

## The Poetic Life Story of Helen Lawson

Josef Jařab

*"The most we get from lives are our rises and falls."*

My first encounter with the poetry of Helen Lawson dates back to the early eighties of the last century. With my friend Jaroslav Kořán we were then surfing the American literary scene in search of authors who would accurately represent the characteristic thematic range and formal qualities of contemporary, or simply modern, poetry in the United States. We were preparing a representative anthology for the Jazz Section, an organization at that time already hardly tolerated by the official regime. From the large group of fine women authors, we finally chose Adrienne Rich, for her eloquent feminism, and Cynthia Macdonald, for her challenging experimentation with language. But we discovered many more women poets of great interest. Three of them we offered to the Journal of World Literature, which, in addition to unofficial and "samizdat" publications, was one of the very few sources providing information on new literary production in the freer world. Consequently, issue number four in 1988 brought verse samples from the work of Helen Lawson, Linda Pastan and Maxine Kumin. (As for the manuscript of the large anthology, it was unfortunately seized and destroyed by the police, and could be published, under the title *Child on Top of a Greenhouse*, only after November 1989; no longer as part of the unofficial Jazz petit project but by one of the established publishing houses, Odeon).

In Helen Lawson, we were captivated not just by the powerful poetic account from a woman of the modern age but also by the mention of her Czech origin. From within the iron curtain, and with the internet still unknown, it was far from easy to attain more detailed information, and thus it should not be surprising that we could tell only very little about the author, and could then hardly guarantee any accuracy of the facts. But the selected verse samples, translated by Jaroslav Kořán, did convincingly testify to the forceful imagination and the daring sincerity of her dialog with human destiny. A number of the readers could possibly identify with Ms. Lawson's confession, "what I want from love I take from poetry," but there were surely many who took from poetry (including hers) what they wanted from freedom (then so unattainable). Together with the poet, we knew, or rather sensed, that "the world has many doors," and we silently hoped that "at least one be there for me," i.e., for every one of us. In the personal or private space, as well as in the larger, public, one. And such doors did open in November 1989.

Today, we know from the correspondence with the author and from hundreds of her poems how and why, after the Communist takeover of 1948, she left her native Czechoslovakia. And where and under what circumstances her doors led her into the world - first a fake marriage took her to Norway, followed

a year later by England and Scotland, and then, already with her legitimate husband and four children, India. In 1969 the family moved to Hartford, Connecticut. The year of the "thaw" in totalitarian Czechoslovakia, 1968, lured her back to her original home country but the Soviet-led occupation chased her out again. In America, she went through moments of personal crisis, including a divorce and a demanding search for self-realization and resources to provide for the family. All that experience is intensely reflected in her poetry, to which she has, systematically and diligently, devoted herself since 1972.

At first her verse found its way into local and regional journals and almanacs, and later into national magazines and anthologies. She authored a few fairy tales and short stories, of which some were broadcast by radio; she became involved in numerous poetry readings, and a few of her poems were set to music and even choreographed for dance performance. Ms. Lawson has also completed a manuscript for a novel. In the years 1978 and 1980 two volumes of her poetry were published by Blue Spruce Press, *Women as I Know Them* and *Live Me a River*. The present book is a selection from nine manuscript volumes comprising the author's poetic work of the decades up to the present.

What is the poetry of Helen Lawson like? In its whole, it is primarily a testimony to the riches of life, and if we can afford a more personal view, which after all the poet herself with her openness and frankness is continuously inviting us to do, it is a testimony to the riches of one particular life. Namely, the life of a sensitive woman who in her pursuit of freedom and happiness has traveled a great deal on the Earth; with an open mind and heart lived through a number of tests and challenges and within a diversity of cultures, only to be able to share with us in her verse the wisdom of knowing the essence of humanity, of the human mission in this world of ours, of the sense of human fates, including her own.

Although at times the poet may appear, in the course of the creative process, alone and even lonely with her words and lines of words, the world of her poems is quite densely populated. Her poetry is frequently conceived in the form of dialog - with herself and with numerous inhabitants of that private poetic world where we can meet members of the author's family, her friends, acquaintances or neighbors, admired masters and potential mentors from literature and the arts of the past and present. Among those of special relevance for Ms. Lawson seem to be, for instance, William Butler Yeats, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom or Wallace Stevens. And, naturally, Emily Dickinson.

The poet declares a special kinship to authors with Slavic backgrounds, and she seems to be charmed by the melancholy of Osip Mandelstam, by the empirical wisdom of Czeslaw Milosz or Wislawa Szymborska. What may be rather striking in this context is an absence of more frequent references to Czech poets and poetry in her verse.

In her poetic quests and questionings, Helen Lawson does not hesitate to address even God himself, the Creator, the Lord of the Universe. She feels justified to do so by consciously embracing our, and her own, Judeo-Christian roots

and traditions, which she further legitimizes by her reading of history, and by her personal life experience. But she does not avoid in her thoughtful ponderings the media-created world either, and puts herself and her readers to testing the capacity of differentiating between the useful and useless, between the real and virtual. Humanistic empathy, civic responsibility, support of the good and the beautiful - these are just a few of the values and attitudes that her poetry promotes, and her sensitive readers can register.

However strong human beings we might be, we still "need in this weary world a bright star," the poet believes, but is forced to admit that we may often, and perhaps too often, settle for "a glitter." Is this implicit criticism of human superficiality aimed at the American lifestyle and is the old continent totally absolved from such accusations? Certainly not. There may only be a difference in the scope and depth of such sinfulness which ensues from a full identification of arts and entertainment. It is evident that Ms. Lawson perceives with appreciation the plurality of the world, including the plurality of culture in the United States. And so her poetry can provide commentary on phenomena of mass and popular culture as well as admiration for the mastership and vitality of poets, such as Galway Kinnell, expression of kinship with the ecological messages contained in the poems of Mary Oliver, and manifestations of being inspired into emotional reflection by the disconcerting fictions of Toni Morrison. It does not have to be an extraordinary thought or exquisite artistic experience, however, that can initiate Ms. Lawson's poetic reaction; such an impulse can be an album of family photographs, a view from a garden window, a walk in the countryside, as well as an item in the newspaper or on the TV screen, a meeting with a friend or a total stranger.

And, it seems, the poet is never deserted by music. As if she constantly heard the melodies and rhythmic phrases of Bach, Mozart, or Brahms, as if she could never forget Oistrach's violin that she had once listened to. It is these musical phrases which have been transformed into thoughtful and sensitive verbal cadences, singing speech rather than songs, that represent in the bulk of the author's poetry the most successful and impressive moments. In these, the line of philosophical rumination creatively and imaginatively touches upon or even merges with the line of aesthetic impact. Such may be the result in poems where the central vision is a child's viewpoint or an insuppressible childhood memory, but also poems evoking a powerful physical, even erotic, pleasure, and poems dealing with human vulnerability and mortality.

Helen Lawson obviously believes in the cathartic power of poetry and her own poetic work must have pragmatically enhanced such belief. Her readers are thus offered a share of her experience.