

Book review

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Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Works of Jan Zwicky **Mark Dickinson and Clare Goulet, eds. Cormorant Books, Toronto, 2010.**

Jan Zwicky is a Canadian poet, philosopher, and musician who has spent most of her life writing, thinking, playing the violin, and teaching. *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Works of Jan Zwicky*, which began as a panel discussion about Zwicky at York University in 2006, is a collection of writing from twenty-seven contributors. Both the editors and the contributors to this collection must have felt that there was something from that panel discussion that could merit a book. We should be thankful that they did.

Even though Zwicky has published since 2010, this 'appreciation' is inclusive of all her major texts up to that date. There is no 'single' argument in the book; instead, the editors 'endeavour is to point to Zwicky's thinking'. Those interested in the poetry and poetics of Zwicky will be satisfied. Much time and thought are given to her primary works of philosophy and it's clear that the close readings of her poetry are never very far from *Lyric Philosophy* or *Wisdom and Metaphor*. Those interested in Zwicky and music will be grateful. If there is an urge to teach or study Zwicky, then *Lyric Ecology* would be an apt companion. As a student be prepared to meet the people (poets, philosophers, musicians) that she thinks it might be worth meeting. A partial bibliography that runs to seven pages is further notice that her poetry, her philosophy and her thought are very crowded places indeed. It is worth more than a glance just to see who is there.

I would like to put a gloss on the form and structure of this collection and suggest that it has the quality, scope, and heft of an anthology of well-written short stories. With multiple points-of-view, different styles, and different thematic concerns it is both informative and entertaining. Gathered within *Lyrical Ecology* we find essays, impressions, an interview, a letter, poetry, and memoir. These are short sharp pieces that range in tone and scope: everything from a critique on the 'structural innovations' in *Lyrical Philosophy*, Zwicky's book-length work of philosophy, to essays on a single poem; from aphoristic *impressions* to a single one-page poem itself.

There is a friendly atmosphere surrounding this collection. Which of course is not to lessen its discursive integrity. However, several pieces include personal anecdotes about 'Jan' or about the contributors themselves. We also get a few biographical glimpses of Zwicky. Since many of the contributors are long time collaborators, colleagues, students, and friends of Zwicky this 'dimension', this peek into the personal is to be expected.

In "Dust in Sunlight, Zwicky's Beethoven", Gordon Johnston suggests that the central position of the "familiar classical composers" throughout Zwicky's poetry satisfies her interest "in the 'lyric' and in the 'domestic' dimensions of their lives". It is almost necessary to be able to be at home in either place or to be at ease being in both places at

once: the domestic, governed as it is by language and the quotidian; the lyric—music--governed as it is by 'wordlessness'. Johnston is there to remind us that Zwicky is thinking about how a coherent work of art can be envisioned and realized amidst the "complications of quotidian existence". Beethoven may have had a direct line to the sublime, but he was also going deaf and had money problems. Or, as is pointed out in the *Preface* to this book, you may be a poet-philosopher that needs to make time in the day for solo violin practice, but you also need to hire a cat-sitter.

So, with varying form and content and a welcome personal touch there is a lot going on in this collection. Which is fitting because Zwicky is trying to remind us through poetry, philosophy, and music that there *is* always a lot going on and that it is our job to look for it and then to contemplate. We are always being asked to consider the interconnectedness of all things. One particular consideration of this sort comes in the form of a letter from 'renowned lichenologist' Trevor Goward. He tells 'Jan' that he needed the ten years between her first visit to 'the mountain' at Clearwater Valley (British Columbia) in 1999 and the actual composition of the letter that she is reading to "rehearse into words some things I've been wanting to tell you". The reason he is 'essaying' this letter, he writes, is "to situate in deep evolutionary perspective your own thoughts on the perplexing question of metaphor". What we get from this letter is a highlight reel of many of the key ideas (metaphor, resonance, clarity) that everyone in this collection is working with; same source material, after all. But what we also get is an origin myth for metaphor. How far back are we allowed to go? Goward compellingly persuades that going back billions of years is not too far at all. Without despair of course; the trick is to look at the world not as "endpoint, culmination, stasis but...as becoming, emergence, process'. Poetry, philosophy, music, and thinking are the means available to us to get to know these processes and for Goward, Zwicky represent the 'vanguard' of this particular concord.

One of the great things about Zwicky's poetry is that it comes with a soundtrack. However, it's not just background music, not just simple reference inserted to make the poems more real or at least part of a narrativized 'real' world. Musicians, songs, 'practicing Bach', even 'listening to the radio' while doing the dishes, are each in their own way Zwicky's attempt to get the reader to explore other ways of seeing and thinking that may not be held by 'linguified knowing'. It is fitting therefore, that several contributors to this collection focus solely on what Dennis Lee calls 'the music of thinking.' There are several pieces collected here that use the language of music theory itself to talk about the poems that are themselves about music. Consider yourself lucky if there is a satisfying twinge of recognition when the piece of music Zwicky is writing about is one you know well. Or, consider the poem as an invitation or as a worthwhile piece of advice to actively seek out and listen to the music for the first time. The relationship between the music or musicians mentioned in Zwicky's poetry and her poetics, and between music and poetry in general, is central to this collection. For those with the vocabulary to think and talk about music there is much on offer here. Even with a limited music-theory vocabulary about the technical and formal structure of music, the entries on or about music offer valuable insights into Zwicky's primary texts. Her poems about musicians and music are there to coax and orient a reader toward listening as a way of thinking. *Lyric Ecology* provides the place for that orientation to begin.