

Elizabeth Brewster Replies

The spring issue of *Atlantis* carried a review of Elizabeth Brewster's poetry. The following is an excerpt from a letter where the poet replies to the review:

I am so frequently described by reviewers as "modest" or "quiet" or something of that sort that I am becoming sick of it and think I should step out of my so-called character and protest. I am not really all that modest. As a matter of fact, I think I am one of the best poets writing in Canada now. I would not make courteous gestures in the direction of Page, Livesay, and Atwood if I did not consider myself their friend and equal. I think your reviewer confuses a quiet voice with a modest author. Wordsworth had a quiet literary voice; his acquaintances did not find him terribly modest. I probably think as well of my writing as Layton thinks of his. There may, indeed, be some arrogance lurking behind my assumption that a good writer ought not to need a loud voice. My assumption has been that the best writers --the Wordsworths and Jane Austens--could afford to write simply, quietly, and on commonplace subjects. Writers who were less sure of themselves must buy a harp, adopt a pose or a cause, and write as sensationally as possible.

There are some comments that puzzled me. I don't think I "was socialized in youth to be apolitical." I am rather wary of political reformers and suspicious of any kind of demagoguery. I suppose I'm a conservative--on the whole I think conservatives are less dangerous than libe-

rals--but I don't suppose that makes me apolitical. I don't think I could become actively engaged myself in partisan politics because I too readily see the opposition point of view. However, I have always thought politicians an amusing group to observe, and have had several close friends who have been fairly actively involved in politics. When I wrote, in the introduction to my early poem "Lillooet," which she quotes, that I was "unable to proceed beyond the personal," I was certainly writing with tongue in cheek. "Lillooet" is not a "personal" poem, at least in the usual sense of "personal." It is a fairly objective picture of small town life. I think the best-observed character in that poem is the local politician, Senator Hill. He is the self-made owner of a company town, a Liberal, "strong for the Common Man," who obliges his millhands to support him politically if they want to keep their jobs. Incidentally, one of the people to whom "Lillooet" was dedicated was Douglas Fisher, for a time the NDP Member for the Lakehead area. Douglas suggested, back in the sixties, that I write a long poem on John Diefenbaker; and I wrote a longish poem which I thought myself to be rather funny. However, it was too long for magazines, and by the time I could have got it into a book it was badly out of date. I decided then that it was not sensible to write about politicians until they were dead or political events until they were far enough in the past so that one could know whether they would be of lasting interest. The fact that my earlier poems especially were slow in

getting published has made me very much concerned to avoid topics that are of only temporary concern or styles that are "trendy" and therefore easy to date. For instance, when I wrote a poem in Sunrise North on the explosion at Amchitka, I did not mention Amchitka. It would need a footnote even now if I had done so. Explosions of one kind or another will be around until Judgment Day, I suppose.

There are, of course, ways of proceeding beyond the personal besides writing poems of social comment. Many of my early poems were about people; they were concentrated short stories. In In Search of Eros my intention was to start with the personal, but to proceed beyond the personal to the world of myth and return again at the end to the "I" which is both personal and representative of humanity in general. (That, I mean, was the intention of my arrangement.) The long title poem is--at any rate on one level--a sort of religious allegory, story of the soul's search for God or Love or meaning in the depths of the self; a descent through progressive layers of terror with the expectation of a worst terror at the centre, and the surprise of finding no final terror. I am sure I identified with Psyche, but I also thought of her as the human soul in general. Also, the "I" of "Pilgrim" is myself, but she is also all those other women of the past; and past and future are also fused with the present. If one goes forward, one goes forward to the past, perhaps, since time is an illusion.

(Of course, if time is an illusion, it's difficult to get worked up about politics except as an amusement. Maybe that's an answer to some questions, too.)

I am never sure whether I am more or less personal in the poems with "I" in them. Who, after all, is "I"? Somebody who is like a lot of other people--otherwise one would hardly dare to write for those other people. I do not myself see "despair of success" in the love poems in In Search of Eros. There are some mixed feelings, but I thought they were on the whole happy poems. The love they write about is not permanent, but then what love for another human being is? It is surely the impermanence and fragility of beauty, pleasure, and tenderness that make them precious. And in a sense writing about the impermanent made it permanent. To me they are celebrative poems.

Basically, I suppose the review was a kindly one, and I normally put up with some misunderstanding. Maybe I protest this time because the writer seemed to imply that I ought to be like Layton, etc.--and Layton would have protested any misunderstandings of his books.

— Elizabeth Brewster