

SONG AND DANCE

Dorothy Livesay

BEHIND ALL POETRY is the song: what Ezra Pound called *melopeia* — melody. And sometimes it is very hard to write a poem without hearing, in your mind, the music behind it. Take a few simple copula-type English sentences: “You are a woman. You are a man.” Now link them with a prepositional phrase that is, in itself, an archetypal image: “under the moon, under the sun.” As you say them over they begin to re-align themselves, thus:

under the moon
under the sun
you are a woman
you are a man

The accentual stresses here are extremely simple; one secondary and one primary stress create the phonemic phrase that is basic to the English language: ùnder the móon, ùnder the sún. In each phrase there are two stresses, one being slightly stronger. You feel this as a beat, so you pause to stress it; but you also hear it as a melody. Perhaps a tune insinuates itself amongst the words, and you begin to hum:

under the moon
under the sun
you are a woman
you are a man

rise up the woman
rise up the man
you are a moon
you are a sun

Immediately the stress pattern has become more complicated; so has the vowel assonance; and so has the thought. They build on each other.

Now I do not know how it is with other poets, but as far as I am concerned I am always hearing this other *beat* behind the ordinary spoken language and I'm always hearing the melody. Perhaps this consciousness developed in me quite early, for of course we had no radio or television in those pre-World War I days; but we had a piano. While my mother played nursery rhymes or songs like "Little Brown Jug" my sister and I sang the words. During and after the war Ukrainian immigrant girls came successively to live with us and act as mother's help, until they knew enough English to get a better job. They sang rollicking or melancholy ballads in Ukrainian, songs which so interested my mother that she began strumming them on the piano, and asking for their "story." Soon she was learning to read Ukrainian herself, so as to translate the folksongs into English.¹ Thus it was that as a small child I "felt" words as being linked with music. In my mind a poem was a tune; and I began to make up tunes before I found the words for them. Always I loved to hear poems read aloud; but soon became independent of my mother's voice, and would take Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, or Irish ballads, and say them over to myself, sotto voce. By the time I was ten I was trying to write a few such verses, myself. By the time I was thirteen they began to flow easily and freely, so that a day wasn't a day unless I found a song in it.

At that young time it never worried me that I could not sing beautifully or keep my voice true; when alone, in the garden or the woods, I just let go and sang. In the same way I accompanied myself in a dance, my body moving and swinging as I sang. In the teens, however, my real problems began to come to the fore. To dance! the most primitive creative expression. But what happens if you are born clumsy? I wrote about that, much later, in "Ballad of Me":

Misbegotten
 born clumsy
 bursting feet first
 then topsy turvy
 falling downstairs:
 the fear of
 joy of
 falling.

Butterfingers
 father called it
 throwing the balls
 which catch as catch can
 I couldn't.

When I was a child in wartime Winnipeg there were no ballet classes and no one had heard of "Modern Dance," a style that might well have suited my temperament. Instead, in winter when the wind waged its battles around the frame house, I trembled; outside, I whirled with the snowflakes. But for the first mad "letting go" into dance I had to come to Ontario. At "Woodlot" in Clarkson the spring winds running through naked birch trees called me to run alongside. In deep summer at Lake Simcoe I preferred to avoid the family outings and run along the beach alone, or fling myself into green meadows: no one around, anywhere, to hear! I was free to whirl about and shout.

In school, learning to dance was a different story. I remember vividly the agonies of a dancing class where a stout woman bellowed at us from a platform whilst we, straggly little girls with hair clipped back to bounce down our backs in a pony tail were each given a chair to push: a chair to waltz with! Most of my companions in that girls' day school graduated to the level of having a dancing partner, prim arm upon rigid shoulder. But I never managed that. And though there were later lessons, in my final high school year, I never did learn to waltz. The formal imposition of having to memorize where your foot went next seemed to paralyze me. Only once did I get a glimpse of how music could relate to natural bodily rhythm; and that was at university when I registered for a course in Dalcroze Eurythmics. Even at that, the technical knowledge required seemed formidable. Once or twice perhaps, in those varsity years was I sufficiently abandoned (because in love) to be able to 'follow' unselfconsciously without treading on my partner's shiny black patent leather toes. Mostly, I remained a wallflower. Yet how I longed and longed to dance all night! At home, I bought foxtrot records (for by now we had got a gramophone). I flew around the room in my own way, alone.

WAS IT AS A COMPENSATION that I wrote poetry, more and more? Most prolifically, at eighteen. Recently an English student of mine who has since become a teacher of Canadian literature gave the following assessment of the mood of my personal poems. As I cannot say it better than he did, I set it down herewith:

This clumsy, awkward child will be with us throughout the poetry. She can't catch ("butterfingers"); she can't keep her playmates when the fire-engine comes

("games fall apart"); she is only a "shrunken, bowed and heavy-bellied form"; and in bed, as wife and woman, she feels "inadequate." This sense of inadequacy is always there, and one way of exorcizing it is to set it down in verse. . . . Thus it is that word play and puns haunt Livesay's poetry. . . . Her wit and punning are experimentation with what words will yield; they are part of her intellectual growing pains, and are therefore linked with her hesitancy and lack of self-confidence.²

Early on, then, the mood was set. A good many quatrains or loose couplets emerged, in the metaphysical manner:

One day's sorrow is not much
When there's grief still to touch

or

I shall lie like this when I am dead
But with one more secret in my head

But I was happiest breaking into free verse (encouraged by reading *Poetry: Chicago* which my mother subscribed to). This free expression was suited to my own rhythmic sense and was dictated, no doubt, by my own breath groups (for I always said the poem aloud; or if that was not possible I heard myself saying it in the mind's ear).

I remember long veils of green rain
Feathered like the shawl of my grandmother —
Green from the half-green of the spring trees
Waving in the valley.

It seems evident now that the free verse poems were all solitary, myself talking to the wind; whereas the more structured lyrics envisage a partner. Through my twenties an experimentation with sex (since called "the sexual revolution"!) was simply this search for the perfect dancing partner. I had read Havelock Ellis's *The Dance of Life* and I believed of the consummation of two bodies into one, the merging of self in other self. Also, it goes without saying, I had read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*! But the dance, I found (when I came back from the Sorbonne in 1932 to discover a changed social scene), the dance could extend to an identification with a community, a nation, a world. I threw myself into the struggle for peace, "against war and fascism." The results, in 1935-36, were the socially committed poems such as "The Outrider" and "Day and Night" and a bold attempt at narrative poetry based on the Spanish civil war called "Catalonia" (never

published). E. J. Pratt gave me a great lift when he printed "Day and Night" in the first issue of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, in 1936. Mine must have been the first Canadian poem to ignore maple leaves and to concern itself with the desperate condition of people caught in a technological revolution. Here, the dance became ironic:

One step forward
Two steps back
Shove the lever
Push it back

A sense of deep frustration followed, as the Spanish war led into world war. But by the forties marriage and the rearing of children compensated for external frustrations. The social commitment became integrated with my own personality, as in "Lorca":

You breathe. You be.
Bare, stripped light
Time's fragment flagged
Against the dark.

You dance. Explode
Unchallenged through the door
As bullets burst
Long deaths ago, your heart.

And song outsoars
The bomber's range
Serene with wind-
Manoeuvred cloud.

And I began to write poems about children or about my own childhood. These appeared in the volumes *Day and Night* (1944) and *Poems for People* (1947).

The story has been told elsewhere of the encouragement I received during the war years from Alan Crawley's critical listening and from his editing of *Contemporary Verse*. This little quarterly gave western poets an opportunity to appear in print which was denied us in the east. Patrick Anderson did write more than once to ask me for material for *Preview*, but soon that magazine developed a very definite Montreal slant. (John Sutherland's *Northern Review* did, however, publish short stories of mine, and Louis MacKay reviewed my social poetry there, very sympathetically.)

From 1939 to 1946 I wrote some fifty poems, many of them still unpublished.

Right after the war I went to England for the *Toronto Star* and wrote my responses to the post-war world, its hopes and doubts. On my return, encouraged by Malcolm Lowry, I worked at my most thoroughly documented “public” poem, “Call My People Home.” I feel that this poem for radio managed to combine a sense of personal poignancy and alienation with a sense of social purpose. Many of the dance routines in this poem are perhaps simple to the point of being banal, but I insist that the nursery-rhyme and ballad pattern are essential elements in poetry, not to be ignored. I suppose that all my life I have fought against obscurantism! For me, the true intellectual is a simple person who knows how to be close to nature and to ordinary people. I therefore tend to shy away from academic poets and academic critics. They miss the essence.

The essential remains: Song and Dance. During one period of my life I almost lost these talismen. For someone who believes in man, in his potential for growth and change, no more depressing period occurred than the 1950’s. Everything that we believed might come out of the holocaust of war: free independent nations living in harmony of economic and cultural exchanges, moving from competition to co-operation — everything was shown to be a mockery. Man was not capable of social intelligence! He was a ravager. The Korean War proved it. Despair, almost an existential despair, took hold of me in those years. The resulting poems were alienated, groping, as in the little chapbook Jay Macpherson published for me, *New Poems*. From the gaiety of “Bartok and the Geranium” I moved to the confusion of “The Dark Runner”:

Around the circle of this light,
This self, I feel his nudging nerve,
His prying finger seeking the concealed
Small crack where my intent might swerve.

He’s sensitive to softness; hurries out
The all-too-eager love; the willingness
To let a fault grow large in wilfulness
Until it swings a window upon doubt.

The integer is I; integral while
I’m centred in sun’s round;
But O, how swift the door is swung
And fumbling darkness found.

In poems such as this I came closer to mystical experience than heretofore; and also closer to despair. I was reading Simone Weil.

IT REQUIRED a tremendous, traumatic break before I could escape from the defeatism of the Fifties. The opportunity came when I won an educational fellowship from the Canada Council, for a year's study in London. Ironically, the stimulation of that environment was countered by deep personal loss . . . the sudden death of my husband and the growing independence of my children — one working, one away at boarding school. Yet, for the first time in some twenty years, I was a free woman. I took off for Paris, where a former professor of mine, Felix Walter, was stationed at Unesco. He helped me to get a job there, and from that vantage point I applied and was accepted for a teaching post in Northern Rhodesia.

The experience of three years in Africa was so intense and fascinating it cannot be set down in a few words. It needs a book. Lacking the time to write that, I made jottings for poems. And when I returned to British Columbia at the end of my Unesco tour, in July 1963, I was a changed person. The great developments I had hoped to see in Canada towards a just society had not materialized. Instead I had participated in a sudden and traumatic changeover from a tribal society (in which there was much of goodness and beauty) to an industrial society in which the people were to a large extent participating intensely. All the evils of capitalism and automation were rearing their heads in the new Zambia; but opposed to these destructive forces were human beings who commanded my deepest respect. Such a one was Kenneth Kaunda, the new president. After hearing him address his people from an anthill on the Copperbelt I was moved to write that part of "Zambia" titled "The Leader."

And so Africa set me dancing again! My students, I discovered, woke up singing; no sooner was their breakfast of "mealie-meal" over when they would cluster in a common room, turn on the record player, and dance. Most of their dances were unsophisticated, jive and jitterbug; it was easy for my feet to catch the beat. Best of all, you didn't need a partner. You could dance opposite a girl student as easily as opposite a youth. Not a dance of touch, but one where the rhythm itself created an unseen wire holding two people together in the leap of movement. I had never been happier!

My poem "The Colour of God's Face," later revised and published as "Zambia," is a documentary, presenting an impersonal view of a country wresting itself from a tribal way of life into the modern world. It is not a documentary in the sense that the Japanese-Canadian "Call My People Home" was: a presentation

true to the “found” facts. It is rather a white outsider’s appraisal, interpretation, of what was happening to the blacks. (The section “The Prophetess”, however, is based on historical events.) It seems to me therefore that “Zambia,” written in 1964, is a freer expression of the impact of socio-political events, written in a more contemporary style. The music and dance is there, but more subtly conveyed.

At first I was extremely hesitant about showing this poem to anyone, for I had long been out of the Canadian literary scene. I scarcely believed I was a poet any more. However, one afternoon my old friend Anne Marriott, the poet from North Vancouver, came over for lunch. On the back lawn, sitting in the sun, I had the courage to read her a section, “The Prophetess.” “Why,” she said, “it’s fine . . . exciting! You’ve really got the feel of it.”

I was most grateful. One has to be believed in, or perish! From then on I began to write, stirred also by contact with the Black Mountain group and by discussions with Milton Acorn. The next year I fell deeply in love and poems “sprang from my loins,” as it were. All the yearning to sing and dance revived again; but this time I did so with more confidence. This time I spoke out of immediate experience. I disguised nothing. The result was the book, *The Unquiet Bed*.

If I were asked now to relate these new poems to my earliest lyrics in *Green Pitcher* and *Signpost* I would find many elements in common: music; dance rhythms (metred and free); speech rhythms; and, in tone, a sense of isolation leading to a game of wry wit, a play on words. Behind it all a belief in love, in communication on all levels; and a sense of grace, a call to praise. Two lyrics illustrate these interrelationships. Here is one, written about 1929:

Now, I am free
but prejudice
will creep like moss
on an olding tree

Soon shall I be
my parents’ child
a desperate grasp
towards fixity?

and another, the title poem to *The Unquiet Bed* (written 1965):

The woman I am
is not what you see
I’m not just bones
and crockery

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the woman I am
knew love and hate
hating the chains
that parents make

longing that love
might set men free
yet hold them fast
in loyalty

the woman I am
is not what you see
move over love
make room for me

Although it has been said that my most intense poems are the private ones, I myself believe that the public poems contain the same elements, mentioned above. Between the types, however, it is the *intention* that differs. Some critics will prefer one genre, others another; but I believe them both to be valid, as poetry. In forty years I have written over a thousand poems . . . many unpublished. But whether “public” or “private” each poem is a part of me and belongs as my skin belongs. Good, comfortable old clothes in which I sink or swim.

Recently I read in a *New Republic* review of my admired critic, Herbert Read, that although he had achieved the modern techniques sufficiently to be a great poet, he admitted failure because he lacked the necessary modern concomitant, “a sense of the tragic.” Perhaps that sums me up also? We are optimists, Blakeian believers in the New Jerusalem. We cannot see man’s role as tragic but rather as divine comedy. We are alone — so what? We are not always lonely. Laughter heals, the dance captures, the song echoes forth from tree-top to tree-top. I won’t stop believing this until every tree in Canada is chopped down! I thumb my nose at those who say that nature and with it, human nature, is becoming “obsolete.”

NOTES

¹ Florence Randal Livesay: *Songs of Ukraina*. Toronto; Dent, 1917.

² D. A. Yarrow: “Dorothy Livesay, poet; towards an assessment.” Unpublished article.