriation of the famous Spanish Civil War slogan "¡No Pasarán!" or "They Shall Not Pass!" rendered by Stephen as "They shall not fail!" (29). The victory is also evoked through the evocation of a Christian second coming that is morphed into a socialist second coming, with the crucifixion of "those hands that were so brave" (34) upon a swastika, leading to a triumphant emergence of the "flower of liberty" (35) from "the martyr's grave" (36). This final victory rests in the evocation of a social ideal, in this case rebirth, to represent a supposedly tangible and attainable socialist future.

Margaret Day,² who would become a founding member of Montreal's *Preview* group, published a poetic parody in *New Frontier*, "Ode to Spring, 1937," which evokes and recalibrates a tradition of British Romanticism. Day's poem employs a dark, gothic tone that works against her seemingly bucolic title. The main body of the poem explicitly alludes to Blake's "To Spring," "The Tyger," and, by implication, to the introductory poems of *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. In the second stanza of "To Spring" Blake writes, "The hills tell each other, and the list'ning / Vallies hear" (5–6), to which Day responds, "The hills still tell each other / But the listening valleys fear" (11–12). That the hills "still" communicate at once suggests continuity in the project of Romantic poetry and calls for recognition that the mere hailing of "thou with dewy locks" does not guarantee adherence to the precepts of the deity who "lookest down / Thro' the clear windows of the morning" (Blake 1, 1–2). On the contrary, "all our longing eyes" are no longer "turned / Up to thy bright pavillions" (Blake 6–7). Instead, Day accuses the "You" who has "Fled from in vain / God's forehead on the windowpane" (9–10). The

accusatory “you” is likely intended to address multiple targets here, directed at the Catholic clergy who supported Franco and worshipped the unholy trinity of the poem’s first line (“Jackal, cormorant and kite” [1]), and at poets who have retreated from the radical traditions of Blake and other Romantic poets. In drawing her Romantic parody to a close, the end of Day’s poem echoes the final lines of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” where he pleads, “Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (68–70). Day’s employment of overwrought diction followed by the morose final lines—“While horror whistles down in Spain / Who can announce Canadian spring?” (15–16)—provides a parodic critique of Canadian writers whose inheritance from the Romantic poets is entirely concerned with the coming of spring and utterly disengaged with, if not unaware of, their revolutionary politics. To suggest, as Nicola Vulpe does, that Day’s “concern is firstly, if not overtly political, humanitarian, and only secondarily aesthetic” is to deny not only the poem’s provenance but also the inseparability, in the work of the popular-front poet, of aesthetic and political projects (42).

Both Stephen’s and Day’s poems have strengths and limitations in their modes of critique which enact, albeit with the aim of displacement, nostalgic poetic forms. Nonetheless, by deriding conventional Canadian post-Confederation poetry in Stephen’s case and calling on the revolutionary traditions of Romantic poets in Day’s case, both poets are able to reposition idealized beauty in the realm of the socio-political discourse of the transnational Popular Front.

Dorothy Livesay and Leo Kennedy were the most prominent writers of Spanish Civil War poetry in *New Frontier* and they are the best known of the five poets who wrote and published on the Spanish conflict in the magazine.³ Kennedy published three poems about the war in the magazine and Livesay four. Aside from being editors of the magazine, they were also essayists who published, also in *New Frontier*, short pieces on the role of the poet. Reading Kennedy’s poetry in relation to his notoriously programmatic manifesto published in the June 1936 issue entitled “Direction for Canadian Poets” and Livesay’s poetry alongside her article “Poet’s Progress,” published in the June 1937 issue, invites consideration of the relationship between what they envisioned as the functions of poetry and of poets in the political arena and their own poetic practice. While the antifascist cause embodied by the defence of the Spanish government provided Livesay and Kennedy with a vast amount of motivation for poetic

production, their participation in that cause was coterminous with a rethinking of a path for Canadian poetry.

That Kennedy took such a hard line on the production of poetry in Canada and then published two Spanish Civil War poems under a pseudonym (“You, Spanish Comrade” and “Memorial to the Defenders”) exposes, for his work, an exception made possible by the Spanish Civil War. While the localized, yet generalized, fight against fascism enabled Livesay to find voice through the production of socialist pastoral poetry, Kennedy was less able to adapt a transnational mode that fit his distinctly Canadian poetic program. By comparing the two pseudonymous poems with “Calling Eagles,” the lone poem bearing Kennedy’s name, we may begin to see a desired albeit questionable adherence to the program proffered in “Direction for Canadian Poets.”

Published just before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, “Direction for Canadian Poets” assesses the general state of poetic production in Canada. Divided into five sections, the literary manifesto begins by stating, “English speaking Canadian poets have never been seriously accepted as interpreters of Canadian *life*. Perhaps that is because they have been content to function as interpreters of Canadian landscape” (21). Kennedy calls for poets to locate their poetry in its social place and states his thesis clearly: “[t]he function of poetry is to interpret the contemporary scene faithfully: *to interpret especially the progressive forces in modern life which alone stand for cultural survival*” (21, original italics). This introductory section focuses on setting his terms broadly. The second section approaches Canadian poetry of the past, lamenting that Canadian poetry has not had figures like Whitman or Poe, just the poetry of “well-meaning if limited individuals [who] suffered from open-road infantilism” such as Carman, Lampman, Scott, and Wilfred Campbell, and to which “several generations of Roberts bears glum witness” (21). The third section deals with the Canadian Authors’ Association’s *Canadian Poetry Magazine* (edited by E.J. Pratt) and their *Poetry Year Books*. The fourth section turns to contemporary poetry, while the final section again reiterates the opening call:

We need poetry that reflects the lives of our people, working, loving, fighting, groping for clarity. We need satire,—fierce, scorching, aimed at the abuses which are destroying our culture and which threaten life itself. Our poets have lacked direction for their talents and energies in the past—I suggest that today it lies right before them. (24)

Kennedy’s call for a new national poetry and poetics would likely have taken a slightly different tenor had it been written after the fighting started in Spain as he would have witnessed an increased production of poetry

close to the kind he advocates albeit less focused on “the lives of our people” (24). Nonetheless, a re-reading of the essay offers the opportunity to trace his adherence to his own programmatic direction for Canadian literature through his writing about the Spanish Civil War.

Both Vulpe and Rifkind suggest that “Calling Eagles,” a modernist poem that employs free verse, breaking with standardized rhymes and metres, is addressed to other writers.⁴ Rifkind proposes that Kennedy’s deployment of difficult poetic strategies in favour of the simpler forms that “characterize the majority of Popular Front verse about the Spanish Civil War” is due to this intended audience (*Comrades* 94). Most of the Spanish Civil War poems in *New Frontier* address other poets, if not directly then implicitly. What makes “Calling Eagles” unique is that it exemplifies its own argument. Among other things, the speaker enunciates historical subject matter while making his call to other poets:

Come where Spain strangles in blood, Ethiopia
Groans at the ironcast heel, Vienna
Numbers the dead, remembers Weissel and Wallisch;
Scream for Brazilian dungeons where Prestes rots
And fascist madmen rattle gaoler’s keys[.] (11–15)

Not only is the speaker asking poets to join him and scream about injustice, he is asking them to do so in chorus, along with the “multitudes” (18). Kennedy positions the speaker on the ground calling upward and in doing so figuratively grounds Spain as a place from which a Canadian poet can perform. It is here that we begin to see the explicit association between “Calling Eagles” and “Direction for Canadian Poets.”

As Vulpe suggests, “Kennedy’s most notable Spanish War poem, ‘Calling Eagles,’ is very much a poetic version of ‘Direction for Canadian Poets’ applied to the present international crisis” (41). Kennedy’s call to poets to “join with the groundlings, multitudes, with hope and passion” (18) in “Calling Eagles” reverberates with his warnings about middle-class poets writing about factory life at the end of “Direction for Canadian Poets”:

Industrial poems cannot be written by middle class poets who have no contact with the subject. The poet whose livelihood is still intact may have trouble conjuring a communicable emotion and indignation out of fifty shabby, unshaven men in a breadline . . . until he has thought the whole thing through and realized that breadlines in a wheat country are illogical and criminal, and that he and his kind may be only some steps removed from a like condition. He must touch life at a thousand points . . . grasp the heroism, joy and terror, the courage under privation and repression, the teeming life-stuff all round him that is also the stuff of great poetry! (24)

Kennedy aims to manufacture a modern poetic sphere engaged not only with social conditions and politics but also with the material conditions of the poetic subject. The most pronounced difference between the poem and the manifesto is that while in “Direction for Canadian Poets” the poetic subject is industrial relations in Canada, in “Calling Eagles” it is the transnational fight against fascism, in the middle of which Kennedy places the speaker of his poem simultaneously in Spain, Ethiopia, and Vienna. “Calling Eagles,” in this sense, is as much a manifesto as “Direction for Canadian Poets” but one aimed at Canadian poets in which Kennedy heralds the creation of a “new state” that is amenable to the transnational conditions of the poetic subject (20).

Additionally, “Direction for Canadian Poets” and “Calling Eagles” are exceptional for bearing Kennedy’s real name. What is he able to accomplish by using his real name in the published versions of these two pieces? Conversely, what is he able to accomplish by writing pseudonymously? In order to approach these questions, it is germane to take a close look at his overall publication history in *New Frontier*.

Patricia Morley notes that most of Kennedy’s “five articles, one review, and eight [sic] poems” in *New Frontier* “did not stand under his own name” and that he “favoured ‘Peter Quinn’ for prose, ‘Arthur Beaton’ for poetry. ‘Leonard Bullen’ was also used” (100). In fact, of the nine poems, only two were published under Kennedy’s real name (“Summons for This Generation” and “Calling Eagles”). His one review, of W.H. Auden’s *Spain*, bears the name of Leonard Bullen. Of the articles, only “Direction for Canadian Poets” appeared under his proper name.

Published under the name Arthur Beaton, Kennedy’s first poem about the Spanish Civil War is an incantatory elegy for Federico García Lorca. “You, Spanish Comrade” opens with a beckoning: “Swing, eagle, high over barricades and plunge / boldly” (1–2). Where, in “Calling Eagles,” the eagle figure stands explicitly for the common poet, “You, Spanish Comrade” addresses a single “fallen” eagle. The second stanza begins by stating, “this struggle is no death in you though fallen” (9). In other words, although Lorca’s voice has been silenced by his fascist murderers, the fight will still be witnessed through a continued return to his poetry and through commemoration. Indeed, Lorca became one of the most deployed figures in poetry about the Spanish Civil War.⁵ The speaker credits Lorca with providing the ground upon which future generations of poets will build: “you build foundations here with bones for granite” (12). It is as though Lorca has passed from poet to muse.

Kennedy's second poem about the Spanish Civil War, "Memorial to the Defenders," was published under the name Leonard Bullen, with a dedication to his friends, Bess and Ben Sniderman. The poem, a Petrarchan sonnet in blank verse with the octave and sestet inverted, is addressed to "You Comrades" and "You Workers" (1, 5). The poem makes use of the same diction and imagery as "You, Spanish Comrade." Again, we have "barricades," splintering, blood, and flesh, as well as "new children," and "newborn men." Rather than proposing a socialist rebirth, as in Stephen's "Madrid," the speaker proposes a monument composed not of iconic figures, but of "The People's Spain" (14) itself, something into which the children will be born.

While successful poems in themselves, "You, Spanish Comrade" and "Memorial to the Defenders" do not completely fit into Kennedy's vision for poetry as laid out in "Direction for Canadian Poets." It is possible that for this reason the poems appeared pseudonymously.⁶ Kennedy had effectively backed himself into a programmatic corner when he published his manifesto. "You, Spanish Comrade" is inadequate in Kennedy's terms because it enumerates the poetic heroism of one man, turning Lorca into an idol. The scene of the poem shifts from the sky, "high over the barricades" (1), to underground where Lorca is given the agency to "build foundations here with bone for granite" (11). The time on the ground, where "men walk upright" (17) and "girls with flowers, new children springing tall" (20), is only figured in the future. Kennedy, as poet, does not do the work of "interpret[ing] the contemporary scene" ("Direction" 21) by "join[ing] with the groundlings" as he does in "Calling Eagles" (18).

"Memorial to the Defenders" stands out among Kennedy's other Spanish Civil War poems in that it does not perform the metapoetic act of referencing poetic production. In other words, it does not situate itself in the same way his other poems situate themselves as participating in the poetic materialization of Spain. The poem focuses on violated bodies and "dispersed flesh" (13) and, again, not on the work of "interpret[ing] the contemporary scene faithfully" ("Direction" 21). The monument in "Memorial to the Defenders" is erected by "newborn men" (12), not through the foundations laid by Lorca in "You, Spanish Comrade" or by "the clean flight of the mind and the sharp perceptions" (23) of the poets in "Calling Eagles." Kennedy did not wish to identify himself as the author of the poetry that did not meet the standards set in "Direction for Canadian Poets."

Dorothy Livesay was the first poet to publish on the subject of Spain in *New Frontier*; four of the ten poems she published there are about the war.

Her article "Poet's Progress," appeared in June 1937 issue, after three of her Spanish poems had already appeared in the magazine. Livesay's "Spain" appeared in the same issue as "Poet's Progress" and their proximity reveals her multifaceted concern with the function of the poet. Both "Spain" and "Poet's Progress" perform at two levels: they are about poets as well as addressed to poets. While the first three of Livesay's poems are anticipatory and expectant, "Spain" makes the call for poetic and social solidarity.

"And Still We Dream" and "Man Asleep" appeared together in the October 1936 issue.⁷ Both poems utilize the same figurative framework of dreaming within natural spaces. "And Still We Dream," unlike "Man Asleep," does not figure sleep in its dreaming. Instead, the dream suspends time or exists in tandem with the temporality of nature where time—"the stir / Of centuries"—is only a "brief wrinkle" for the thrush, the bees, and the mountains (10–11). The speaker urges her comrade to "rise up" and live in social time rather than "Whistling a low bird note" (14), which intimates the detached poet writing about nature. The speaker constructs an opposition between the natural and the social that figures as an anti-pastoral call to arms through pastoral imagery. While deriding the reposeful figure of the pastoral, the poems take rhetorical situations from the pastoral tradition to create a socialist pastoral poetry that ignites action and fuses nature and society.

In the companion poem, "Man Asleep," the simple opposition between the social and the natural begins to proliferate. Here, both nature and society are split into a double dialectic, a further development from the opposition set up in "And Still We Dream." On the one hand, there remains a passive dreamer in the mountains where visibility and clarity of the social, present in the images of the towns, recede "at the march of evening" (3). Here, with the construction of a false sense of ease, nature—poised against the social—is the active subject, smoothing the dreamer's brow, relaxing "the stiff bone" (5), and cooling the blood. While these are images of relaxation, they are also images of death and decay. This mimics the dialectical opposition between nature and society in "And Still We Dream." As the poem continues, though, Livesay constructs a second dialectical opposition, this time in Spain: the sleeper's "brothers raise the dust / Over Madrid, gird the impassive hills, / Cast off mandragora with lightning thrust" (7–9). In Spain it is men who become the active subjects through fighting fascism. The poem ends with a return to the dialectic of the sleeper and a tentative future synthesis of the social and the natural: "your bones shall spring to life like steel / Clamp down on victory, behold the sun!" (17–18). The sleeper's bones do not spring

to life like the crocus, but like steel, the product of society and, more specifically, labour. It is only through coordination and combination—the formation of an alloy—of the natural with social labour that the sun can be felt in its productive potential.

According to Dean Irvine, “[c]ontrary to the socialist romanticism of ‘And Still We Dream’ and ‘Man Asleep,’ ‘In Preparation’ presents a romanticized portrait of lovers undercut by its wartime context” (82). Not only do the first six lines of “In Preparation” work to present a romanticized portrait of lovers, but they are lovers dependent on nature for epistemological certainty. In other words, Livesay constructs love as extant in nature and subordinate to it, only to reveal in the last two lines the urgent necessity to “Look fearlessly at these searchlight suns, / Unblinking at the sound of gun . . .” (7–8). With this shift, Livesay positions the verification of love not in (or because of) natural phenomena but as corroboration through the social. The “searchlight suns” and the “sound of guns” (7–8), in this sense, are the products of social conflict that stand in for conventional uses of a romanticised nature that articulate and illuminate love.

Kennedy who published his manifesto on the production of poetry in Canada *before* writing his war poems, subsequently concealing his authorship of the poetry that did not meet the standards he had set. However, Livesay’s programmatic aesthetic—traceable through her first three Spanish Civil War poems—is articulated by the simultaneous publication of “Spain” and her popular-front proposal, “Poet’s Progress,” which does not limit itself to interpreting the Canadian scene. Here Livesay outlines what she sees as the three functions of the poet and the two functions of the audience. First, the poet must understand a wider conceptual notion of the individual. Livesay’s retort to critics’ accusation of a “collectivist complex” in the modernist poetics of the 1930s does not construct the individual poet as an ideal, autonomous, Cartesian subject who takes his or her own thinking to be the primary site of existence; rather, the “poet’s individual mark appears not in his thought content, but in his style, form and technique” (23). Second, Livesay states that the poet must be engaged in “pure ideas” which she equates with “facing the issue of humanity itself, of human destiny” (23). Finally, the poet must be the “conveyor of emotional values” which, for Livesay, are not abstract but rooted in historical particularity (23). These three functions of the poet are positioned in association with the two functions of that poet’s audience: “The three are related together in such a fashion as to create in the hearer a sensation of identity with others, and to release in him an individual

creative comprehension” (23–24). By including the functions of the reader or “hearer” in her program for poets, Livesay works to break down conceptual barriers between production and reception, conflating the agency of the poet and the reader. “These concepts of social solidarity and aesthetic response,” Irvine suggests, “make plain the sociopolitical character and cultural function of her progressive poetry: it is at once collectivist and individualist” (92). This can be seen, I would add, in the poetic companion piece to “Poet’s Progress”—“Spain”—where she both positions herself as an individual writer *and* constructs a common cause.

Livesay begins “Spain” by positioning both nature and society as active subjects. The first stanza is rife with action:

When the bare branch responds to leaf and light,
Remember them! It is for this they fight.
It is for hills uncoiling and the green thrust
Of spring, that they lie choked with battle dust. (1–4)

Rifkind reads this opening stanza as describing “the idyllic Canadian setting as that for which the Spanish people have been fighting” (*Comrades* 92). I am less willing to assert a Canadian setting. Rifkind’s reading is of a revised version of the poem dating from the late 1960s in which the hills are “haze-swept” instead of “uncoiling” and the “green thrust / Of spring” becomes the “green thrust / Of pine.” With the retrospective revisions nature becomes less active and increasingly precise: the ubiquitous “spring” becomes the particular “pine.” Perhaps Rifkind is reading something of Canada in the “pine,” though pine trees certainly grow in Spain. The version published in *New Frontier* is less about counterpoising Canada and Spain in an effort to make internationalist connections than it is about transnationalism as universal affiliation between society and nature where “they fight” for the maintenance of spring’s activity.

The second stanza addresses “You who hold beauty at your finger tips” (5). It is difficult to determine just who the addressee is here. I suggest a double reading focused on the materiality of holding an object of beauty in one’s hands. Given the double project of “Poet’s Progress,” where Livesay outlines the three functions of the poet as well as the two functions of the audience, I read the second stanza as being addressed to those two subjectivities: the poet holding an expectant pen and the reader holding the leaf of poetry. Livesay asks the addressee to take up Beauty as a weapon of solidarity: “Hold it, because the splintering gunshot rips / Between your comrades’ eyes: hold it, across / Their bodies’ barricade of blood and loss” (6–8).

The addressee of the third and final stanza, I believe, is changed. On first glance, it may seem that Livesay repositions the natural and the social in opposition. But the accusatory address to “You who live quietly in sunlit space” does not take issue with the sun’s agency but, instead, recalls the generational and classed critiques of her earlier 1930s poetry. This image is specifically, as Rifkind suggests, “reminiscent of the middle-class subjects of Livesay’s Third Period poem ‘A Girl Sees It!’ who gaze out of their comfortable homes at class struggle on the streets below” (*Comrades* 92). The poem ends with a comment on the relationship between parents and children of the middle class, a relationship to which Livesay herself could speak directly. The bourgeois addressee in “sunlit space” is thus spoken to from the location of the “sons” who “struggle” and do the work of social illumination. The final lines enact a typical trope of war poetry that lays blame on the old for sending the young to battle.

I suggest that the co-publication of “Spain” and “Poet’s Progress” is also a co-theorization. While she writes about the necessities of individual personality, “pure ideas,” and conveyance of emotional value, Livesay emphasizes the need for these traits to work together and not in opposition. Although developed in her earlier poems, it is not until she publishes “Spain” that she fuses, first, the opposition between nature and society, and second, the poet and reader. In this resolution, what could be read as her previous sentimentality in the earlier poems is abandoned for a popular-front synthesis.⁸ But the synthesis is not left without problematization of the writerly relationship in her poem. Livesay identifies, at the close of her poem, the bourgeois addressee who functions as one who, in “Poet’s Progress,” “still cling[s] to the more static conception of society” (24). While the poem is manifestary, Livesay intimates that it can only enter into an unconventional relationship with the reader who has shed bourgeois inheritance and is actually involved in the popular-front struggle.

Of all the Spanish Civil War poems published in *New Frontier*, Kenneth Leslie’s⁹ “The Censored Editor” is the most anomalous and uncharacteristic in terms of *New Frontier’s* editorial habits. The lengthy poem, about an editor betraying the democratically elected Republican government, is concerned with loyalty and solidarity, but the poem also works to conflate writerly and editorial production as a mode of engagement with both aesthetics and politics. Livesay, in her retrospective article on Canadian poetry and the Spanish Civil War, suggests that “The Censored Editor” is the

“most ambitious of any poems written in Canada about Spain” (16). It is the longest poem and also the last-published Canadian poem about Spain in *New Frontier*. The poem is a socialist parable informed by Biblical allusion that sets the scene of Inés, a supporter of the Spanish Republic, hiding amongst mountain rocks, watching and narrating the scene of her son, the “scribbler” Guido, betraying the government to a young Fascist soldier. Specifically, it is a parable that re-enacts Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Inés is prepared to sacrifice her son because she has ultimate faith in Spain’s socialist project. She means to stop the “little stream of treachery [that] has run / out of these hills, a stream her flying knife / must dry up at its source” (20–22).

Towards the end of the poem Inés sings out, the rocks causing her voice to echo and accumulate. Her “voice / is many voices” (163–64), highlighting her solidarity with the Spanish people and confusing the two men as to the origins of the lyrics. She finally instructs the men to “Go, tell this fable to your blind instructor” (189) and then provides her own parable about climbers in the Pyrenees:

A rockface in the Pyrenees. Five climbers.
Five dizzy lives held by a fingernail.
That moment on the trail when every eye
must focus on the trail. One puffing fool
flings out his arm to point the distant view.
The balance breaks. And so well roped together
down go the five like plummets. All for one
who was a two-fold enemy and traitor,
betraying beauty and its living hosts.

‘Beauty was underfoot there in the rock.’ (190–200)

Vulpe notes that, “breaking with Romanticism, Leslie also maintains that beauty is not ideal; it is concrete and immediate. Beauty, and hence truth, are not as the Romantics proposed in ‘the distant view,’ but ‘*underfoot there in the rock*’” (41). Leslie establishes the ground for beauty and truth in materiality, in beauty’s “living hosts,” the bodies working in unison and climbing the “rockface” not through a break with or rejection of Romanticism, as such, but through a radicalization of the Romantic, specifically Keatsian, treatment of beauty—“‘Beauty is truth’ was said and truly said” (183). The last line of the poem—*Beauty was underfoot there in the rock*—serves a double function, providing the moral of the tale of a climber who upsets the collective balance with a gesture akin to a Fascist salute, while also referencing the scene that dominates the poem: the mother figure hiding amongst the rocks and committed to truth and to the Republic.

While some of the other Spanish Civil War poems in *New Frontier* speak directly to the production of poetry, this poem includes a meditation on editorial integrity. Leslie, an editor himself, positions editorship as something demanding veracity, resolve, and faith instead of “cleverly balanced articles” (65). Vulpe suggests that “the poem is not about Spain but a discussion of the intellectual’s political and moral responsibilities conveniently set in Spain where such questions are now, dramatically, a matter of life and death” (40). I suggest that the poem is about many things, Spain included. If the poem tells us one thing it is that the political and moral responsibilities of the intellectual are to be firmly located in the struggles of real people and not in abstract space. The materiality of Spain comes into play not simply through geographic or cultural descriptions that contain a flimsy authenticity, but through the coalescence of Spain and political resolve in the Canadian poetic imaginary. The same issues that Leslie raises in the context of Spain are ubiquitous within the emergent formation of popular-front aesthetics in the Canadian poetic imaginary before and during the Spanish Civil War. In other words, in writing about Spain through socialist parable, Leslie shows the fact that a political poetics can be grounded in Spain but must be heard from both Spain and elsewhere. Leslie’s critique of the distant view acts as a compression of the political ideal of the Spanish republic into the transnational affiliation of humanity within socialist precepts.

Indeed, the fact that the antifascism of the late-1930s acted as a catalyst for so many Canadian poets, of which I have mentioned only a few, speaks to the continued need to create alternative genealogies of Canadian literary production through paying close critical attention to historical moments in which political crises mould the Canadian poetic imaginary and enunciations of a national poetics. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, we see an articulation of a modernist practice in *New Frontier* that has deep connections with both transnational politics and transnational modernist production. The innovation in Canadian poetry brought forth in the poetic response to the Spanish Civil War in the pages of *New Frontier*—articulations of metapoetic modernist, pastoral, and parabolic poetry—remains a signal moment in the development of modernist practice in Canada, but it is also at this moment that Canadian poetry develops a unique voice that resonates with simultaneous poetic production around the globe. In other words, though the emergence of Canadian modernism was experienced through a form of uneven temporal development when compared to the emergence of a more broad transnational modernism, this may be the moment when a

broad movement of Canadian modernist production breaks free of the uneven development by responding to a world historical event at the same time as more established articulations of transnational modernism.

NOTES

- 1 Alexander Maitland Stephen was a poet and novelist who, after his return from service in the First World War, settled in Vancouver. His associations with the Vancouver Poetry Society, Canadian Authors' Association, League of Western Writers, Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the League Against War and Fascism, and the Canadian League for Peace and Democracy made him an active participant in the political and literary life of 1930s Canada. He wrote two novels, four volumes of poetry, two volumes of plays, and edited two anthologies of Canadian verse. The Alexander Stephen fonds are held at the University of British Columbia.
- 2 Margaret Day's role in Canadian literature is not widely known. She was a schoolteacher who had lived in London and studied voice at the Royal College of Music in the early 1930s. Through her experience of the Depression in Montreal she became radicalized, prompting a trip to Russia. She met Dr. Norman Bethune at her Marxist study group and took him as a lover prior to his leaving for Spain. She would go on to marry Canadian painter Philip Surrey and become a founding member of Montreal's *Preview* group of writers, although she left the group after the third issue. The Philip and Margaret Surrey fonds are held at Library and Archives Canada (MG 30 D368). See Patricia Whitney's "First Person Feminine: Margaret Day Surrey" in *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 31 (1992): 86–92.
- 3 Because Livesay and Kennedy are well known figures within the field of Canadian poetry, I have not provided their biographical information.
- 4 Candida Rifkind suggests that "Calling Eagles" was "first published in *Canadian Poetry Magazine* and then in *New Frontier*" (*Comrades* 94). "Calling Eagles" was in fact reprinted in *Canadian Poetry Magazine* in October, four months after it appeared in *New Frontier*.
- 5 For other examples of elegies to Lorca see poems by Dorothy Livesay, George Woodcock, Louis Dudek, Eldon Greir and Mark Frutlin in Vulpe's anthology *Sealed in Struggle*.
- 6 Patricia Morley states that "[o]bviously, [Kennedy] feared that putting his signature to the work would cost him his position with N.W. Ayer" (100). I cannot see any politically apparent minefields in the pseudonymous poems beyond those that appear in "Calling Eagles." In fact, "Calling Eagles" does the hazardous work of naming names.
- 7 These poems appear under the heading "Two Poems." They are printed down the right side of the page, with "And Still We Dream" above "Man Asleep."
- 8 Livesay was critiqued at the time for her sentimentality in an article submitted by Vernon van Sickle to *New Frontier*, entitled "Dorothy Livesay and A.A. [Audrey Alexandra] Brown." For a detailed discussion of this see Irvine's *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916–1956* (68–69).
- 9 Kenneth Leslie was a Nova Scotian who published six books of poetry. He won the Governor General's Award in 1938 for *By Stubborn Stars and Other Poems*. Leslie moved to New York and in 1938 he began to edit and publish a monthly magazine on religion and politics called *The Protestant Digest*. In 1949 he was accused of "un-American" activities and was listed in *Life* magazine as a communist sympathiser. He returned to Nova Scotia where he died in 1974. The Kenneth Leslie fonds are held at Nova Scotia Archives and

Records Management (MG 1, Vol. 2190-2247) and a separate collection can be found at Dalhousie University Archives and Special Collections (MS-2-232). See Burris Devanney's "Kenneth Leslie: A Biographical Introduction" in *Canadian Poetry: Studies/Documents/Reviews* 5 (1979): 83-104.

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