

## Marjorie Perloff: On "For The Anniversary of My Death"

What distinguishes a poem like "For the Anniversary of My Death" from the "undecidable" texts of a Beckett on the one hand, as from its modernist predecessors on the other, is the marked authorial control that runs counter to the lipservice paid to "bowing not knowing to what." Far from being a poem of dis-discovery, a text whose "echo repeats no sound," "For the Anniversary of My Death" is characterized by a strong sense of closure.

Consider, for example, the stanzaic division. The first stanza (five lines) describes what happens "Every year"; the second (eight lines) refers to "Then" (when I will be dead). The first concentrates on the silence of eternity, beyond "the last fires," the eternity symbolized by the beam of the lightless star. The second recalls, even as does the final stanza of Yeats's "The Stolen Child," what will be lost when death ends the inexorable forward movement of time, when the "strange garment" of life is shed: namely, the love of one woman, the shamelessness of men, the singing of the wren, the falling of rain, and, yes, the "bowing not knowing to what," which is to say, "bowing" to the premonition of death one has in moments of transition, as when a three-day rain comes to an end.

Does the language "mock the poet with its absences"? Not really, or at least its mockery seems to take place only on the surface. The first line quickly gives the game away: since there is obviously no way to know on what day of the year one will die, the phrase "without knowing it" strikes a rather self-important note. This is the language, not of dream or of mysterious Otherness, but of calculation: the setting up of a hypothetical situation that brings the time/eternity paradox into sharp relief. Again, the reference to "death" as the moment when "the last fires will wave to me" seems to me the very opposite of "spare" (a word regularly applied to Merwin's poetry by his admirers); it is a gestural, a decorative metaphor reminiscent of Dylan Thomas rather than René Char. Indeed, lines 2-5, with their heavy alliteration and assonance, their repetition and slow, stately movement, have the authentic Thomas ring:

When the last fires will wave to me And the silence will set out  
Tireless traveller  
Like the beam of a lightless star

The language of the second stanza is increasingly abstract, conceptual, formulaic, recalling, as Bloom points out, the conservative rhetoric of poets like Longfellow or MacLeish. To call life "a strange garment," to define one's humanity in terms of "the love of one woman" and the need to wrestle with "the shamelessness of men"--such locutions have the accent of the Sunday sermon rather than the surrealist lyric. Given this context, the "bowing not knowing to what" in the unpunctuated last line is a predictable closural device: it points us back to the title with its recognition that one of the days now lived through will, one year, be the day of the poet's death.

The poem's closure is reflected in its formal verse structure. Merwin's heavily endstopped lines, each followed by a brief rest or hush, are lightly stressed, anapests predominating as in

Like the beam of a lightless star

or

And bowing not knowing to what

but in many lines the pattern is complicated by an initial trochee:

Every year without knowing it Tireless traveller Hearing the wren sing.

Syntactic parallelism--"And the silence will set out," "And the love of one woman," "And, the shamelessness of men"--provides a further ordering principle. And although the stress count ranges between two and five (and syllable count between five and thirteen), the lines are organized tightly by qualitative sound repetition: Merwin's patterning is extremely intricate, as in the alliteration of t's, r's, and l's in "Tireless traveller," the assonance and consonance in "Find myself in life," and the internal eye rhyme in "And bowing not knowing to what."

"For the Anniversary of My Death" is thus a very elegant, wellmade poem; it has a finish that would be the envy of any number of poets, and its theme is certainly universal--just mysterious enough to arrest the reader's attention, yet just natural enough (this is the way we all feel about death sometimes) to have broad appeal.

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