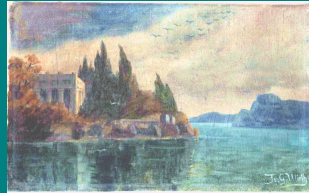


Max Wickert

SERENADES



Gelasius Wirth, *Landscape*

Note: This is the complete cycle, not a selection. The "Elegy," originally written separately, was later slightly revised to form an epilogue to the series.

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1

We two are contained by nothing not even this palpable darkness
Where horns are forgiving us flutes are like bones expectantly still
And violins are presenting vast night to us in a tiny casket
We press It between us when we embrace we feel it when we kiss
Each other's eyes and are not ungrateful for our little present
Galaxies rustle faintly multitudinous in it and over
The small blue pearl of its earth animal presences echo
Their infinitesimal crotchets of yearning through hollow dark
The violins making a gift of it to us in a tiny casket
There the hairy hands of the violators the heels of the clumsy
Suffer ecstatic reduction becoming transparent and frail
There cruel man stares at his sky with a rush of elegiac feeling
And dreams of terrific disclosures indefinitely withheld
Flutes expectantly still like his bones the horns forgiving him:
Never again will we waken to silence never again
Hear other than this fading impartial inward singing
"I am a palpable darkness: You two are contained by nothing."

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo,
NY: Outriders, 1972)

Muted measures lift slab after slab from hollowly gorgeous
Night *trala* their single refrain discards the romance
Of epitaphs our great tablets of law are tumbled aside
With sober inquisitive canons *trarira trala* the bricks
Of our comfort already crumble near a trampled dancing-floor
And music's cool contemptuous wisdom whistling digs *trala*
In the disenchanting ground *trala* casting up our cheap
Plaster bas-reliefs of *trala* an idyll of mercy
An allegory of sublime chastisement with easy instruments
Our mysterious obelisks are felled our pyramids are
Unpiled *trala* Where are our '*je-ne-sais-quois*' *trala*
our sweet ineffable *tra* our *la* intimations of *li* . . .
A pitiless unison turns the last stone to find beneath it
Ourselves blind white worms left suddenly in morning silence
Our spontaneity destroyed by our knowledge of what is required

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo,
NY: Outriders, 1972)

Night stretches all her wires tight to lure the sightless
Heirs of wretchedness here or there or another place
Strings of silver or steel singing pass from stars
To tipped grasses tie frost to tree-bark transfix the apples
With woms or steadily pull at the ring in the nostrils of
A patient white bull the moon: night organizes courts
Of desire where all things squirm or thrill at appointed centers
The bat secure at the place of the moth the moth rejoicing
In a mansion of little flames the flame ringing a last faint
Vibration of venom and honeycomb: night has tuned her wires
Precisely has strung them through the ears of her blinded
inheritors is making them yearning for justice try to guess
At the one the final direction by piercing melodies crossing
Recrossing turning their heads this way or that: they know
Their eyes no longer avail in the magical night they listen
For the seat of the harpist themselves musical with regret
That it beckons from no place that two ears are not enough

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972)

There while in unromantic branches assembled the air
Unobeyed now sings the counsels of her end he leads her out
Reluctant to hear the refusal of leaves again she allows
His tugging her toward his own significance in the darkness
In May-time one voice can be taken for another she smiles
Brave at his easy merging with the chorus of general talk
"Ah!" he is waving his arms and "Ah!" she has caught his drift
For him the abandon of storm is meaning but she understands
How wisdom is wind except for a trembling in what hangs on
In the leaves that cry: "Don't let him think on autumn nor the moon
Come out to illumine what shivers gray under judgment here
Don't let him remember why winter winds more silently move
Let us all sing to fill him with the grief he will need one day
When he sees the breeze read destruction in a flutter of her blouse."

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972)

“Ladies and gentlemen,” overwrought cries the moon, “I want
I want . . . “ but he can't conclude he makes a Byronic gesture
Pacing spoiled boy his palace with antediluvian frown
Among the moist-eyed lovers abstracted murmurs rise
The midnight having tried too hard for tone resigns
Stars sit in dismayed committees and stare their minutes over
While ardor already seizes the reins with easy inaptitude
By two o'clock the winds are thick with unassimilated
Sighs the commerce of kissing taking an unhealthy turn
The traffic of hands in dalliance almost routinely theatrical
Ladies and gentlemen take good stock of your naked bodies
Do not allow too much currency to protestation for now
The darkness is no longer governed in your private interest
Your whole wealth a dumb figure asleep in your arms
And by four the dew will begin to pluck its weak guitar
The cheap sparrows to advertise a narrow sunrise

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo,
NY: Outriders, 1972)

In the plenitude of twelve o'clock the strawberry blood surmises
Ecstasies of spilling and galaxies are whelming the blackness
In transcendental frauds the consolations of metaphysical
Malice outspeed the nimblest afflatus of vulgar happiness
And gaiety rides her dogcart into the pulsing quasars
Before formulations of clemency opened the curtains of tears
Night has stood in the pit darting a lovely scorn and long after
The echoes of yearning cease in the source a great sanity
Will gently open her violent book and read a single
Uncoded word *Enough!* O midnight your mothers offer
Their virtues to the stars and spill their milk in your storms
Your myriad nebulae transform their infanticides into hymns
And the black iridescence of plague adorns your maidenly pallors
Only I your bastard beg for morning on earth for a cold light
An insomniac staring with electrical aspect into his mirror
To find there the face of art in all its potential stupidity

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

Now leeks are greening under starlight and glacial ridges flow
To fill a gentian stratosphere with elfin ghosts of water
My littleness is wheeling above an alpine dream of your face:
Sideways from corners of your shrewd closed eyes the wrinkles
Weave slow laces of lady-wisdom your parted mouth breathes
Like a chasm from innocent moist lungs rhythmic to smash and lungs
Of frangible pulses it is Sunday in your spine though the moon's
Diplomacy still matters in your blood while shambling he wanes
Feeble in ultramarine profundities of shattered stars:
If gnats flew alone mountain-high exalted in the salt night
If they saw your pastoral shape so enormously disposed on a slope
As I do and understood how ice melting and pungencies of pale green
Assimilate your hair and your harmonious futures and if
They outlived the chill to settle at your side in morrowing sun
Sniffing the fragrances of your unbecoming dream their chorus
Would retrieve from the tides of the night something I never will
Who can only remember what I have been told: *She is asleep*

--written 1971, published in *Buffalo News* (September 22, 1972)

Radiance of your body will reach my eyes but now you lie
Naked in pitch black as though your frailty had outlawed pity
Above these clouds the stars in their pride of completed lives
Probably strut the eternal kids in their quotidian fashion
Making game of the hearts they steal to their gravity making marriages
Of all to all in their consummate abodes thank heaven a blanket
Of unspent rain can hide their stark regard and hallow
The thrill of darkness torn from startled shadow in the dark
And it is you love you alone whom now I turn to
Alone to bring home to you stern axioms of perished stars
For all nocturnal feelings are versions of panic: still
I want to speak dimply to you but is it simple to cry
I love your life which is half done your endurance in divorces
Your having borne issue who also will cease and your terror
Of the heart steeling itself for the end of your delight my delight?

--written 1971, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)

The whole day wasted shifting ground appeasing you with pledges
Now the air is posting a chilling message to my newest address:
'Nothing is enough take leave of your senses promise her nothing'
Again the beacons of departure have begun to solicit the evening
And the horizon's old cincture yields to their older astral fret
Empty as boats that strain at their moorings the images of desire
Tear against their origins and drift abandoned in cold: You
Whose loving once harnessed my love are hard to find in that dark
Where syllable by syllable my oaths return to encumber me confessions
Declarations cloy my passage and the words the worlds of my vows
Are all too much: Only your ultimate future flagged
With your name flares austerely from beyond the Milky Way
All other names of desire are beguiling lies I will promise
Nothing: Here is the hand of an idiot on your mortal skin
Here my unpledging mouth looks to yours for the gift of silence
These my five senses are lost in your pitiless fugitive sense
Only your present body saves mine from being inconsolable
Later I fall benighted into nothing between your legs
And nothing is enough as fall together senseless into sleep
Should dawn remember to restore our girding firmament I
Calling back my former senses will fumble to unhasp the chain
Of desire and find no more than a leash of lovely longing

--written 1971, unpublished

Elegy

Praying the leaves not to sprout, the worlds nevermore to fashion
coincidences he can homestead for whatsoever
he plans to deserve, he boards his ship and speeds away in
a line impossibly straight tracing the graph of all points
farthest from complicity.

 You, lady, who have quarreled
(or with whom he has) are appalled now to rediscover
his tale of your ugliness in the bald twigs of the last
tree on earth under which you sleep and from which no apple
to bless your kin or curse it will fall until his return.

Nothing is perfect and by your flaws we remember you
and tell you from the perfect others that cannot exist.
Yet even so we refuse to recognize what we have
ashare in, to be at home with you where all disappoints
but love which is not enough.

 We are the majority
the nations that embarrass you by staring at the scars
on your belly not suiting our manifest destinies
though you are ours and agree with us when we acclaim
the voyager whose goal shrouds your form in criteria.

As for myself can I ever be free of these others
with their insistent statistic that your breasts are too small
even if lovely, their conceit of your years and seasons
as congenital obstacles to their strait and narrow
Idea, their fear of periphery.

 Let me whisper
to your sleep, change your nightmare of your own grotesqueness
of your chastity fouled by him who cannot dwell in it
whom crowds exalt: it is he who abandons you not I
I am another doomed to depart another time.

I say to them: She dreams and with every cry at her ear
of *Not enough!* or of *How long? how long?* she is returned
closer to her ancient but no longer innocent shape
but each time more removed from the embrace of who alone
can make her know herself lovely.

 But with them I must cry
at your ear: You are ungenerous you respect neither
yourself nor our craving for the empire of perfection
you are too obedient to us yet you will not forgive
miscalculations . . . You environ us with blemishes.

I have no desire either to explain or accuse.
After all interpretation after discomforting
intimations of shared petulance time overtakes me
with a rage for utopias, even utopias
that accede to your degradation

There the unlikely
cocksure lover nursing his knowledge of the perfect face
smiles on yours despite what failings he has marked on it
I can be dazzled by seas of desolation when I
enjoy the vantage point of the moon of my perfection

The voyager craves a novelty that will no longer
surprise him flees from the irritations of your household
where each hour a new strangeness stuns and renders him guilty
flees your smiling gravity toward an inner straitness
and after him the multitudes yearn.

He has forsaken
whom before he instructed to feel a necessity
for him alone and he does not remember whether he
has quarreled or been quarreled with by your ravaged frailty
and can no longer distinguish a strangeness from a flaw.

Lady! call him back from accident to coincidence
and forgive us for inventing him, show us all the path
to a knowledge not of faults but of our complicity
and forgive me for what I become among these others
then free yourself.

You still speak as one who belongs to me.
Your damaged recurrence is not yet irretrievably
altered so long as you but sleep and a single tree stands
I alone while yet your breath comes am your bridegroom who learns
to let human enterprise cease before your beauty dies.

--written 1972, unpublished