

Dawn Songs

SAMPLER

ALSO BY PETER RILEY (* SHEARSMAN TITLES)

POETRY

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The Linear Journal
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PROSE

Two Essays
Company Week
The Dance at Mociu *

Peter Riley

Dawn Songs

SAMPLER
preceded by
Mass Lyric

and followed by
On First Hearing Derek Bailey

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PREFACE

An obsession, which started when a Transylvanian village band played at a pub in Cambridge in 1993, led eventually through a lot of travelling and a lot of tapes and CDs and old travel books, to an essay on one of the song forms. It took a long time and it got finished, but the information never stopped coming in. It still hasn't stopped; it arrives piecemeal, mostly emerging from research in Hungarian and Romanian Englished into CD booklets and websites, or further extensions of the thesis develop through books on anything from psychodrama theory to bagpipes. Travel to Transylvania, now generally biannual, always leads to disturbing discoveries and contradictions. But the essay seemed to have completed itself and except for major reversals everything else was delegated to the notes.

Thus following the essay and its footnotes, is a big section of newly developed and unattached notes, 'Additional Notes', which are extensions or revisions to the essay, further topics shooting off at a tangent, etc. A whole new interpretation of one of the main theses of the essay sprouted up unexpectedly at the last moment and is given in the final section.

There is no doubt that the only trustworthy comment on a society comes from those who have lived there and spoken to many people and understood all the internal and external complexities without bias. That's not me. I was intoxicated by a string band in a pub in Cambridge in 1993, and it has led me to write where I have no authority, and don't even speak the three languages involved. I've tried to get involved with sociality only as it creates necessities which condition the music, and I think this is possible. But my final excuse rests on that evening in the rather dingy black-painted pub-theatre, The Boat Race, Cambridge (now, alas, some kind of smart eatery), with the band from the village of Soporul de Câmpie (now, alas, gone to U.S.A.) brought there by a professor from Cluj.¹ It was a rainy evening and there was an audience of about ten. We were told that they had never left their parish before, and they probably didn't know where exactly they were, but as soon as they started playing they found themselves – they were somewhere, and happy to be there. It was obvious that whatever "community" such a band served (which is not a simple question) I could hear them as clearly as anyone in the world, and the opening their music seemed to offer was something I had a right to. I only learned much later the reason for this: that I as much as they inhabit the history within which the music came into being.

NOTES

¹ This was in a way a fortunate introduction because the music arrived under a Romanian aegis. I was later to find that 80 percent of available research and comment comes from Hungary and most of it presents the music as Hungarian. Most outsiders are led to this music through Hungary and it can be very difficult to escape from the nationalist agenda; there is less Romanian research, it is more academic, and it is hard come by. It is also equally prejudiced. There is no Romanian “revival” version equivalent to *táncház* music. Hungarian researchers have ignored the Soporul band almost completely while devoting a lot of attention to the same kind of music from bands serving Hungarian-speaking villages in the same area. This could be a factor in what led the band to emigrate. My account of seeking them in their village and attending a dance they played for, is given in the title story of my *The Dance at Mociu*, 2003 (revised edition 2014). The leader, Șandorica, eventually returned to Transylvania and is now active in the area, noticeably stouter.

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DAWN SONGS ^a

In the repertoire of Transylvanian village bands working for the Hungarian-speaking population is a category known as the 'dawn song' (*hajnali*). In its full social use, which is now uncommon, it marks, in a quite elaborate and extended way, the termination of a dance or celebration, which would normally be at about the time of first light.

The bands normally consist of a virtuoso violin (or two) with a chordal viola (or two) and a string bass, and the players are traditionally gypsies.¹ Their services are required mainly for weddings and a few other festive occasions, dominated by eating, drinking (mainly very potent home-brewed fruit spirits) and a great deal of dancing, and these events can be of great length, 48 hours or more, during which the musicians have to play almost continuously.² While basically marking the end of the festivities, the dawn songs might also occupy an interval at the end of the first night. These people seem to be able to drink and dance and sustain festivity to almost superhuman lengths. But at a point just before dawn the dancing and noise stop, the musicians start playing preludial slow airs, and those who wish to sing approach them. One by one they step forward to face the musicians and sing a dawn song. The music may be played continuously, modulating from one song to another as each next singer comes forward. Sometimes a song may be taken up by a small group. This can go on for hours, sometimes involving some final dancing.

Other sources of information place the dawn songs differently.³ In this version they constitute the formal ending of the celebration, and only men are involved. In the first light of dawn the men process out of the house or yard led by the musicians playing, and, holding onto each other by the shoulders, they walk down the village street singing together, and are thus escorted back to their homes and occupations. As the group arrives at each man's door⁴ he sings his dawn song facing the musicians and company, as a form of farewell, until there are none left. This can take hours.⁵

We are talking about a large upland area, a country,⁶ of plain, penepain, hills, and mountains, most of it covered in large and scattered agricultural villages, most of them linear villages strung along roads. It is sometimes referred to, at least in parts, as one of the last true peasant societies left in Europe. This is half true in terms of land ownership and the sufficiency of the family smallholding, but it is very far from a 'classic' peasant society. There are a number of cities and market towns, but this music now belongs to the villages, to landed smallholders living in clusters of farms with a sub-class of

^a Notes to this section may be found beginning on p.53.

unlanded workers, often gypsies, living in small houses on the edges of the villages. In northern Transylvania much of the architecture was recently still of wood, including the churches. The surrounding land, usually hilly, is covered in cultivation strips except for the areas of pasture attached to each village or situated above it on mountain slopes, maintained by professional shepherds. In mountainous areas the shepherds are transhumant, living through the summer on the high pastures with the sheep, or alternatively smallholders themselves move into small “summer farms” on the intermediate slopes. The agriculture is self-sustaining and in the more remote areas still capable of ensuring self-sufficiency. The system of land tenure, which in every generation divides the family’s land equally among all children of both sexes, resists the formation of large capitalised farms and has in centuries past, in certain areas, protected the villages from the formation of aristocratic estates. State-enforced collectivization was resisted for a long time, and abolished immediately Ceaușescu fell.

The work is constant and arduous, from daybreak to night at certain seasons though minimal through the winter, highly regulated in extended family units, and people undertake it in full knowledge, these days, of the alternatives, and with a certain resigned fatalism. And surely sometimes, they live lives of contentment and fulfillment which do not need to rest on any form of innovation but only on maintaining a set cycle of necessities against a shifting world with its own possibilities of improvement. Into this duration the two forms of observance, calendrical and occasional, are set as major stations, of which, as in other places, the wedding shows by far the greatest resilience.⁷ The leafy nuptial crown, punned with the death wreath and the birth coronet, marks the central node of a concentric economy, however eroded round the edges.

So it is at first light in these family farms, the larger gatherings out in the yards under temporary textile awnings with lanterns, the smaller ones inside the houses,⁸ that the enormous expenditure of festive energy and persistence for whatever occasion, reaches at last its point of tiredness, and the movement of the dance gives place to the solitary singer, singing dawn songs. I assume it to be hushed then, I assume everyone to be listening.

It appears that this is or was to some extent an improvised singing, or at least that each person had his or her own song to sing and that its words might be self-composed and have bearing on the singer’s own fate. My own conjecture is that song texts were constantly re-composed in preparation for performance, and that during the long periods between celebrations people would, while watching the beasts or hoeing the land or weaving the textiles... have been preparing their next dawn song, by composing or revising words to a known tune. But it is also obvious from the examples given that singers

were free to sing pre-existing songs of several (but not any) different kinds on the dawn song platform, and songs could also be put together by taking phrases and whole verses from known songs into a new sequence.⁹

In most oral traditions the singer receives a song from the repertoire as material for re-shaping, re-stressing and re-figuring, both text and music, and this freedom can be exercised in very slight shifts of tone, pace, or ornament, or in radical transformation. It is one of the surprising liberties of supposedly strict self-regulating societies, but one which goes to the core of the structure. And generation upon generation the succession of singers continually reforms the piece, according to their own versions of desirable figuration and their own versions of living a life. An apparent extreme of this condition, which may be commoner than one would expect, is where the text, if not the music, is more-or-less completely self-composed by the singer as a thing wrought from his/her own fate and made public in a specially licensed arena such as the dawn-song. In the notes to the CD of the band from Szászfenés, Kalotaszeg¹⁰ (recorded 1998) László Kelemen indicates that such not only did but in some places still does take place in the social performance of village singing in Transylvania: (my italics) ‘The song text can be applied to the melody according to taste or whim, and when our informants sang, *they sang mostly of their own fates, in the old style.*’

In unaccompanied song this means a freedom to re-form both text and music according to your own lights, though the melody would of course have to retain its contours and basic figurations, or it would no longer be an ‘old melody’ as most of them are described. Accompaniment by ensemble, introduced into this music probably during the earlier 20th century, tends to ‘freeze’ the piece musically, but with a margin of collaborative extemporisation still possible between singer and band-leader, which will be a lot easier with slow tunes such as dawn songs.¹¹

It is also common in Transylvanian village music (as in other traditions) for melodies to ‘belong to’ individual patrons, who are entitled to demand that the musicians play them on the instant, whether for listening, dancing, or singing. This proprietorship probably has a historical relationship to the practice of personal re-invention of songs, though I know of no evidence for what exactly that relationship may have been.¹²

* * *

It is obvious that anything called a dawn song will, if it fulfils half the potential of its title, face permanent questions of ending and beginning and the extent of the world figured against the daily journey of light. If the Transylvanian dawn song does this, it does it by a relentless focus on diurnal

reality projected into a cathartic theatre, thus on working destiny rather than epiphany.

The dawn song functions as a bridge out of the event: at weddings, funerals, christenings or whatever, it marks the end of exceptionality and turns to face the continuing world beyond, returning from the festive island to normality. But this normality is expressed as a condition of fated extremity which remains within the lyric fiction, with the seriousness of a form which has never been allowed to float away from the demands of realism, but has been continually referred back to actuality by the intervention of individual singers in its course of development. Even in the fixed texts that now circulate around the urban 'revival' scene it is possible to sense that the poems have been wrought out of individual past fates which still adhere to them.

In festive space the entire community faces inwards and revolves in strict order round the node at the centre of the birth-death chain, thus confirming its right to subsistence and hope, but also confirming the extent and symmetry of the structure and thus its avenues to freedom. The actual ring-dance is now reserved for the opening of such events and most of the dancing is an elegant, it is said 'court-derived', couple dancing, in which the couples constantly turn this way and that, separate and come together. (The Romanian for the ring-dance, *hora* – also meaning a type of lyrical song – relates to the Greek Χορός.) The mutual self-illusioning of festive release is forced to a focus which excludes questions and holds all of history in the present moment, a communal protection. But at the end of that the temple doors are opened by individuals singing their own songs, 'Yes, but the singularities also wield sceptres, and lead us back to uncertainty, loss, and hope.'¹³

People come forward at the end of an episode of formalised immediacy, a community hypnosis which steps outside time, and declare in song the demands of necessity, *within the edge* of the festive enclosure, bearing that theatre with them into questions of actual fate. What is created, always anew, in that transitional space thus has the potential of drama, even tragedy, wrought out of the lives that surround it, as the more individual and particular it is the more it acts out a cosmic relentlessness. And that is exactly the sense of the steady pace and harmonic richness of the dawn-song music.

The texts of these songs are for the most part deeply and bleakly unhappy. They deal in personal inadequacy, failure and ill-fate, either directly or more often through the modes of the common lot and its traditional sung repertoire, songs of the acknowledged unbearables: love-loss, economic failure, orphaning, toil without reward, punishment, exile, imprisonment, recruitment,¹⁴ but not death. Or rather only the living-death, the welcome-

death, of the self's abandon to impossibility, not the lament for the lost other.¹⁵ And sometimes they figure a totalised sense of loss by singular image (candle-flame extinguished, bird flown, flower faded etc.). Where other communities sing at this terminal point 'We wish you a merry Christmas' or 'Auld lang syne' and send us home full of affirmative comfort, these people show a wound you would hardly suspect to exist.¹⁶

The ethos of the songs has distinct echoes in (or from) the cultivation of 'melancholy' in 16th and 17th century European 'courtly' song, with which it shares a strong sense of quasi-exilic loss, a refined cultivation of misfortune and undeserved rejection to the point of welcoming death. In the poetics they share an at times extreme hyperbolism involving degrees of wit and even humour, and in the music a relentless steady movement as of a slow march or pavane. The convergence can at times be startling, and some of these village songs could stand alongside some of Dowland's, though I think there are important distinctions to be made concerning the localisations of the dawn-song, and the absence from it of the pastoral distancing of the courtly lyric [see Appendix 4A on p.92]. Where the songs are circumstantial they deal with known realities of life which are felt as integral to a common fate rather than depicting an individual accident or the typicality of a phase of life or a 'character'. Where they are generalised they come closer to some of the more extreme lyrics of cultivated melancholy, especially on the 'welcome death' theme, but tending to cling more to social particulars and conditions, and deploying a minimal symbolised imagery of bird, tree, and flower, which relates to pastures and fields rather than gardens, so that even the expiring moan is a factor of the substantiated locality.

Only through these iterated invocations of the site-specific societal whole is recognition of the species condition approached. Even when it enters the kind of ironic localism which makes fun of itself, it takes on board absolute fatality. The peasant society may represent itself as an inescapable framework (which it no longer is, if it ever was) but by making even the fullest hurt intimate to participation and belonging it transcends small-scale subjective solution, or home-comfort. The loss remains stark, unmitigated and finally terrestrial.

The bird wanders everywhere, it's an orphan,
Bújdosik az árva madár...

It lands on the edge of every country¹⁷
It's an orphan just like me
Poor thing, of course it wanders.

I'm going to have a house built for myself
But it's not going to have any windows.
When I'm inside they'll cover me with dirt,
Then they won't be able to push me around any more.¹⁸

These bleak, defeated lyrics are performed head up, full-throated, in consultation with the musicians (who have been playing for two days, their fingers are blistered and they can hardly stand up, but they never falter¹⁹). And we can assume that rather than actual orphans they are performed, sincerely, by heads of families and owners of flocks and smallholdings, by respected matrons, by village beauties and likely lads, by satisfied grandparents... who sing themselves into the role of the meanest reject of the village, the fool and the luckless, and they sing it as their own song. The whole tone of the event forbids the adoption of a fictive *persona*, where it occurs, to be a distancing or disowning act. What they are singing is human commonality, the fate of one is the fate of all, the figure that opens up the imaginative possibilities of yearning. It is extraordinary for this to be coded so clearly into social or festive custom.

The stately music transfers the fictive lament into a theatre of great poise and deliberation. The desolation is sheer, but held quite proudly before the world, you can sense that it is also smiled at, as something splendid, because it is known for its truth and its belonging, the common recognition of its elevated fatalism. This recognition is bound within the singer's own group, by which the fictive disaster remains in the realm of possible fatality (no one is going to start singing, 'Alas, I am a poor gypsy...'), which in some villages would be considered laughable.)²⁰ The penetrative and destructive excess, the hopelessness patiently born, are intimate to the music with its constantly yearning but dignified tone derived from its complicated, probably partly aristocratic, ancestry. The extent of ever-present potential disaster is viewed from a personal elevation won from history, a distinct and endorsed frame of mind which encompasses the extremes of the possible world by acknowledging precisely the wholeness which shows no mercy.

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And I thought as long as the world turns
The candles would still burn

But now I see they are dying,
That they are really dying...

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