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“We Free Singers Be”: Poetry of Etheridge Knight · *Frank Allen*

I

IN OUR TIME, creative energy flows to the vernacular while it carries mental complexity and psychological tension. The Croatian machinist, Irish artisan, Norwegian farmer, the Amerindian and Afro-American, the seamstress, the blacksmith, and the logger have colorful, dynamic verbal patterns, but their real interest, I suspect, to literary figures, is as a refuge from the over-refinement of an urban literary culture rather than because of their innate, specialized speech. Love my language, love me. Is the literary world better or worse because no one writes creatively in Latin? The Roman Empire is out; it's the Etruscans we adore. “Le style c'est l'homme même.” You are what you write. “L'homme est le mot.” “Great” literature fuses style and content. Writers trying to resuscitate a style after its time is up have a ludicrous appeal. This didn't keep poets for two hundred years from imitating Shakespeare's blank verse.

II

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapors weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.

“Tithonus”

Cozy, secure, narcissistic, we recognize ourselves in this mirror of pre-technological floating anxiety. The splendid decaying “woods” (words) are so Kierkegaardian that the modern mind in its nuclear winter goes tingling all over. “Polite, meaningless words.” A generic intellectual's, elitist, refined. Aloof from the sweating mason, ironworker, laundress; aloof from one's mother's homespun drone or father's over-worked shrill piping; aloof from everything except its reflection in the mirror. One comprehends “after many a summer dies the swan” not from those literal

words but from the resonance of the vibrations of sadness that throng behind urbanities between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born. (How many live swans have you seen outside a zoo? If the answer is fewer than nine-and-fifty, you miss a free trip to Coole Park.) Still, these lines have verifiable beauty. Stately, somber, as everything Victorian (even Dickensian comedy) is somber, as though from too much brooding about the death of little girls. A laureate's voice as vates among ivy and Milton bound in morocco. Hoarse, tired; a church organ, incense and altar lilies. Druggy, summertime-ish, unborn and beyond death; in short, literary. "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem," argues Poe.

III

An' one night I cooms 'oam like a bull
 gotten loose at a faair,
 An' she wur a-waaitin' fo'mma, an' cryin'
 and tearin' 'er aair,
 An' I tummled athurt the craadle an'
 sweär'd as I'd breäk ivry stick
 O' furniture 'ere i' the 'ouse, an' I gied our
 Sally a kick,
 An' I mash'd the taables an' chairs, an' she
 an' the baby beäl'd [bellowed],
 Fur I knaw'd naw moor what I did nor a
 mortal beäst o' the feäld.

"The Northern Cobbler"

Now the orthodox literary person would like to give me a swift kick. All right, he or she says, if you want democratic cock-crowing and horse-whining, you'll get it. To the elitist, the spoken voice is what Tennyson's northern cobbler does. He comes in, smashes things and, remorseful, starts talking like Micah. Fidelity to the spoken voice, however, starts with this nineteenth-century neo-Gothic infernal machine. This determined imitation shows masterly intelligence trying to recreate a primitive voice, but from the outside. It's too good to mock, so it gets anthologized. Imitation rather than original, waxen like Madame Tussauds. A creation of will (note the rhymed couplets) as though Tennyson, in his

study at Farringford, willed language on to the paper, disdainful pen and ink. This Victorian parlor of a poem has a semblance of the spoken voice that, no doubt, for its time was as revolutionary as “argosies of magic sail.”

IV

All is beautiful,
All is beautiful,
All is beautiful, indeed.
Now the Mother Earth
Now the Father Sky,
Meeting, joining one another,
Helpmates ever, they.
All is beautiful,
All is beautiful,
All is beautiful, indeed.

The beginning of the world, I am thinking about it.
The beginning of the world, I am talking about it.

Navajo

The bona fide, unself-conscious, unBurger-Kingized oral tradition is monotonous repetition with integrity of stone. All id, tribal, anonymous as succotash, wampum, or beadwork. Egoless but dignified. Fragile as the nomadic tribes that fell before whiskey and smallpox, fragile as cattail leaves, a bird's egg, mother-of-pearl. In a spiritual way, austere as the cry of a crow, an owl, the yelp of a Shoshoni spearing a buffalo. Without internal mechanism to debug like a computer program, it needs no well-wrought urn, no exegesis. Plain as a penny, lofty as a mesa. (“What you see is what you get.”) Visceral but not frustrated visceral. Rather a handful of corn meal, sunshine, burning sagebrush. As irrelevant to the intellectualized tink and tunk and tunk-a-tunk-tunk self-consciousness as a drum beat. A little dull (to be honest) as living in a pueblo would be dull. (Do Ojibwa buy tape decks or do middle-managers buy teepees?) The pre-technological artist (painters in the Aurignacian caves, cathedral architects, ballad composers) didn't bother to sign their works. It wouldn't

even have crossed their minds to make their identity depend upon acknowledgement of authorship. (How many people would write poetry if poems had to be published anonymously?) Communal, dateless, a shard of exultation, a bone that we can neither swallow nor throw up, frightening in irreducible thingness, relic and curiosity.

V

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.

“If We Must Die”

The people’s voice becomes desperate and angry, with brittle pride that rings in the air like a fire bell. Although it is one man’s voice (Claude McKay), it stands with tens of thousands and speaks for them, muffled and rejected, called a non-voice. (The poet is today’s invisible man.) After this, black and brown bards cried “Yes!” until they broke through the gobbledegook of bureaucratic unaccountability. This is the bloody grass of Sand Creek, Colorado (200 Cheyenne women and children died there), the flank of a tree where blacks died (70 blacks were lynched in 1919 alone), the cutting edge against genocide and racism. However, it looks backward, not forward. It wants a hero where no hero can breathe the air of Gucci loafers and bar codes. It doesn’t fully believe in itself, so it looks to Shakespeare, but Shakespeare’s voice is mute because blank verse is not the people’s voice, not the voice of tumult, agony, and forcing things to the limit where they finally do change. Stilted, a little shrill, in its day it swept through the continent like an electric charge, a forerunner, before it became channeled into prose, diatribe, and oratory. (We need a Martin Luther King of poetry.)

VI

It’s easy ’nough to titter w’en de stew is smokin’ hot,
But hit’s mighty ha’d to giggle w’en dey’s nuffin’ in de pot.

“Philosophy”

This inward honesty does not throw itself against the barricades of white supremacy like McKay's lines, but suddenly turns from a view of Pisgah and realizes that poetry and one's voice are a fusion of what's plain and familiar. The way we speak, Paul Lawrence Dunbar reveals, when we're eating breakfast, fixing the car, talking with our parents, is poetry and one can not do better than to mould language to that shape and substance. Not only not do better, but can have no other more honest and courageous ambition, in an age when mass marketing runs rampant, falsifying regional dialects in snack bars, union halls and waterfronts, from the Appalachian highlands to the Pacific mountains. Before the assault of Madison Avenue which bastardizes language (among other sins) as much as propaganda manipulates people's repressed fears, the poet sees his or her duty, not to illuminate transcendental truth but to immortalize the rudiments of a heritage, skin and bones of a soul not the halo. Whitman's purpose before he was lured away by the siren song of soul-love from the twanky banjo-strains of folk accents.

VII

The daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains

The Lone Ranger

Experience has assembled here across the floor of Grand Central Station under the unmoving facsimile of the heavens. Smooth, beaten language testifies to something that lived hard for a while and, although gone, still stands hard, anachronistic, within itself, irrefutable because it was neither eccentric nor floss, but many people's voices like worn rocks at the shore where the surf of pain washes over it. A myth that many believed for a long time, deeply. Like the crossbow which was Europe's major weapon from the twelfth century to the sixteenth century: 400 years of the same weapon. You accept this prose-poem of many voices, this earnest, dependable force that corresponded to what once lived, accomplished something, and died away under "Ryan's lunch, hatters, insurance and medicines." In a humble American way, in an iron-girdery, proletarian way, heroic.

VIII

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe
Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen
its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

Langston Hughes deliberately "blackens" a literary perception, working backwards, as it were, from printed literature to the spoken voice. The speaker obviously never "saw" Lincoln go down to New Orleans and only in a generalized way ever "heard" the Mississippi sing. A poet not a sharecropper would say "I've seen / its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset." Still, Hughes moves in the direction of the vernacular.

IX

If a writer were to represent the way we actually speak, the result would be clichés, fragments, and parentheses. All literature imitates. How close one remains to spoken usage and how much a literary Pateresque awareness intervenes are the relevant touchstones. While some struggle to become educated, others seek to become uneducated or even de-educated. Since the time of Rousseau, we have heard sounded the death knell of culture and society, usually rung most loudly by the intelligentsia, intellectuals whose enlightenment depends upon the printed word. D. H. Lawrence is an example of one with great literary sophistication who argues how important it is to be primitive and natural. (Don Ramón is among his most contrived "literary" spokesmen.) Once you're educated, you're educated. Not all the king's horses and all the king's men can get Gary Snyder uneducated.

X

What yo' gwine to do when yo' lamp burn down?

Spiritual

Not quite as anonymous as the Navajo, the speaker could be someone like Dilsey. (Audre Lord inverts the image of the black mother.) There is a

raspy toughness to this, even an odor. You could take the pulse of “What yo’ gwine to do when yo’ lamp burn down?” The written and colloquial fuse so you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. With just a hint of the sublime so that it is memorable not mental. One wants to shake hands with this line. It points to eternity as easily as a grandmother would relate some family memory handed down through the time. Rather than gaudy and grandiose, it is particularized, moving from the literal to the symbolic so that you don’t even realize that the real subject is death and atonement. Actually you’re listening to a person, a poet, speaking.

XI

the skin
of my poems
may be green, yes,
and sometimes
wrinkled
or worn

“Genesis”

Any original, native oral culture, it seems to me, in America is all but gone. The necessary question, and a very different issue, is whether it can be re-created. Certainly it is a diverse, plentiful heritage that should have as much claim on our critical and creative intelligence as the literary heritage. When you hear poetry recited (not memorized), you feel tactile, free, even amazed. Oral or “folk” poetry (to which literati are tone-deaf) asserts that the intellectual luggage we bear around is, at bottom, for the artist, superfluous. One should open the mind and mouth and sing. Knight carries his “works” in his mind which is an inaccurate way to express it. Rather, his mind, memory and poetry are not in separate compartments. A musical instrument instead of a mechanical device. (How many would be poets if they could only publish as much as they could recite?) To Knight, what is written down is a little suspect. What is verbal, recited, and aurally transmitted possesses creative energy. The main point is not whether his “Hard Rock” is better than, say, “Sunday Morning,” but that a singer is among us, singing. Despite everything our soci-

ety does to authentic singing, from ignoring it to making it rich (both of which stifle creativity), it has, in fact, produced a poet whose personal speech has been transformed into a public, poetic voice.

XII

This poem
This poem
This poem / is a song / about FEELING
about the Bone of feeling
about the Stone of feeling
And the Feather of Feeling
“Belly Song”

Mammy, Uncle Tom, Sambo, Rastus, Steppin’ Fetchit, Harlem Sportin’ Life, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Kingfish, Amos and Andy, Catfish Row, the brute Negro, the bad “nigger” are stereotypes that save thinking. In the mind of the Other, comes the conventionalized image of what lies incommunicable beyond. Gwendolyn Brooks first replaced these images by standing them on their heads. The bad “nigger” emerges as the Promethean black hero, liver gnawed by our American eagle. Rudolph Reed and Dorie Miller, Emmett Till, Mrs. Small, Annie Allen, Jessie Mitchell’s mother, and the Bronzeville woman in a Red Hat, whose dream sends “through onion fumes / Its white and violet, / fight with fried potatoes / And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,” become real individuals who drive the stereotypes out of literature into their last refuge, television. Throughout *Born of a Woman* are tributes to these large mythological figures inhabiting Bronzeville, a god’s acre of indignation and endurance that Brooks manufactured from Chicago’s slums. Knight rids these characters of their lingering romanticism with a cry of the black prisoner, the outcast, hero, and martyr—Hard Rock, Shine, Flukum. The prisoner epitomizes the black American separated from his roots. Hard Rock (one thinks of McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*) has been gelded with a lobotomy and EST: “Crushed / He had been our Destroyer, the doer of things / We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do.” This often anthologized poem is neither sentimental nor angry, rather colloquial, elegiac, close to the suffering and negation that eats at

the underbelly of American success. Building on his “classical” forebears — Brooks and Dudley Randall — Knight’s song is non-vituperative, satirical, amazed at the excesses of racism, alternatively comic and melancholy. Flukum, the patriot and soldier, comes “home” only to be shot there: “He died surprised, he had thought / the enemy far away on the other side of the sea.” This ironic summary statement retains a flat, musical freshness, just teetering into conversation. Deep outrage is under full control. A “poetic” voice fuses with an “actual” voice.

XIII

Everyone talks like John Chancellor, all educated, reading the wire services, L. L. Bean’s mail order catalogue, *Time*, *Parade*, all watching “Real People.” The Black voice withstands the *Harbrace Handbook*. African song, spirituals, jazz, blues, folk stories, assimilated into the American experience, remain apart, faintly alien, fed from a different vein:

I done shot dope, been to jail, swilled
wine, ripped off sisters, passed bad checks,
changed my name, howled at the moon,
wrote poems, turned
backover flips, flipped over backwards
(in other words)
I been confused, fucked up, scared, phony
and jive
to a whole / lot of people . . .

Haven’t you?

In one way or another ?

Enybody else wanna cop-out?

“Cop-out Session”

The fluidy, unheightened, thrown-together quality of a street corner conversation yet has permanence, something quite close to the felt mood, a double-edge quality of immediacy and beyondness. It neither grovels at our feet nor soars over our head. It has the gristly honesty of the outcast who has been through too much to deceive anyone, above all himself. An

earned confession, not a paranoid confession. If the poet is an outsider (so the hypothesis runs), if all American poets must be outcasts, then one's primary goal is self-understanding instead of a meaningless venting of fury at philistine America. "I done shot dope" is the glittering eye of the Ancient Mariner that will not release the wedding guest on the way to the marriage of materialism and success and "the duplicate grey standard faces." With crafted honesty poised between an apology and a boast, we learn, in uncontrived, free cadences, that the poet as alien and vagabond can be as honest in facing up to his own internal contradictions as formal, mainstream poets. The apostate Huckleberry Finn, we learn when he apologizes to the slave Jim, has superior moral virtue to the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Following the trail of one's own voice is hard, particularly the conversational impromptu voice which has nothing to fall back on except its own timbre and resilience. A mythology (seemingly the quest of all twentieth-century poets) makes it easier, but a mythology is evasion of where he's been:

I been to Detroit & Chicago
Been to New York city too.
Said I done strolled all those funky avenues
I'm still the same old black boy with the same old blues
"A Poem for Myself")

XIV

There is a sadness to his voice that is the equivalent of the "blues" along those "funky avenues." (Someone says that the "blues" are the black's tragic voice.) The blues voice, origins of jazz, be-bop and boogie-woogie, melancholy black working songs, prison or funeral songs, music that haunts the white psyche, comprise a luminous requiem that is the bitter residue of every American search for identity. The blues are the music of the grindstone that sharpens the black writer's consciousness. Beats by and large were middle-class whites slumming; the black confronts the abyss of homelessness in his own "land."

The fears of years, like a biting whip,
Had cut deep bloody grooves
Across our backs.

“Hard Rock”

Language has suffered the same experience as the speaker, and it carries within it the same unwhimpering dignity.

XV

Knight and his songs share this same relationship. The written and the colloquial again fuse without embellishment. A scythe handle long used by a farmer. An heirloom pocketwatch. The wooden handle of axes and spear-shafts. Machinery sounds in a cotton mill. A printer or plumber's total reliance on and understanding of his craft. The mechanic's tools will never make Chippendale furniture, but they will fix a car transmission without dishonesty. There is something earthy and tranquil in this relationship between a maker and his or her tools, in the way that a housewife is so at ease with her spatula, wooden bowl, and measuring cup. A candor and responsiveness as though getting down to work, after all the “valedictory echoings” of life, were a pleasure. Work, somehow, equals song. Knight always seemed relieved to be settling into song.

XVI

We free singers be, baby
tall walkers, high steppers,
hip shakers, we free singers be
still waters sometimes too.

“We Free Singers Be”

His songs have many voices and many tones. As great poets have many voices (Stevens is ironic, philosophical, playful), Knight sings of many experiences: of prison, being in or out of love, comic tall-tale exaggeration, in lyrical bluesy or sad, death-haunted song. Never fake. He lives life variously rather than attempting to make statements about it. When the voices coalesce, Knight's poetry works best. Cell songs evoke sympathy

and outrage, but when he moves to intimacy, the voice is capable of unusual tenderness.

Day
and the sunlight playing in the green leaves
above us fell across your face traced the tears
in your eyes and love patterns in the wet grass.
and as they waited inside in triumphant patience
to take you away I begged you to stay.
“but, etheridge,” you said, “i don’t know what to do,”
and the love patterns shifted and shimmered in your eyes.
“Upon Your Leaving”

In the elegiac “The Idea of Ancestry,” a prisoner, thinking back to his roots, discovers that racism’s worst effect is that he is separated from his rural, provincial parents. His need for family oneness breaks through cocaine addiction, if only briefly:

I flirted with the women / I had a ball till the caps ran out
and my habit came down. That night I looked at my grand-
mother
and split / my guts were screaming for junk / but I was almost
contented / I had almost caught up with me.
(The next day in Memphis I cracked a croaker’s crib for a fix).

Now in jail, he reaffirms kinship with his family. There can be no doubt about the authenticity of this sense of race.

Each fall the graves of my grandfathers call me, the brown hills and
red gullies of mississippi send out their electric messages. . .

As with “What yo’ gwine to do when yo’ lamp burn down?” the real subject is death and salvation. Knight’s instinct to mistrust large statements makes him seek out exciting and original rhythms. Poetry as a tool instead of a diary or megaphone.

In Africa (not vinyl Africa), Knight undergoes a merging with the people, the land, and “deadness.” In a kind of Whitmanesque interweav-

ing of motifs — stone, blackness, and song — he both celebrates and mourns the origins of folk poetry.

The deadness was threatening us, the day
was dying with the sun, the stillness —
unlike the sweet silence after love / making or
the pulsating quietness of a summer night —
the stillness was skinny and brittle and wrinkled
by the precise people sitting on the wide white porch
of the big white house. . .

“Ilu, The Talking Drum”

where he is both totally merged into his heritage and one with himself. The music of “the stillness was skinny and brittle and wrinkled” comes spontaneously out of the land, out of the throat, precisely crafted yet natural as the drum’s ominous refrain, “kah doom, kah doom.” Knight’s intelligence recognizes the danger of merging with a threatening deadness while yet he comprehends that experience in song. “The beginning of the world, I am talking about it,” he says with the Navajo. In what time has winnowed itself is a kind of wisdom.

XVII

To read Knight is not to escape from or to transfigure America. It really isn’t a “comfortable” experience. He is too aware of the violent spaces between races and individuals to attempt grandiloquence. Equally he is too screwed into the mundane to attempt sleight of hand tricks. His poetry is clarified on the oilstone of experience. The sad, funky yet celebrative sound of his “blues” is experience being honed on the quartz grains of a grindstone. Raucous with showers of sparks, gritty, delicate. A whittled branch is more natural and no less beautiful than carved marble.