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ON THE PROBLEM OF "CLASSICISM" IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

("FOUR DOZEN SONGS" BY CORNEL ADAM LENGYEL)

It has been said in literary criticism that C. A. Lengyel's poetry is metaphysical; that he has mastered classical forms to an extraordinary degree; that he "has invented a new form of verse: the blank verse sonnet" out of which he has made "a natural and powerful instrument" [1]. As G. Santayana put it, Lengyel "avoids obsolete or affected language without falling into contemporary commonplaces or positive colloquialisms, as the 'modern school' does" [2]. In other words, according to the philosopher, C. A. Lengyel's poetry is "classic" in the sense of classical simplicity, without any traces of stylization and without following obvious standards of some contemporary trends.

The secret of this quality is not to be found in the type of imagery, as often believed. C. A. L.'s poetry is permeated with biblical images. But the same kind of imagery can be used with totally different artistic effect. Majakovskij, for example, had it serve as material for his strikingly surrealistic phantasmagorias, and, at the same time, for his ultrapersonal, autobiographical myth of the poet. Such a tendency stands in opposition to that of C. A. L.'s verses, which — in their calm tone of stoic resignation — present a broad generalization of human fate and of the poet's role and destiny.

We have to seek for the particulars of poetry in the structure itself, and to begin the investigation from the very basic semantic and grammatical categories and syntactic units.

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[1] George Santayana, a letter of G. Santayana to C. A. Lengyel, on sonnet sequence *The Lookout's Letter*, [in:] *Selected Letters of George Santayana*, Scribner's 1956.

[2] *Ibidem.*

We choose several poems from the large cycle of *Songs,* in our opinion the most interesting of C. A. L.'s poetic output. While his *Sonnets* and *Lookout's Letters* have been analyzed, his recent poems praised — as for example, one of the latest pieces, *Man in Orbit,* published in one of the last issues of "Poet" [3] — the *Songs* have never been discussed in criticism, nor are they published in their full extent.

The whole cycle, provocatively entitled *Four Dozen Songs,* consists of four smaller divisions: 1) *Early Songs,* 2) *More Songs,* 3) *New Songs,* and 4 *Late Songs.* Almost all of the poems are extremely short; a 2-3 stanza structure prevails. All of the titles are emphatically symbolic in their deep meaning, while on the surface they refer to ordinary objects and phenomena. The symbolic meaning of a title reveals itself only after we succed in disclosing thoroughly the meaning of the poem.

We shall begin with the song which opens the cycle:

NOON SONG

(1)

Noon so clear
　　night so long:
Shan't I dare
　　invent a song?

(2)

Time so little
　　change so near:
Words so brittle
　　who will hear?

(3)

Yet let who can
　　turn breath to song:
Love in man
　　lasts not long.

On the surface, this song is presented in the simplest form: two downbeats tonic verse, composed in three stanzas, each of four lines, with cross rhyming (*a, b, a, b,*) [4]. The poem is "imageless"; that is, it does not contain metaphoric expression, either fixed or newly coined. But its symbolism, so diffuse at first sight, turns out to be masterfully constructed by an inner logic. One principle governs the overall structure: the principle of o p p o s i t i o n s. Correspondence of opposed categories

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[3] "Poet". An International Monthly, March, 1968.

[4] N. B.: the type of rhyme: *clear / dare,* today irregular, and which was fully realized phonologically in old English — is very characteristic for C.A.L.'s poetry; cf. such instances as *good / blood,* in *Table Song,* and many others.

and ideas runs between and within the stanzas. In stanza (1), *noon* in its clearness is opposed to *night*. The reason why a poet is inspired "to invent a song", besides the stimulating role of the clearness of noon, is the length of time which allows him to do it (*night so long*). But in stanza (2), the opposite idea comes about, the time appears to be too short ("Time so little / change so near..."). Therefore doubt takes over as to the whole plan of "inventing a song", the doubt reinforced by the feeble nature of words which will not be able to get through to and reach a listener ("Words so brittle / who will hear?"). However the last stanza, in spite of the doubts previously expressed, brings the final decision, the imperative directed to everyone "who can" to be attentive to "song". The reason for such an unexpected conclusion is given elliptically in the closing lines: "Love in man / lasts not long". These lines create a contrasting parallel to the second verse of stanza (1): while there a "song" was planned because of l e n g t h of time, here the reason is just the opposite: it should be created because a moment which gives it a power — love — is s h o r t. This opposition is the strongest one for it operates with the same category of t i m e although in two different contexts: In the first case it is an open sequence of time, time passing ("night so long"), whereas in the second case manifestation of time is given as the duration of an inner experience of man ("Love in man / lasts not long"). Thus the parallel is rather hidden and has to be "deciphered". On the other hand, it is reinforced and further revealed by another structural factor, the pair of rhymes, identical but reversed: (1) *long / song*, (3) *song / long* — which relate creation of "song" to time factor (*long*) and where the first "long" refers to time sufficient for creation, whereas the second indicates its shortness. This pair of rhyme makes a frame for the whole poem and endows it with a finesse of epigrammatic expression.

The principle of alternating contrasts and parallels, or, in other terms, changing "decisions" creates a basic pattern of the poem — an internal dialogue of the poet with himself.

In the given context, the concluding phrase: "Love in man / lasts not long", turns out to contain a latent definition of a source of poetry: man's love, which ought to be expressed in the very moment when the flame of feeling is high — in the moment of "noon". Thus the title itself reveals its symbolic meaning.

RUSTIC SONG

(1)

Things there are that will not keep:
Salt in the cellar, butter in the pan,
Wood in the woodpile, snow on the roof,
Broom in the field or hay in the barn;

(2)

> Milk in the oven, money in the pocket,
> Rage in the mind or heat in the heart,
> A maidenhead in a double bed —
> Things there are that will not keep!

This song, "imageless" and rhymeless, is patterned on the principle of juxtaposition. On the surface, the things juxtaposed all belong to the same category: they are "rustic" things of everday usage. But what is of real interest here is the means of disappearence of things. The key phrase puts emphasis exactly on this aspect: "Things there are that will not keep". This phrase opens and closes the song. While the nouns are patent, the verbal categories are to be revealed:

> salt (is eaten)
> butter (melts)
> wood (burns)
> snow (melts and evaporates)
> broom (is plowed and decomposed)
> milk (evaporates)
> money (is spent).

Thus "things which will not keep" disappear each by a different means. This hidden property makes the juxtaposition of nouns so puzzling. The puzzle is increased by mixing the two abstract nouns with the concrete ones: "Rage in the mind or heat in the heart", and by treating them as if their nature was the same as that of the other things which "will not keep". Consequently, the nature of disappearance of these two "things" is not so clear and cannot be pinpointed by one relevant verb. All we know is that they "will not keep". The penultimate line introduces an even more complicated category; "a maidenhead in a double bed" will not keep either because a maiden will not stay in a double bed, or because she will loose her property of being maiden if she does stay.

And yet all the juxtaposed "things" do have a common denominator in their disappearence: c o n s u m p t i o n. This, in turn, is necessarily concerned with the factor of t i m e, which builds a bridge between the two poems in question. It also changes basically the whole tonality of the song, which pretends to be innocent and naive. Under the disguise of a "rustic song", a joke (as readers and listeners often take it), we see a profound message about the passing of human values: feelings, destinies, lives. Once again, the symbolic meaning is deciphered beneath the purely referential level.

FOOL'S SONG

(1)

Lean in the greenhood of my fearful years,
Lost in the world's dust fallow I lay,
Dreaming of thunder, hopeful of rain —
A boy in December, an old man in May.

(2)

Gone the loud thunder, gone with the rain:
A lightning-struck branch has burnt to an ember;
Lost in the world's dust lightly I sing —
An old man in May, a boy in December...

The most complex of the three, *Fool's song* offers at least two levels of interpretation. At first sight, the message seems to read as follows: the one who proceeds without common sense is a fool. "Lost in the world's dust", he still sings; he dreams of things commonly undesirable — of thunder and rain. He feels like an old man in May, the month of spring and a symbol of youth, but he claims to be young again in December, the month opening winter, when everything withers, dies and becomes old.

If we carefully examine the whole structure of the poem, a significant new perspective can be acquired. The opening phrase presents an interesting case of a refreshed metaphor. A fixed metaphoric expression, "green years" [5], by virtue of transformations, obtains a completely new coloring. The adjective (*green*) becomes an abstract noun (*greenhood*), whereas the noun itself is modified by a new adjective: *fearful*. Thus, the years are not "green" but "fearful", and what is left of the fixed metaphor and therefore of traditional understanding, is only "greenhood": an abstract noun, brittle, unreal thing, a phantom. But it is "greenhood" which is used concretely, like such phrases as "world's dust". The abstract lends its coloring to a concrete noun, and *vice versa*.

These „fearful years" changed him from a "boy in December" into world. In the first stanza, the lyrical hero lies "fallow", that is, passive and unable, "dreaming" of thunder and rain which can bedew him — a barren soil — and make him "fertile".

These "fearful years" changed him from a "boy in December" into "an old man in May". So traumatic was the experience to be "fallow"; or perhaps he became "fallow" because of his "fearful" experiences.

The second stanza forms a parallel to the first one, but with an important variation. "The loud thunder" and "rain" are gone. Our lyrical hero still lies "lost in the world's dust", but now he "lightly sings", despite some tragic events which took place in meantime: "a lightning-struck

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[5] N. B.: this metaphor is very often used by C.A.L., in many variations.

branch has burnt to an ember", some values have been destroyed or changed in the stream of time and events. Perhaps he himself had burnt during the thunder storm, of which he was dreaming at the beginning. Nonetheless, only now can he "sing", and moreover he has changed in more general way: from "an old man in May" b a c k to a "boy in December". This is a very interesting change: a cycle one. It reminds one of the changes in Nature itself, which undergoes perennial cycles of rebirth, in spite of death and tragedies which occur. So it is with man, and with a poet in the first place. His sudden regeneration can come, unexpectedly, from any event — even tragic and destructive.

And so, once again, the title of the poem reveals its ironic double--meaning.

The three above songs are all structured on "grammatical tropes". A number of poems in the *Songs* are built on another principle, the sound pattern. For example:

THE PRIVATE BED

1

Whether the bed is stone or straw,
Whether the garden's green or bare,
Whether the flesh be warm or chill,
Whether the worms be far or near:

2

Each loves alone, each lies alone,
Each leaves alone, each dies alone —
Whether the garden's bare or green,
Whether the bed is grass or stone...

The two-stanza iambic tetrameter shows a striking accumulation of monosyllabic words, particularly in the first stanza. Of 23 word units [6] there we have 18 monosyllabic ones, whereas the second stanza has 16 monosyllables in 23 words. Let us notice also a remarkable symmetry of word number in both stanzas. The symmetry is underscored by the caesura, under stress, after the second foot, with the exception of the second line in stanza (1), and the penultimate line in stanza (2). This classical type of caesura is particularly emphasized in the first two lines of stanza (2), for it coincides with the intonation boundary between two clauses and therefore breaks the line into two identical segments.

Another kind of symmetry is offered by the sound pattern of the poem:

1. 2. 3. 4. *whether the*
1. 3. 4, *be;* 1. *bed,* 2. *bare* (bɛ)

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[6] Articles are, naturally, excluded from the counting although they function in a metrical and sound pattern.

1. 2. 3. 4. *or* and 8 surrounding (r);
in total 1:2; 2:4; 3:2; 4:4
1. *stone, straw*
2. *garden's green*
3. the flesh be *warm;*
4. the *worms* be *far*

The extreme saturation by sound similarities is greatly supported by the first kind of symmetry — the repetition of monosyllabic words — since such a structure agglomerates word boundaries and this, in turn, contributes to a stronger perception of the sound.

The main message is conveyed by the set of subordinating paratactic clauses, whereas the rest of the poem consists of subordinated clauses, so that the whole is structured as one sentence. Consequently, the subordinating clauses are the only affirmative set of clauses.

The categories in these two lines: *love, lie* [7], *departure* and *death,* are declared to belong to the same realm; everyone has to face them *alone.* Surprisingly enough, we accept this, although ordinarily we would not do it so readily — it is not an axiomatic affirmation. Not necessarily does one *"love alone",* on the contrary, the feeling not only h a s an object but often is s h a r e d by the object. A l i e can also involve two poeple, and the same holds true for departure.

But in poetic language new axioms can be coined. *Love, lie* and *leave* become all of a sudden related by virtue of their sound similarity. *Lie* and *die* also display their kinship because they rhyme. This powerful poetic operation, called by the Russian Formalists "poetic ethymology", is masterfully utilized here, supported by the whole structure of the poem which is so strongly saturated by sound repetitions.

There is another factor which reinforces our acceptance of the poet's point of view. The pronoun *alone* falls on the second and fourth foot of the iambic tetrameter, that is, on the two strong downbeats of the meter [8]. Moreover, these strong metrical downbeats coincide with the logical accent which this word carries by virtue of its syntactic position. So the word acquires a particularly forceful argumentative value and carries the message through. Semantically related to the adjective "private" used in the title, *alone* lends to this word part of its weight.

And once again, the title acquires a symbolic and ironic significance:

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[7] This word should be taken here in its double meaning: 1) to lie down; 2) to tell the falshood.

[8] Cf. studies by R. J a k o b s o n and K. T a r n o v s k i who investigated the iambic pattern in Russian metrics. Their conclusions apply also to English iambic meter.

"private" becomes u n i v e r s a l since the poem generalizes about human experience.

The puzzle of C. A. Lengyel's poetry, which is "powerful", and at the same time classically simple, can be solved by looking into its "deep structure", that is, by investigating its grammatical, phonological and syntactic patterns. It shows first of all, that "imageless" poetry, poetry built on strictly grammatical tropes, can be strongly symbolic. The *Songs* speak about human life and destiny, and "human life is symbolic because it is meaningful". Consequently, they are metaphysical since metaphysical questions are those dealing with human destiny — for which there is no answer. The only answer that the *Songs* offer is that the world, with human life upon it, is a great and perennial riddle. In spite of our frustrated expectations, it is in our nature to keep striving for the solution of this riddle. Such a message is shared by all the great poetry of all ages. And such poetry is that which strives t o   c o m m u n i c a t e. According to Lengyel this is the very nature of any real poetry: "Despite the numerous perverters of the word, poetry remains one of the great and magical arts of communication" [9].

ZAGADNIENIE „KLASYCYZMU" WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ POEZJI AMERYKAŃSKIEJ

(„CZTERY TUZINY PIEŚNI" CORNELA ADAMA LENGYELA)

STRESZCZENIE

Zagadkę poezji Cornela Adama Lengyela, poezji klasycznie „naturalnej" i prostej, można rozwiązać przez przyjrzenie się jej „wewnętrznej strukturze", tzn. przez zbadanie jej pod kątem gramatyki, fonologii i składni. Okazuje się przede wszystkim, że poezja „bezobrazowa", poezja, której tworzywo stanowią ściśle gramatyczne tropy, może być zdecydowanie symboliczna. *Pieśni (Songs)* mówią o ludzkim życiu i przeznaczeniu, a „życie ludzkie jest symboliczne, ponieważ jest wieloznaczne". W rezultacie jedno i drugie jest sprawą metafizyki, albowiem metafizyka zadaje pytania, na które odpowiedzi brak. Jedyną odpowiedź, jaką dają *Pieśni*, stanowi to, że świat, a wraz z nim życie ludzkie jest wielką i wieczną zagadką. Na przekór zawiedzionym nadziejom — w naturze naszej leży podtrzymywanie tendencji do rozwiązania owej zagadki. Takie posłannictwo jest udziałem każdej wielkiej poezji w każdej epoce, a wielka poezja to ta, która usiłuje coś z a k o m u n i k o w a ć. Według Lengyela istota każdej prawdziwej poezji tkwi w tym, że: „Na przekór różnym żonglerom językowym poezja pozostaje wielką i magiczną sztuką porozumienia".

Streściła *Janina Kosińska*

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[9] C. A. L e n g y e l, *The Creative Mind* (From the manuscript of the text in preparation for publication).