

Donald Revell: On "Syringa"

"Syringa" sends an Orpheus entirely its own into "the nature of things to seen only once, / As they happen along, bumping into other things." This Orpheus proves most adaptable, shifting and changing his songs to extol and then to exhaust many measures of art, nature, love, and time. And in the end, he is not torn apart; rather, he is simply used up, burned out like a star, and the poem continues to its finish without its Orpheus and yet with something of the beauty of his example, his fatal trajectory. Orpheus "is no longer ? Material for a poem," and so the poem finds other material. The reckless economy of poetry teaches that "stellification / Is for the few," that out of many figures, only a handful resonate with enough life in enough time to set us the kind of example, that is, an exemplary self, in search of which we originally resort to the writing and reading of poems. In order to find these, the imagination tries and squanders a great deal, living carelessly off its only capital: the real and real time. Th compact measures of bad poetry are niggardly; they refuse to waste words and try to pass off such parsimony as a virtue. Ashbery has taught me that I must waste words, lots of them, trying them against and upon one another, allowing them and their syntaxes to fall apart sometimes in order to find, not the true ones, but the ones that seem true at the time, the ones whose example I am willing to follow to their ultimately silent ends. The wasting and the falling apart are the circumstances, the medium of poetry.

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