
Reviews

Dignity in Old Age: The Poetical Meditations of Peter Viereck

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Tide and Continuities: Last and First Poems 1995-1938, by Peter Viereck. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1995. xix + 320 pp. \$36 cloth. \$20 paper.

In *Tide and Continuities*, Peter Viereck shows himself to be a formidable philosophical poet of the sort that Santayana had in mind in *Three Philosophical Poets* (Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe). His cosmic drama is in the form of extended meditative dialogues on death and dying carried through a series of long and ambitious poems, in which the figures (voices) of Dionysus, Persephone, and Pluto are metaphors that enlighten, rather than transmute, the perspective of an uneasily but deeply held belief in the finitude of individuated human consciousness. Viereck is a civilized humanist, just like Babbitt, Ortega, and Santayana (writers whom Viereck likes to cite in his prose works), but he is of a later generation that was tempered by World War II and turned existentialist. In an important sense, Peter Viereck is a civilized existentialist.

*A civilized
existentialist.*

Now we find him in the first poem in the book, "At My Hospital Window," near death and suffering from a critical illness, confined to hospital, and hooked up to medical contraptions and pumped full of medicines. Yet he has written long, demanding, and complex philosophical poems in genial voices that go beyond anything that he has done before in their sustained concentration and thematic depth. It is as though his illness liberated poetic powers in Viereck,

*The poet's
dying and
what ours
might be.*

that it convinced him not to hold back anything, to go for all he could get before it was too late. In the process, he has given us a compelling myth structure through which to think through our own encounters with finitude grasped from within our personal awareness. There is a poetry of the technological hospital and Viereck has written it. Viereck, ever audacious, gives us an account of the poet's dying and, in consequence, of what our own might be if we could pull it off.

Tide and Continuities is more than these remarkable late poems, which take up half the book (Part I "Mostly Hospital and Old Age" and Part VI "Tide and Completions"). It also collects many of Viereck's earlier published poetry and some new short poems, under the categories "Ore," "The Planted Poet," "The Green Menagerie," and "Walks." We get a chance to see what preceded his works of old age, to witness the germination process; but the late works dominate the book by their gravity and their unforced lightness.

In the late poems in *Tide and Continuities*, Viereck articulates a mature vision of human existence that tempers rather than subverts the existentialism of his youth. I will use as my touchstone for understanding this vision one of Viereck's prose texts—the vignette entitled "Bewildered Dignity" from *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals*—and then will work through four poems in *Tide and Continuities* that illuminate the vision: "Crass Times Redeemed by Dignity of Souls" (1944-46), "Rogue" (1987), "At My Hospital Window" (1988-95), and "Persephone and Old Poet" (1995). The latter poem is the last one in the book.

Bewildered Dignity

The vignette "Bewildered Dignity" is one of the few outcroppings of Viereck's poetic concerns with personal existence into his political writings. It is a meditative text rather than a set piece, and it begins in a mood of moral proclamation and ends in a mood of mordant doubt.

*Man clings
to "shreds of
glory."*

In a key of cultural politics, Viereck (1965) begins by stating that there is "no ground for resisting the communazi degradation of man . . . if the dignity of man is merely an idealistic illusion." In the next sentence he is already getting off the soapbox: "The credo of these pages, their tacit impossible assumption, is that man clings—and clings innately—to some shreds of glory." Comparing the hu-

man being to a good sport in a bad comic strip, who keeps getting hit with undignifying pies in the face, Viereck concludes the paragraph by saying that man clings to “some bewildered and inalienable dignity” (37).

“Shreds of glory” and “bewildered dignity” are phrases that unlock Viereck’s philosophical anthropology. He is a thoroughly chastened but unrepentant idealist. The second paragraph begins: “It matters to cling to glory’s shreds.” Even though they are “pathetic” and criticized by modernist skepticism, they are not illusory: “Self-transcendence is part of self” ends the paragraph (37).

“Self-transcendence is part of self.”

The third paragraph, quoted here in full, reverses the Proposition just stated: “And self, in turn, is part of all self-transcendence. Self is the cruel practical joke, the old tin can, tied to the tail of transcendence by the neighborhood brats and rattling forth a distinctly tinny laugh at the sublimest moments.” With this reversal, idealism modulates to existentialism. The dignity of the human is problematized and must prevail, if it can, stripped of any mythological armor (37).

Life on earth will end and “ooze back soggly into the ocean,” Viereck observes in paragraph four. The “last flicker of consciousness will sough”: “ ‘Anyhow, for a while it was good to have been man’ ” (38).

Then, in four short and punchy paragraphs, Viereck touches his existentials. That we are here only “for a while” is our “deep sadness,” “the condition of armorless consciousness,” which is counterpointed by a “cry of gladness,” the “anyhow,” “whose prelude is not pleasure but tragedy.” The tragedy is that we are neither stone nor star, but “mortal, aspiring and earth-bound,” “a muddy and vulnerable glory” (38).

We die. For all that we can redeem from it, the world is finally adverse—a “firetrap” with no fire escape, “not a ‘good neighborhood’ to settle down in,” “one of the ‘uninhabitable planets’ ” in the long run (38).

There may be better universes, Viereck concludes, than this one, but we are stuck here: “Nobody likes ‘blind dates.’ Being born is a blind date” (38).

In his gracious spirit, Santayana titled the last volume of his autobiography *My Host the World*. That is not Viereck’s spirit, even less so in old age. His is a far more restless spirit than Santayana’s, one of struggle and, as Yasmin Lodi (1995) puts it about the philosophi-

cal poet Muhammad Iqbal, noble failure. He is never reconciled with evil; he refuses to place himself on the side of the world's adversity, even when he acknowledges its necessity—as when, in “Persephone and Old Poet,” he gives Persephone her due as the perpetual destroyer-renewer, but defies her telluric wisdom to accept death as a fate.

A blind date is not a host. How he romances and complains to his blind date is the substance of Viereck's late poetry. There will always be ambivalence about the world for a being who is caught on a shoreline, doomed to fall back into the sea and, indeed, tempted to do so, but also aspiring to the heavens. This is the being who has bewildered dignity, who undertakes risky adventures, who asserts his own self-transcendence in the face of being transcended by the world (a “rogue”), who clutches at shreds of glory. Also, he is the one with the tinny laugh when things get out of control in a bad way and who is all too aware of how undignified he becomes when subject to inevitable indignity.

Dignity of Souls

Humanistic conservatism a commitment to human dignity.

Human dignity is the idea that most amply ties together Viereck's writing, that unifies his prose and his poetry. Politically, his commitment to human dignity is articulated through a “humanistic conservatism” that defends constitutional democracy and freedom of expression against statist tendencies and movements that force conformity. In his poetry, human dignity is wrested, precariously, from the struggle to affirm self-transcending life against both the adversity of the world and the evil of those fellow creatures who cooperate with that adversity and spread and intensify it. It would not be farfetched to say that Viereck's humanistic conservatism adumbrates the political conditions in which fragile bewildered dignity might best be nurtured and become more confident of itself.

“Crass Times Redeemed by Dignity of Souls” was composed fifty years before Viereck's late poems on death and dying. It is one of the minority of Viereck's poems that mixes cultural politics and personal existence. It is the most existentially cutting yet optimistic of his early productions. It signals, as its title indicates, redemption.

The poem is divided into four sections, with a decisive break into the existential in the middle of the second section, followed by an extended struggling encounter with evil that ends in the triumph

of love on a high note of affirmation of a positive ideal of dignity.

The first section of the poem presents the dignity of souls from the viewpoint of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—the awareness of creation beyond good and evil. Dawn unrolls an “avalanche of awe” that identifies the poet with the “old unbaptized night” that “Dreads and/needs and/looks and/loves the light,” and moves him to proclaim: “*O harshness of the dignity of souls*” (204).

The second section begins with praise of “*the tenderness of dignity of souls,*” which “conjures and cajoles” us, guiding us to sensitivity to inner life and to transcendence through art, which “quickens yet controls.” Then the soft and comforting mood is broken by five powerful lines: “The weight that tortures diamonds out of coals/Is lighter than the frisking hooves of foals/Compared to one old heaviness our souls/Hoist daily, each alone, and cannot share:/To be-awake, to sense, to-be-aware” (204-205).

*Art that
“quickens yet
controls.”*

Here, at the point of radical existential individualism, Viereck moves to conclude the second section by asserting that all of the aspirations and activities of our lives “*Are but man’s search for dignity of souls.*” The dignity of souls, which was given at the beginning of the poem, is now problematized. Consciousness is a burden that each one must shoulder all by himself.

Into the existential vulnerability opened up in section two, the third and fourth sections introduce evil in the figures of Seth, the Egyptian donkey god who feeds on souls, and his agents, who today appear in the guise of purveyors of cheap grace, complacency, commercialized pleasure, and cowardly noncommitment masquerading as good sense: “The nice, the wholesome, and the commonplace.” Rather than conjuring and cajoling with song as tenderness did, the voices of evil “cadge and cajole” with shouts. Section four ends with the agents of mass society telling the poet that the battle is lost, that he is “The struggling warrior of the lost last war/*To vindicate the dignity of souls*” (205, 206).

Section five records the poet’s counterattack against his tormentors. He tells them that he will have nothing to do with their Prince, that all the gaudy effects of evil are “blackness still.” Then the poet gets thrown back once again into a stark existential moment, proclaiming: “Lap-squeezed from blackness, soon to choke on black,/Leaning on nothingness before and back,/Locked tight to lies by veins and nerves and will,/My life is darkness.” Yet there is redemption. The poet lives to tell us that love “Frees us the way the

*The gift of
dignity follows
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struggle and
-transcendence.*

good and daily light/Heals and/shreds and/liberates the night." Having worked through awe, tenderness, existential solitude, persecution by banal evil, and finally existential anguish, we are released by love to love each other: "May every dark and kindled 'I' revere/In every 'you' that self-same *fire-core*,/In every soul the soul of all our souls." Dignity here is a grace, a gift that follows upon struggle that transfigures the world by alerting us to its "fire-core." The awe-inspiring world that kept us reluctantly wanting to hide in the shadows has now become, after encountering the limits of art, confronting radical solitude, and battling evil, a proper place for us, because we are able to look to each other. The fire trap is redeemed by the fire-core. This redemption is not present in the late poems. Dignity there is bewildered, even bewildering.

Rogue

"Rogue" is the greatest of Viereck's philosophical poems, embodying in a genial, comi-tragic, naturalistic myth his mature view of the forces at work in the human condition and their economy. This poem has, as does all his late poetry, both subtle and sharp shifts of voice, and mixes humor, irony, and harsh wisdom in a roller-coaster ride of existential tensions.

Viereck informs us that the botanical meaning of "rogue" is "seed spoiled by mutation." His mutant seed is the lungfish, "the first air-breather, from whom all land life descended." The predominant voice in the poem is "'you' (the reader, modern man)" transformed into the lungfish whom he has been miming in a parlor game. This voice is joined at one point by "modern you" and engages in dialogue with "'father,' here God-Mephisto, the brutality of reality" from the middle of the poem to its end. Like "Crass Times Redeemed by Dignity of Souls," "Rogue" is divided into five sections that parallel the earlier poem in some ways (71).

Just as "Crass Times" occurs at the liminal time of dawn, "Rogue" unfolds at the point at which the first lungfish has been beached and is not yet decided on leaving the sea behind for land life. The first section is an ominous warning issued by the lungfish to contemporary human selves. He warns us to bolt our doors and hide from the sea, which will claim us and remains inside us in the form of our blood: "You chose land's height? Undertows/Have long arms; hide" (71).

In the second section, the lungfish confronts life on earth and takes positions toward it. Abraded by sand storms, he is not healed by the “good and daily light” extolled in “Crass Times,” but is fried by a “big scorching Eyeball.” He wonders whether the earth is “ambush” (recall the bad blind date of “Bewildered Dignity”), but then he sees a beach rose, “smells of growingness rouse” him with “greenish flavor,” he takes his first breath, and vomits (72).

From then on section two is a complaint by the lungfish about his sorry lot. Most painful is his inability to articulate the pain of the “razor-runged ladder” of evolution that he is on: “Ache is my echo since climbing rung one,/A gagged echo straining for voice./My vocal chords, still many an age upstream,/Lag behind their scream” (72).

Section three begins with an ironical expression of homage to the lungfish from modern man, praising “the pilgrimage of our race,” always liminal and transitional: “From Argonaut to astronaut, from a puddle/On earth to a pebble in space.” Before the lungfish can reply, the father figure enters the conversation to engage in struggle with the lungfish, to pull him down, just as the agents of evil sought the surrender of the poet in “Crass Times.” To the lungfish’s assertion of self-transcendence of the individual (“We shore people,/We’ll ripple tide.”), God-Mephisto asserts the self-transcendence of the world (“You’re but tide’s ripple.”) (73).

Knocked back by this reversal, the lungfish curses the vicissitudes of his DNA that will eventuate in “dodos, hippos, Al Capone, and Christ,” and allows God-Mephisto to insult him: “You’re all rough drafts of the Weltgeist/Discarded.” Life on earth is pain, from the father’s viewpoint: “The die your landing cast,/Writhes all land’s pain-to-be, from the gashed/Hare to the Lear on the heath” (73).

Having absorbed these blows, the lungfish launches into a diatribe aimed at “modern you,” adopting a grisly, bantering tone. He does not accept the homage offered to him by modern man, but interprets the evolutionary process mordantly: “The long fuse gets reversed; click—from my hips/Tick futures ramming fish hooks through my lips” (74).

Section four begins with the lungfish expressing nostalgia for the sea and a sense of the futility of land life that is taken by God-Mephisto as an opening for trying to woo the lungfish back into the sea. Yet, just as when he saw the beach rose and smelled the scent of

green, the lungfish is now drawn to the world by a sound that he takes to be a gull screech, but which the father says is “only some wind-blown horn.” Stimulated and inspired by the dawning of consciousness, which God-Mephisto calls a “brow infection,” the lungfish resolves to “bulge just one wee rung/Toward brow that super-lung.” The father warns him that “brow,” the “super-lung,” that is man, will “blow/Up the show,” but the lungfish affirms that, if so, the cycle will be renewed in “some overlooked puddle, not quite sterile” (75).

*Image of the
horn encapsu-
lates existence.*

The final section replays the lungfish’s first glimpse of land, but now in dialogue with God-Mephisto, who still tries to lure him back into the sea. Announcing that “Rogue seed stays ornery,” the lungfish resolves to answer the call of the horn, forcing the father to reveal to him that the horn is an “out-of-time skeleton,/Stripped and hollowed, weathered and torn”: “The stripped beast is you, both your gill-fish bone/Of before and your loaded brow/Of tomorrow.” We chase our future, which is always already dead. The sublime image (in Nietzsche’s sense of sublimity that Viereck cites in an epigraph to “At My Hospital Window”: “The sublime as the artistic conquest of the horrible.”) of the horn composed of the bones of all the dead encapsulates Viereck’s deepest understanding of existence (76).

In response to God-Mephisto’s last appeal to return to the sea, the lungfish proclaims: “I’ll always lose. Some losses . . . *hone*.” And then: “Stripped, I’ve landed./Make way for man” (76).

*Viereck’s
rogue life
counters
hedonism.*

Life is a losing proposition, but utilitarian calculation is not the last word. At the opposite pole from Santayana’s contemplation of essences, but answering the same question, is Viereck’s rogue life, in which one remains ornery and acts counter to the pleasure principle, and gets honed by loss, when that is possible—a resistance to sinking back that tries to be indomitable, even though it cannot be; a willingness to risk everything on a losing proposition; a struggle for affirmation of life, for Nietzschean *amor fati*. Let us next, then, consider the old poet in the hospital and see how this resistance fares. The lungfish assumes with armorless consciousness the old heaviness of being awake and aware. This is not hedonism, but comitragedy, reminiscent of Camus’s (another of Viereck’s favorites) absurd lives. Camus also affirmed a bewildered dignity.

Hospital

"At My Hospital Window" bids fair to be the most personally revealing poem that Viereck has published. Dedicated to Joseph Brodsky, who wrote a verse introduction to *Tide and Continuities*, the poem's predominant voice is not a persona or even "the poet," but Peter Viereck, the aging man who, it appears, suffers from cancer and cataracts, and is lying in a hospital bed in springtime, close to death. Composed during the years after "Rogue" was written, the poem announces that Viereck will write a book on Dionysus, Pluto, and Persephone if the cures that he is undergoing do not kill him.

Viereck places "At My Hospital Window" at the very beginning of *Tide and Continuities*, allowing it to set the tone of the entire work. It is a complex poem divided into two parts, with six sections in the first part, five in the second, and subsections within most of the sections. The syllables "sac" or "sanct" appear in the titles of all but one section, indicating not a religious atmosphere, but a sometimes grim play across the binary of sacred and profane.

In the first section of the poem, "Sacred Wood" (the hospital), Viereck revisits the issues that he addressed in "Bewildered Dignity," "Crass Times Redeemed by Dignity of Souls," and "Rogue." Dignity is challenged *in extremis* in the hospital and, indeed, does not survive there, at least in any form that it previously took. Viereck proclaims: "Come praise—more than 'the dignity of man'—/The faced indignity; go clear-eyed down./When even charm and status face the deadpan/Smirk of the bedpan, indignity/Is the great leveler." Viereck goes on to say that "loss" is his "leitmotif," as it was for the lungfish at the end of "Rogue." He maintains that "In the sacred wood of losers, still some tatter/Of loved-enough loss must stay." Yet he acknowledges that everything crashes. As once it mattered "to cling to glory's shreds," now Viereck enjoins: "Share/Leftovers; dregs matter, ashes/Warm" (4).

The second section of the poem, "Sacroiliac," deepens Viereck's meditation on death and dying. Hospital is a "nation" where "the buildings inhabit the people," a "campus" where "Pain is dean," "Angst is flunky prof," and Viereck "their flunking pupil." Then, as he will do several times in the poem, Viereck pulls back and criticizes himself for giving in to "Confessional verse's professional moan." He would hope to "counterclown" instead of to "blubber" at death. Section two ends with Viereck's reflection that, sealed up

in his hospital room, he will never hear tide again and be honed by its waves.

Section three, "Sacre de Printemps," and section four, "Sacrilege," are the bitterest and most desperate moments of the poem. In the third section, the greenery of spring, seen through Viereck's hospital window, is not the rebirth of Dionysus, but a cancer, plague, and case of gangrene. Inside him there is also growth: "I'm a vase for a poppy of rosier bloom,/My blood its sap, my meat its loam./A shot of morphine its opium,/Its garden the surgery room" (6).

*A sacrilege to
hide from
death.*

In "Sacrilege," Viereck remarks on the cataracts that are blinding him and then has an encounter with Grim Jack the Reaper in the form of the clacking dentures of the recently deceased former occupant of his room. Trying to face down this grisly and farcical vision with the power of poetry to effect "a poise that no longer panics," he is thrown back when the vision declares his poetic defenses to be "duds" and tells him that it is sacrilege to hide from death, which is now upon him. At this juncture the imperiled poet invokes the female "life-core of ocean" to save her "clown-priest."

Sections five through eight record the poet's romance and struggle with the sea, pursued most likely in a morphine dream. In the fifth section, "Sanctuary," he plays erotically with the sea, praising the liminal states of land and sea ("These sand-pebbled bays, these salt-probed beaches"). He culminates with the assertion that "Fleshed mutualness, each reached by what it reaches, Shares Holy Land" (8).

In section six, "Sacred Ode," Viereck proposes to "eke real-life theater from farce/By love's sheer force," but then draws back from "poesie mush" and implores the sea to shield him from the Reaper until his ode to her is finished, to which "Sea's voice (or is it my echo?) answers, 'Finish!' " This section ends with the poet's intent to go back behind his "lungfish-ancestor's beachhead to birth's first arena." He hungers to return to the womb: "Then, vulva of Unda Marina, sway me the tide of the dead" (8-9).

Part One concludes here, and Part Two begins with the seventh section, "Sacred Code," in which the poet senses that the sea is sending him an urgent message in an indecipherable code. Blocked in his effort to connect, he turns in section eight, "Unsacrosanct," to convert the sea into a "sea trope" of his own devising, attempting to assert once again the power of poetry and even flirting with the idealist speculation of physicist John Archibald Wheeler that perhaps

the “universe required the future observer to empower past genesis.” He declares: “Parental worldsea, you’re my oversized/Baby, anthropomorphized by these very lines” (11).

Section nine, “Safe Inland,” finds Viereck back in the hospital contemplating “spring’s rampage” again, until he lapses into dream and is pelted by brine and must surrender to a powerful current that hurtles him in an uncertain direction. In section ten, “Sacerdotal,” the poet after another shot of morphine again confronts the clacking dentures, which drive home the indignity of life: “Gold was brow’s goal, gut’s rot has made it dross.” The poet answers bravely: “Watch me shape shapely silver from gold’s loss” (13).

That promise will not be fulfilled, at least in this poem. In the second part of section ten, Viereck has returned to his bed, unable to remember what he is supposed to write (his sacred ode to the sea). He observes that “We differently-abled golden agers/Are mnemonically-challenged underachievers, ” and then promises himself that “Tomorrow I’ll shape, not shed. The best is ahead” (13).

That will not be either. His memory does not return. In the final section, “Sacrament, ” he suggests a “new Sacrament” for lovers—“The sharing of leftovers/The unholy communion of the unfulfilled.” Returning to the theme sounded at the beginning of the poem, Viereck observes that once he “willed to go down clear-eyed. “Now that no longer seems to matter. He has lost the sea and a sea trope will not save him. With pathetic irony he concludes: “Where’s sea? My only tide/Is my catheter bag and my I.V. pouch:/My two ebb-flow machines./Plugged into gimmicks of expensive ouch,/I squint gray cataracts at what regreens” (13).

Is there dignity here or even faced indignity? Only sad, but no longer bitter, irony—perhaps that is still a form of dignity.

Persephone

Viereck survived to write his poetic meditations on the Dionysus-Persephone-Pluto relation. These long poems constitute a masterwork of philosophical poetry, a reflection on cosmology from an existentialist viewpoint that instantiates Greek mythology vividly, cogently, appropriately, imaginatively, and compellingly right into the life of the late twentieth century. The work is as actual as a visit to a postmodern technological hospital, and it is also for the ages. It faces and refuses to deny—this has always been Viereck’s

A remarkably credible synthesis of Tide and Continuities.

greatest strength—the sway of contemporary tides, but has redirected them so that they fuse with nearly archetypal myth structures: the Dionysus-Persephone-Pluto dialogues and monologues incarnate *Tide and Continuities* in a remarkably credible synthesis. In these poems, Viereck has left us proof that his cultural ideal of a fusion of the thoroughly modern with the permanently human, as embodied in tradition, can be achieved.

The image on the cover of *Tide and Continuities* is a telling commentary on Viereck's mytho-philosophical poem cycle. It is a photograph of an ancient terra cotta relief showing Persephone seated next to Pluto; she holds a fowl in her hand and he holds a sheaf of grain, the arm rest of their bench is a serpent. The two gods sit calmly, serenely, and impassively. There is no sign of the third player, Dionysus, although there is great merit to Joseph Brodsky's claim in his sparkling verse introduction that "this book, left to its own devices/is an *hommage* to Dionysus" (xiv).

As Viereck has imagined the relation of the three gods, Dionysus is the principle of unrepentant life, struggling for more life; Pluto is the principle of death, secure in his serenity; and Persephone is the shifter of the seasons, shuttling back and forth between her two lovers, reviving by regathering Dionysus in the spring and reaping him, hacking him apart in the fall. Viereck's poems are exquisite, often hilarious and often touching, inquisitions into the ways in which the three figures respond to their roles in the cosmic drama that they are fated to play, and to each other—as they separate and unite in the subtlest and starkest ways through their dialogues.

The mytho-philosophical poems appear in Parts I and VI of *Tide and Continuities*. Part I features Dionysus asserting himself against death ("Dionysus in Old Age" and "Goat Ode in Mid-Dive") and Pluto defending his place in the cosmos ("Pluto Incognito"). Part VI features Persephone dialoguing with Dionysus ("Tide") and with an old poet ("Persephone and Old Poet"). The former poem is often breathtaking in its changes of voice and in the way it puts the two figures into a complex and genuine relation with each other: they individuate for each other. The latter poem gives the last word in the book to Persephone.

There can be no doubt that the most complex and credible figure in Viereck's mytho-philosophical poems is not Dionysus but Persephone. She must spin the wheel of life and death, of the seasons, dwelling with two lovers. To whom does she belong? Is she

the betrayer of Dionysus, his slayer; or is she his reviver who would wish to stay with him perpetually but is forced by fate to abandon him for the underworld? Is it really Pluto whom she loves or does she defy Pluto each spring by leaving him alone to rule his frigid but serene realm without a consort with whom to share its inhuman peace? Does she belong to the wheel that she must spin? Does she belong to herself as the one who shuttles and is ultimately indifferent to both her lovers, although she is inevitably drawn to fuse with each of them at certain times in the seasonal cycle?

The complexities, ambiguities, and ambivalence of Persephone's role endow her with a wisdom that neither Dionysus nor Pluto can have. Each of them is fixed in his world and would, if he could, have Persephone as his consort perpetually. It is probably true that Persephone, given the pushes and pulls on her, can never know what her will is and where her loyalty lies. Her significance does not reside in her having a fixed viewpoint, but in being an opening for a play of viewpoints. She is wise when she takes account of the whole cycle in which she is involved, being the only one to experience it as a whole. There she finds her superiority, and the reader is tempted to speculate that she always reserves part of herself above the stations of the cycle, even in her moments of abandon to one of her lovers; that there is always a sad, hard, and yet strong independence that neither Dionysus nor Pluto has—one gets the sense that she has learned that a girl has to take care of herself and that she has learned to do so with a savory realism.

*Viereck's
Persephone
indisputable
moment of
transcendence.*

It is a great credit to Viereck that he has been able to imagine a compelling, even dominant, female figure at just the moment that, as the civilized-rogue-existentialist and reverer of struggling life that he has always been, he encounters an unwanted finality. The indisputable moment of transcendence in Viereck's poetry is the figure of Persephone, the most complex persona that he has yet invented and one that is at least as credible as his representations of himself.

"Persephone and Old Poet" contains seven sections entitled "Prologue," "Calendar," "Hex," "Mend," "Chore," "Medusa," and "Epilogue: My Future Prologue." The poem is taken up with, as the old poet puts it, "a clash of myths," specifically the encounter between Persephone's wisdom that death is the preparation for new life and should be accepted by the one who is dying, even though the dying one will not himself be reborn; and the old poet's bid to

*Death the
preparation for
new life.*

assert the power of poetry against mortality, perhaps to make poetry redeem the mortality of the flesh.

The argument between the old poet and Persephone builds up to a climax at the end of the sixth section ("Medusa") when the poet encapsulates the controversy in his terms: "Goddess and bard are each a lasting watcher./Who outlasts whom, there's the wager." Persephone responds: "Your hubris bloats weirder. I'm wider, you're waner./A shuttler's no wilter. You wither." The poet replies: "I wither. Into music. Though you balk,/Are not these very lines (which magic is winner?)/My Perseus mirror against your Gorgon gawk?" (315).

In the seventh section ("Epilogue: My Future Prologue") we are back to the stark confrontation with death that governed "At My Hospital Window." As always, in Viereck, what is at stake is dignity. In section two Persephone had uttered the challenge: "Age is a spastic fandango/(Flayed of all dignity) towards your Penelope,/Your waiting grave-hole. Tell her 'Open Sesame.'" At the end of the first part of the final section, she asks: "For what are you waiting before you go drop?" The poet answers: "For the unlikely chance of some unexplainable warmth" (309, 316).

In the second part of section seven, the old poet reviews the history of evolution from the "rogue amoeba that split in two" to "my Homer-Shakespeare-etc. accident," and declares it all to be "accident," asserting that now his "accidental new start starts" (316).

"Some accidents less accidental than others."

The next part begins with Persephone's retort: "Though hooked fish twitch, ends—ends!—aren't starts./No more Chronos coins in your till." The two voices then go back and forth, with the old poet repeating his point that "the singer topples, but his songs still scan." Persephone queries how a few "neo-lungfish rebut/The odds and live to reach/That accident beach." The poet responds enigmatically: "Maybe some accidents are less accidental than others," recalling the physicist Wheeler's speculation that the "universe required the future observer to empower past genesis" (316-17).

The penultimate part of the epilogue-prologue is a touching exchange between the old poet and Persephone in which the poet acknowledges the finality of death ("For Attis and his knife, no antidote."), but refuses to let down his "heliotropic heart" and proclaims: "Unexplainable warmth is now my blind date" (317).

Is it still true, as it was for our date with the world in the vignette "Bewildered Dignity," that "nobody likes 'blind dates'"?

Persephone responds to the old poet's proclamation with a perhaps condescending, even gently mocking, perhaps rueful and also ironic compassionate regret: "Because I dote on you so, I'd stay for a quickie chat/If, if./The wheel won't let me do it." She knows that he is not leaving her for new adventures, but that she is leaving him, as she leaves Dionysus each fall.

The final part of "Epilogue: My Future Prologue" recounts the old poet's attempt to start his new adventure, his grasping for a "fluke": "Fluke, needed fluke, is my argonaut, steering/To where new mess, new growingness is stirring." Persephone responds that the old poet's power is "worn out," he cannot launch himself again; to which he replies that his "knack of fumbling empowers both heart and head." Persephone: "I almost believe in you. But." Old Poet: "My riskiest launching—full speed ahead!—/(Well half speed) is starting, is starting." Persephone concludes the poem: "Brief humans, my eons still can't figure you out" (317-18).

*The final
human
dignity.*

The final human dignity is to bewilder the gods. Bewildering dignity.

References

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