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How Blue Can Red Get? – Music as Metaphor in the Poetry of Thomas McGrath

Explicit liber: “Here the book ends.” McGrath changes the standard phrase to “Explicit Carmen” to end *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. The year is 1984: here the 407-page song ends. Distant echoes ring as forty-odd years earlier, in his first collection, *First Manifesto* (1940), McGrath had given exactly that Latin title to a poem. This “Carmen” – “song” or “charm” – found at both ends of McGrath's career, is no accident. He had, after all, chosen to entitle his last book *Death Song*.

Adept at puns, he had probably intended “Explicit Carmen” to be read in various ways: its title was certainly meant in the sense of “explicit song” if not as “explicitly carmine,” i.e. “red.” For the song was programmatic in the way you expect a Communist's manifesto to be: “Warmed by our work, movement of all men / . . . We shall be free / But not to starve. We shall exhume the day.” (*Manifesto* n.p.)

In the preface to *Les Yeux d'Elsa* (1942), Louis Aragon protested that, contrary to what critics had asserted about *Le Crève-Coeur*, a previous collection of his, his calling a poem “song” or “lament” should by no means be taken to indicate that he had set out to enlarge the national repertoire by writing new folk songs. The benefit of his forays into the diction of traditional verse and songs had never been intended to be anything but metaphorical. Aragon was actually getting impatient with the period's craze for folk music which seemed to have become something people hung on to in the midst of troubled times, making it stand for immovable certainty. “Poetry has nothing to do with certainties and, should folklore be given force of law, more likely than not, poetry, that rebel child, will steer clear of it, I am warning you. And it would be a shame,” he added. A poet's use of such words as “song” or “lament,” he insisted, was a figure of speech which was as old as poetry itself.

That *La Chanson de Roland* was so entitled did not mean that it was shortly to be set to music for use on sites where young French people were made to work by the Vichy government. Aragon reminded us that *chant* (song) came from the Latin *carmen*, also the root for *charme* (charm), which could be an image conjuring up magic just as much as music. When he said “I sing,” he meant it the way Virgil did when he opened *The Aeneid* with “Arma virumque cano” – “I sing of weapons and of man.” Aragon went on to say that, for his part, this was what he had honed his diction for all along. He concluded somewhat grandiloquently: “And my song cannot deny itself existence; for it too is a weapon for the

disarmed man, for it is man himself, whose *raison d'être* is life. I sing because the storm is not violent enough to drown out my song and because no matter what, tomorrow, gets done, while this life can be taken from me, my song cannot be snuffed out." There "song" simply stood for "the poet's voice."

McGrath once said to Frederick Stern that music per se is not "a primary thing with me." (Stern, McGrath 174) However, when asked by James H. Rogers how he became a poet, McGrath traced the process back to several factors in his background, his father first one among them: "My father was a folk singer and a reciter of all the old ballads and so on out of the McGuffey Readers, and so I grew up knowing a lot of the remains of the folk culture [...]" (Rogers, McGrath 29) (Very early in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, two lines recall this musical figure of a "skippering Irish father, [...] / With his head in a song-bag..." (*Letter* 4) Later, "Round Song," a short poem in *Passages Toward the Dark* (143), would celebrate this ancestry:

My dead father comes back
In the shape of my little son.
And I sing him to sleep with his songs
Still in my own child's ear.

Traces of this musical education occasionally show in McGrath's poems: "A Little Song About Charity" (*Longshot* 64) has a subtitle specifying "Tune of Matty Grove." A survey of the titles of his poems confirms the resonance of music throughout McGrath's work. Their author put special value on this importation, albeit a metaphorical one, of musical pointers into his verse. In the preface to *Les Yeux d'Elsa*, it is interesting to note how Aragon, despite his reservations about folk songs, expressed the view that it would indeed be a pity if poetry came to be forced to steer clear of those traditional art forms altogether in an attempt to safeguard its independence. This qualification is worth noting when the poet whose work is being discussed is, like Aragon, also a Communist. McGrath started writing in the mid-1930s, a time when, with the shift to the ideas of the Popular Front in 1935, Communists' militant neglect or downright hostility towards folk music or things ethnic began to relent. Barbara L. Tischler has written:

In the early part of the decade, the organized Left had expressed little interest in folk music as a vehicle for advancing class struggle. The Communist ideological line of that time downplayed the importance of regional or national cultural expressions, and some of the highly trained modernist composers of the Composers Collective

disdained folk music in favor of the more complex styles they had recently studied in Europe. But this music was less than effective in organizing working-class audiences. In 1933 Mike Gold recognized the problem when he asked in the *Daily Worker*, "Why don't American workers sing? The Wobblies knew how, but we still have to develop a Communist Joe Hill."

This realization brought composers and performers with ties to the organized Left to:

popularize the folk musics of African Americans, farmers, miners, and urban workers [...] Left-wing performers such as Paul Robeson, Cisco Houston, Aunt Molly Jackson, and many others gave voice to the protests and celebrations of these constituencies in music that once again relied on older hymns, familiar tunes, and the talkin' blues to communicate the political messages of the latter part of the [Thirties] (both quotes, *Encyclopedia* 231).

The election by radicals of the blues as one of the quintessential American musical art forms was definitely not surprising since it is wholly rooted in suffering and oppression – "For the Negro sold again and again in slave trade Washington" (*Letter* 153). It certainly comes under what Alan Wald has called "cultural cross-dressing" (Wald 152-161) as a marker among American radical poets of political sympathy with the oppressed.

From the vantage point offered by this historical perspective, McGrath's musical labeling of a lot of his poems therefore takes on a definite political meaning. Though he grew up when the political clout of the Industrial Workers of the World had become virtually nil, McGrath's exposure to the "One Big Union" idea(s) was considerable, first through his father who had encountered the Wobblies when he worked in the woods, then through Cal, the migratory farm worker whom McGrath, aged nine, befriended on his uncle's farm and to whom a memorable passage of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* is devoted. "My sun-blackened Virgil of the spitting circle, [...] / Played a harmonica; [...] / A quiet man with the smell of the road on him" (*Letter* 22-23): McGrath is here associating the epic poet with indigenous folk music. It therefore makes sense that McGrath developed an awareness of the power of folk musical forms to achieve political ends. His Wobbly "education" – which is all over his work – would make him see eye to eye with Mike Gold on the necessity to find ways of tapping popular musical veins for revolutionary purposes. Donald Sinclair Smith has made a convincing case that McGrath's "A Real Gone Guy: Short Requiem for Percival Angelman" (*Longshot* 14-16) is "a full-bore swiping" of the old cowboy song "The Streets of Laredo," "in

the way Joe Hill steals, in the way the songs of the *Little Red Songbook* appropriate melodies that are at large in the culture." (Sinclair 84)

One may assume that it was his Wobbly radicalism with strains of the IWW's songs in his head that led McGrath to associate with Cisco Houston, one of the most representative left-wing artists of the age, when the two of them were in Los Angeles in the early fifties. Due to his challenging of the Communist Party's line, which was at the time to seek out alliances with other parties of the Left, McGrath found himself "put in limbo" within the CPUSA. His way of fighting back was to form – with Cisco Houston and a handful of friends – a new party on the "unaffiliated far Left" which they called in jest the RSVP:

Inventing again the commune and round
Song [...]
Building the Ramshackle Socialist Victory Party (RSVP)
And Union of Poets.
[...].
But I still remember the flowers and Cisco singing
Alive
and the flowering names of that commune of laughter and light
(*Letter* 154-155)

Upon the singer's death, in 1961, McGrath was to write a "Blues for Cisco Houston":

More than nine hundred miles from home now Cisco –
Poor boy, gone underground to the final proletariat,
Old Blue following possum in the new ground corn
In the blaze of your death, by the light of your incendiary guitar.
(*Movie* 175)

Apart from the isolated references to other musical formats – as with his "Fanfare for a Procession of Heroes" (*Longshot* 25), recalling Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* composed for the 1942-1943 season (in the mid-1930s, Copland had associated with left-wing musical activists as a participant in the Composers Collective and been a writer for *New Masses*) or with "Guiffre's Nightmusic" written in homage to the jazz clarinetist – McGrath's poems with musical terms in their title divide into two main groups: "blues" and "songs." Did, given the context outlined above, McGrath partly mean other than the metaphorical idea of "song" for the "blues label" attached to the title of some of his poems? Focusing on the way it is used in *Letter*, we will also wonder whether the word "song" may have signaled and

conveyed any special sense for McGrath on top of the obvious message imparted by a majority of the shorter poems' titles to include that word, i.e., "this is lyrical poetry."

The April 26th 2001 issue of *Red and Green*, a student newspaper at Minot State University in McGrath's native state, advertised a concert by one Rick Watson who "wrote guitar music to go with eight of McGrath's poems," having selected "stuff that was already laid out like a ballad." Could one conceive of a blues singer having done the same with McGrath's "blues"-poems?" "Gone Away Blues" (*Movie* 187) "is just a song, worked up over an afternoon between McGrath and his friend the folksinger Cisco Houston and his guitar" (*Sinclair* 16). However, while it was composed to be put to music, the poem does not match the characteristic form of the blues either, if we go by the strict definition of the genre as a format involving a "12-bar chorus consisting of a three-line stanza with the second line repeating the first." (*Random House Dictionary*) As for "Blues for an Interim" (*Longshot* 23), what with its stanzaic form and the beat and diction of some lines – "But the roads are out / And the river is up / And I feel in my heart like a lonesome child." – it has sparse enough lyrics and could conceivably be set to blues music if its content did not make the poem more of a "meta-blues" than a straightforward one: a man tells of his struggle and ultimately his failure to stop the all-out class war raging in the outside world from impinging on his relationship with his "pretty baby." Whereas typically "the blues is self-orientated" [and] the singer is not concerned with things exterior to him "unless they have a direct impact upon his life" (*Oliver* 328), in the poem at hand, it is the dilemma induced by concern with the outside world which has an impact on love: "But in our sick season / When love seems treason / I can't be happy with you or without you, honey." The lyrics of McGrath's "blues pieces" generally have too many words to them to become blues songs; nor does their diction make them eligible for transformation into talkin' blues.

Conceiving that McGrath's use of the word 'blues' was more specifically purposeful than merely metaphorical is all the harder as he would, on occasion, use the word in a looser sense: variations in meaning range from "the blues" *stricto sensu* to "their strident offspring" i.e., jazz, to quote Richard Wright's phrase. (*Oliver* 8) It is the case in the following bold ethnic mix of metaphors challenging the WASP *Weltanschauung*: a vision of the Revolution is conjured up in which McGrath has a Native-American representation of the coming of a New World – the Hopi Fifth World Saquasohuh signaled by the Blue Star – materialize to the strains of African-American music; "blues" is here used in its broader sense:

Saquasohuh:

the blue star

Far off.

The Fifth World. Coming.

[...]

The West glows yellow

Where the first of the cherubim blows – and his name is Louie Armstrong!
Guardian angel of the first of the Hopi worlds – Tokpela!
And the angel of the Second World in the blue south – Tokpa –
Is Sidney Bechet!

Kaskurza, the Third World, lies

In the red east where Bix blows his magical horn!
And now, from the black north where our present battered sick

And sad Fourth World – Tuwaqachi – reels and rolls,
The angel – Bach or Jelly Roll Morton! – is playing a bottom blues...
(*Letter 395*)

Many jazz pieces are called “blues.” The purist's labeling was always blurred by musicians themselves. Did this double designation have any particular significance for left-wing poets? A poem by Don Gordon, whose work McGrath held in high regard (*Festschrift* 14), shows the same uncertainty as McGrath's idiolect as to which meaning to ascribe to “blues” and may therefore afford insight into this fluctuation. Gordon's poem, entitled “Nobody Hears You” (Gordon 14), is a reading of the gradual migration North of black Southern music. It starts (underscoring mine): “New Orleans spoke in public with the drums, / said about the river and the marketplace.” As black music traveled North, it picked things up along the way but for all the widened reality it embraced, it remained true to its past:

piano said cane-brake, drum said tree,
horn said cotton, cymbal said free
[...]
piano said cell-block, drum said rope,
horn said hunger, cymbal said hope

After Memphis and Chicago, the music ends up in New York where

Juke-box opens its purple eyes:
neon face: chromium mouth.

Drop your nickel, get the South:
a kind of music, lightly tossed.

Nobody knows the sound of the lost,
nobody hears them trying to speak.

The presence (circa the mid-1950s) of the juke-box has changed all this: all links with the political and communal meaning of the music have been severed. To white ears, it is nothing but entertainment:

[...] whitefolk hear
the lighted street, the dancing feet, the psalms.

Beat out the rhythm, beat your palms,
black music, beat,

And the poem ends:

but never choose
those
nobody
hears
you
blues.

The poem never says which black music it is about. Memphis and Chicago were landmarks on the way North both for jazz and the blues. This makes the poem's end hard to interpret. Though regret is expressed at the deafness of those being entertained, the poet seems to encourage black music to make the best of a bad case: "Beat out the rhythm, beat your palms,/ black music, beat, [...]" Is Gordon saying that black music had better deliver the cheerful and entertaining voice that gets across to people i.e. jazz rather than the blues? And that, failing this, its voice will simply go unheard: "those/ nobody/ hears/ you/ blues". Is it for the same reason that McGrath used 'blues' in the looser sense of a jazz piece when he pictured the coming of Saquasohuh? Because he did not want any voices lost?

And then McGrath:

But I would praise those, mainly,
Whose names are wasted on the violent air:
Fighters in ambiguous actions, leaders
Of anonymous patrols which somehow got off the map,
Are found in no index, lost in a fast shuffle.
(“Fanfare for a Procession of Heroes,” *The Movie 70*)

The Daily Worker, the most important literary-political expression of the Communist movement, had been publishing laudatory articles about jazz since 1937. Fats Waller, a politically-minded jazz musician of the period who moved in organized Left circles (*Encyclopedia* 396) provided McGrath with the epigraph to *Letter to an Imaginary Friend, Part II* (1968): "Don't give your right name! No, no, no!", an emblematic quote for one who would not name names. "Music. A slow blues under which a trumpet is plotting insurrection" ("Scenario", *Manifesto* n.p.).

Jazz poetry – of the kind initiated by Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* (1955) – had not been born when McGrath wrote his first "blues-poems." Given the tactical stakes the CPUSA had placed on folk culture and McGrath's consummate poetic craftsmanship, it is our contention that, while allowing himself considerable freedom within the idiom – an expanded diction, a more reflexive poetic voice – when it came to celebrating the memory of political comrades, which Warren Irwin, his own brother Jimmy and Cisco Houston surely were, McGrath must have elected the vehicle of the blues as the indigenous folk elegiac genre, much in the way as he was to follow the Native-American custom in chanting his own Death Song (1991). He simply maintained his radical policies in the teeth of death, confronting it in the language of the wretched of the American earth. Evidence of his kinship with the blues in the narrower sense is found in *Notes, Personal and Theoretical, on "Free" and "Traditional" Form* in which McGrath places "the great blues makers" on a par with the English Marxist poets of the Thirties"(when then-Marxist W.H. Auden penned his much anthologized "Roman Wall Blues") praising the ability they had in common to create "formal poems of great immediacy" (*Life* 224): it is obviously to the likes of Lightnin' Hopkins or Brownie McGhee that McGrath refers here. That, finally, upon McGrath's death, Dale Jacobson, a poet close to McGrath in his later years, should have chosen *Blues for Tom McGrath* as the title for his threnody to the deceased, offers yet more proof of a non-contingent link between McGrath and the blues. Hence our assumption that McGrath put in his "blues" much that belonged in the genre their titles displayed. His year (1939-1940) as a student at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge had to have given him first-hand knowledge of a musical style that is certainly not native to North Dakota:

Now from the farthest bar a music breaks and binds,
An icy necklace of bluest fire spills down the hour.
The river stirs and seethes, its steady working whispering
Into the ultimate South.
(*Letter* 82; underscoring mine)

But McGrath subverted the genre with a revolutionary poet's tenets. It is this interplay between the traditional form of the blues and McGrath's use of them for political tactics which I would now like to explore.

"One of the things that I've never liked in left-wing poetry, and it isn't just left-wing, it runs throughout American poetry [...] is the whine, with a capital W [...]; there was no whine in Brecht, you know" (*Life* 76). Though Cisco Houston both wrote and sang blues, he was not primarily a blues artist, rather a radical balladeer. By entitling the poem to the memory of his left-wing folk singer friend "Blues for Cisco Houston," McGrath honored him for the radical that he was, highlighting the communal (that is in "communist") ties with his audience. This – at least originally – communal tie between the blues singer and his/her audience would have held much appeal to McGrath both as a Communist and a poet.

A closer look at the form proper will take us to the red in McGrath's blues. In addition to the repetition of first lines, binary structures within a line are almost a fixture of blues diction: take Sleepy John Estes' "Lawyer Clark Blues": "He lawyers for the rich, he lawyers for the poor" or Ma Rainey's "Chain Gang Blues": "Many days of sorrow, many days of woe." The repetition of a word or words at the beginning of two or more successive lines or verses, i.e., anaphora, often echoes the hammering guitar-playing:

Got me accused of peepin' – I cain't even see a thing,
Got me accused of beggin' – I can't even raise my hand.
[...]
Got me accused of taxes, I don't have a lousy dime,
Got me accused of children an' nary one of them is mine.
(Oliver 234)

McGrath's own "Blues for an Interim" (*Longshot* 23) echoes this: "I can do without fame, I can do without money, / I can do without books or winters in Miami..." Such catalogs will sometimes reach a semantic climax matched by the ascent of the singer's voice and a crescendo in the delivery. This climax marks the point where it is felt that language comes closest to the meaning intended. Relief will be all the stronger when the enumeration that preceded it consisted of nothing but negatives. "Blues for Warren" and "Blues for Jimmy" provide more than a few instances of such rhetorical devices which enhance their eulogistic character, as in this passage about Warren:

He moved to the accompaniment of dispossessed angels:
The Angel of Love who issued no marriage licenses
The Angel of Reason with the brutal face of a child

The Angel of Hope who carried a gun in his fist

The Angel of the Fifth Season with his red flag
The Angel of Your Death who looks like your friend or your lover
A kid knee-deep in the rotting dreams of dead statesmen,
In the First Imperialist War, thinking of home.
(*Crooked 83, Selected 35*)

The thought of "home" is where the movement and the music of the procession – which is there through the polysemy of "accompaniment" – comes to a restful close. Similarly in the third section, Warren's final loneliness is effectively expressed in the last line through contrast with the three negative statements opening the stanza:

For the sea bird is not alone on the moonless waters,
Nor the fox alone in the high hills of the desert
Nor is even the soldier alone on his lone night watches
[...]
But O in the timeless night, in the dark nothing, Warren, you are alone.
(*Crooked 85, Selected 36*)

In "Blues for Jimmy," despair at Jimmy's absence is conveyed by four succeeding stanzas, each of which focuses on a different season. These stanzas are themselves an expansion of two lines in the previous section, haunting through McGrath's joint use of anaphora and epiphora (symploce): "That you are nowhere; that you are nowhere, nowhere, / Nowhere on the round earth, and nowhere in time." The four quatrains blowing up the initial cry of helplessness all start "Not where" followed by the season's name. But in a fifth slightly longer stanza, negation itself is negated in a vibrant affirmation of brotherhood and hope:

And when the Fifth Season with its mass and personal ascensions-
Fire-birds rising from the burning towns of Negation
Orbit toward freedom –
Until then, brother, I will keep your watch.
(*Longshot 31, Selected 46-47*)

Section four of "Blues for Warren" will make our point even clearer: it is devoted to the different forms of escapism which Warren, as "The Socially Necessary Man" i.e., one to confront "the determinism which connects the consciousness and productive relations of men" (Caudwell 65), successfully eschewed. The emergence of the affirmative out of the negative first occurs, as the poem unfolds, in the form we have described: "These envy the wild birds; these, the shy life of the mole— / [...] / These dream the fast fadeout, blessed by distance: /

[...] / The Socially Necessary Man is hanging in chains of fire." (*Crooked* 85-86, *Selected* 36-37) Later on, it is the process itself which is abstracted (Underscoring mine):

[...] turning and turning in their monstrous hells of negation
[...]
They haply escape salvation, escape the Fall.
But you, Warren, in the general affirmative hell
(Which includes all others) escaped these common infections
Avoiding Pride's Scylla, Fear's Charybdis, Hope's defection [...]
(*Crooked* 86, *Selected* 37-38)

Achieving this polarity shift may well be what singing the blues is all about. Writes Richard Wright: "The most astonishing aspect of the blues is that, though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope" (Oliver 9). "Blues for Warren" ends: "the spring-tide flowers of our hopes" (*Crooked* 88, *Selected* 39);

Likewise, "Blues for the Old Revolutionary Woman" (*Selected* 155), within the space of four stanzas, effectuates a reversal of mood from a wry assessment of time unreeling "the gaudy shroud of history" and transmuting "all statistics into pain" to "that possible world/ Where statistical death can never cancel dream / And history is humanized." This transmutation of pain is critical to the tactical appropriation of the genre for radical purposes.

Yet more specific motifs are also invested with fresh meaning. In "Blues for Jimmy," the first poem, for instance, focuses on the return home and the interment of McGrath's brother's remains after he died in a plane crash in June 1945:

The train was late. We waited among the others,
All of us waiting for friends on the late train.
[...]
And then the train with its clanking mechanical fury.
"Our will could neither turn it around nor stop it."
Abrupt as history it violates the station.
(*Longshot* 28, *Selected* 44)

The scene of a train bringing home the remains of a soldier was certainly familiar in small-town America at the end of World War Two. Things probably happened the way they are described in the poem in Jimmy McGrath's case. But the railroads are so much a part of the blues that considering the title of the poem, the train reverberates with the generic

meaning of trains, a meaning which is ambivalent, as trains can "take the Damned to Hell and the Righteous to Glory." "In the train, the folk Negro invests a character that he admires or hates according to the circumstances of its relationship to him and to his life." (Oliver 85, 92) In much Socialist art the train symbolizes the hard but unstoppable march of history towards its end ("abrupt as history").

"The most striking feature of [blues] songs is that a submerged theme of guilt, psychological in nature, seems to run through them. Could this guilt have stemmed from the burden of renounced rebellious impulses?" wrote Richard Wright. This is a more fundamental way McGrath again openly departs from the traditional blues attitude, in promoting those rebellious impulses that traditional blues don't pursue. He simply will not bow his head in acceptance of "The massive implacable personal guilt." (*Longshot 29, Selected 45*)

I will not [...]
[...] wear my guilt for a badge like a saint or a bourgeois poet.

I forgive myself of your death: Blind shadow of my necessity-
Per mea culpa-cast by a son of freedom
I climb the hill of your absolute rebellion.
(*Longshot 32, Selected 47*)

This stance is of course in keeping with the revolutionary element in McGrath's work but also raises the question of the quality of the spirit informing the blues. The organized Left's mid-1930s shift towards acceptance of folk art did not stop the blues from being looked on as retrograde by African-American middle-class people who saw the 1960s blues revival as a step backwards to the days of patronizing acceptance of the Negro as entertainer. The opposite view has been taken according to which "the whole of blues is created in the spirit of protest" (Oliver 320, 331). It seems only fair to admit, however, that the latter statement can only be accepted if the word "protest" is used in a very general sense since "when an exhaustive examination is made of recorded blues it becomes apparent that the number of items that are directly concerned with protest themes is exceedingly small" (Oliver 321). The reasons why the blues, by and large, seldom trespassed the bounds of what was deemed acceptable by a society which, until the nineteen sixties, relied on race hatred, discriminatory practices and segregation for its smooth working, are threefold. Doubtless, censorship by the record companies was a major factor in the muffling of those blues voices that might have sounded too shrill to conservative ears. Then – and surely the fear of "takin' a rap" at the slightest hint of unruliness largely accounts for such submissiveness – a degree of apathy and fatalism which racial leaders always had a hard time breaking, developed among African-Americans over the years and this attitude directly permeated the blues as one of the art forms

least removed from the folk's raw feelings: "People tell me life is what you make it, but the whole thing seems jazz to me, / It seems like old bad luck follows me each and everywhere, / Now I'm at the place I don't even care" (Leroy's Buddy's "Hard Way to Go", quoted in Oliver 323). Lastly, blues singers' highly subjective approach to their subject, which McGrath distanced himself from in "Blues for an Interim", made them unlikely to become overtly politicized. On this point especially, the space afforded by the traditional themes and diction of the idiom must have felt extremely cramped and stuffy to a Communist poet.

In the *Festschrift for Thomas McGrath* Fall 1982 issue of *The North Dakota Quarterly*, Frederick C. Stern reminded the poet's readership of the necessity to always bear in mind that the crucial component of his art was his Communism: "The many other things one might say about him – that he is a modern poet who works in many traditions and forms, that he is a North Dakota-born American poet, that he is a myth-creating poet-all these things are, as it were, modifiers of my first sentence – that McGrath is a Communist or communist poet" (Stern, *Festschrift* 107). McGrath's Communism informs his "blues-poems" in their denunciation of capitalist ruthlessness:

Those summers he rode the freights between Boston and Frisco
With the cargoes of derelicts, garlands of misery,
The human surplus, the interest on dishonor
And the raw recruits of a new century.
The Boss's machine gun split open the human midnight.
(*Crooked* 84, *Selected* 36)

"Blues for Warren" and "Blues for Jimmy" contain numerous instances of words or phrases with strong Communist overtones: "Your blood is made part of the general-strike fund / Your courage is coined into the Revolution" writes McGrath in the concluding section of the poem to his brother in which he also emphatically expresses his refusal to "wear his guilt like a saint or a bourgeois poet." Winter – as a season of this "nowhere in time" Jimmy is locked in – is described as erecting "its barricades of coal stoves and forgetfulness; /With the warmth indoors, talk, love, camaraderie," (*Selected* 47). The enemies of the working class are named and their mistaken beliefs denounced:

Priest, banker, teacher or publican,
The mask of the irresponsible man
May hide from the masker his crimes of passion
But not the sin of his class position
[...]
But the bourgeois, the saint, the two-gun man,

(Letter 162-163)

For the “song” is also performative, instrumental in bringing about the wished-for change:

– I'm here to bring you
Into the light of speech [...]
[...] to sing you
Home from the night.
Night of America.

(Letter 138)

comrades...
I'll sing you
Out of the prison stone, I'll pick the lock of your night.

But lonesome song, for a fact.

(Letter 163)

That "concord of sweet song" McGrath called "Daft and old-fashioned." ("For the Time Being", *Movie* 135). He valued a different kind of song: the voice of *communitas* whose song is round: "Night, pure crystal,/ coils in my ear like/ song" (Letter 131). "Round" i.e., without end like the song handed down from one generation to the next. (See "Round Song" supra p. 152) Round like the communal dance, whose importance Jacobson has spoken to (Afterword, *Letter*), which is to take place when human beings, finally guided out of the labyrinth, free themselves of exploitation and social classes. In the long poem, the word "song" often conveys a sense of what the world should be like after the Revolution. Making due allowances, "song" in McGrath's epic poem is to his blues-poems what *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is to *The Communist Manifesto*: the latter points out the reasons and the ways to get to some place new, the former delineates what this imaginary place could be, assuming "imaginary" is taken in the sense of "potential" as Jacobson asserts in his afterword to *Letter*. In the process, the poet has a critical role to play:

And I am only a device of memory
[...]
To...blaze the trail for the enduring journey
Toward the round dance and commune of light.
[...]
To build that Legend where all journeys are one

Exists

Where speech becomes song.

(*Letter* 136)

Singing is a duty: " ' – get out in the stream and *sing*. / It's a branch assignment [...]" (*Letter* 143). A reply to Mike Gold's concern? Silence is not golden. The absolute rule of money in post-WW2 New York elicits the following metaphor from McGrath: "[They] Slipped past the great church of song and planted a century of silence / On the round hearts' hill where the clocktower the cock and the moon / Sang" (*Letter* 165). Silence, shaft-like, is shown superseding the singing on a round place.

Folk-songs often come full circle with the last words that are sung – line, verse, or chorus – going back to where the song started from. Could it be that it was McGrath's exposure to Irish ballads sung by his father that paved the way to his associating “song” with roundness? But then the songs, “Circe-like,” (Jacobson 1982) may entrap man in the circle of paralyzing “eternal” verities inducing fatalism and submissiveness. The eternal return of the same informs the folk world-view in traditional songs and is what the Irish Celts' mythical conception of Time amounted to. On the other hand, “the circle has a vital meaning for the primitive commune” (ibid.) and myth as a domesticating force of adversity, as Caudwell and Jacobson have shown, can be reclaimed to tear humanity away from “de-socialized,” dog-eat-dog capitalist society.

McGrath's Irishness remains largely unexplored territory. In his “Longshot O'Leary: Tom McGrath's Years on the New York Waterfront”, Joe Doyle only approaches McGrath's Irishness as a moment in the poet's life. Sinclair Smith comes closer to a real gauging of the Celtic streak in McGrath and of its influence on his work when he writes: “McGrath is as much an Irish writer as James T. Farrell (of *Studs Lonigan* fame): with three of his four grandparents Gaelic-speaking, some of that effect on the rhythms of English is in his poetry, in the form of both reported ritual cursings and constructed Yeatsian echoes” (Sinclair 168). He offers the view, very near to this writer's, that “it is McGrath's own brand of Child's Ballads-traditionalist-Irish-Wobbly-Populist tactical craft, as a practice not shared by everyone on the Left, that is relevant to his position on the margins of the Left itself”(143).

There was the warm and comforting circle of family, enhanced by a father's community-building gifts:

My father [...] was known far and wide, in a small circle naturally, as a wonderful storyteller [...] I remember many Saturday nights, when all he would do is sing, or tell stories or recite poems. I remember this particularly, at

some time in the thirties. As all the farmers did then, we had a battery-operated radio. There was no electricity on the land yet out there; it didn't come until after the second World War. And the batteries would go dead and there wouldn't be money to change them, or, in the winter, if you had the money, you couldn't get to town. So many nights, especially in the winter, he would send us all off to sleep one by one telling us stories, singing and reciting poems (Stern 152; underscoring mine).

These musical “circles” or “spheres” later translated in McGrath's Communism as metaphors for the achievement of perfection, “round song” not least among them .

In McGrath's proletarian novel with a film noir atmosphere to it, *This Coffin Has No Handles*, we find the following description of a jukebox in a bar the strikers patronize:

The jukebox contains twenty-four records including a Ladnier-Bechet disk of "Wild Man Blues." The disk is in good condition. No one plays it except the young energetic barman. There are three tangos which no one plays either, and there are the songs, the loved unhappy ballads of Eighth and Ninth Avenues: "Mother Machree," "Kathleen Mavoureen." The latest lachrymo-mechanical heart throbs come and go, but there is a record of "That Old Gang of Mine" which is sadly worn (187).

Notwithstanding McGrath's generally Luddite attitude towards "rack'n'gawk" (*Letter* 162) jukeboxes or any transistorizing of the human voice, this description encapsulates the author's “musical” – read “political” – priorities. Against the white noise of the “title-unspecified” tangos or "lachrymo-mechanical heart throbs" that stand for alienation, a jazz piece labeled “blues” and "the loved unhappy" Old Country, i.e., Irish ballads stand out. Note that "unhappy" is not equated with "lachrymose." Both the piece of African-American music and the Irish songs are identified and shown in a favorable light: the young barman who plays the blues record is "young [and] energetic". And the Irish ballads are "loved.” Last but by no means least comes the "record of "That Old Gang of Mine.” It seems it has been played again and again and is still in demand. Its title suggests a union song, with action and community held as the highest values. Irishness and the ethnic recede into the background.

"I have come here [...]

[...]

To find our sign past sleep or these sleepy reveries of an insomniac Harp...

_____ have come to claim you, to build, on the angry winds of the renegade Angels, the four blueblowers of the compass points, this stand

For the round song and the commune;
(Letter 268; underscoring mine)

Louis Aragon said his song was “man himself.” McGrath reddens the blues, and the idea of song itself, to create the metaphor of the round song of the commune. Mark the revolutionary music!

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