

“The Redemptions/ Of the Moment”



Marjorie Perloff

My personal favorite among George’s poetry collections is the little booklet *Voluntaries*, published by Corycian Press in Iowa City in 1987 and later included in *Century Dead Center* (Left Hand Books 1997). The first of the book’s seventeen short lyrics, “Wellfleet, 10:30 AM 7/6/79, from the deck:” explains the sequence’s title:

Voluntar-
ily. I’ll submit
to the redemptions
of the moment.
My will be done
in whatever reaches me /

These lines provide a nice spin on Keats’s *negative capability*—the “capacity of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Like his Romantic precursor, George takes poetry to be the antithesis of rational explanation, but his own “redemptions / of the moment” are the result of what he here calls voluntarism—the power to choose. George is, in other words, a poet who very much knows what he is about, whose quizzical ironies measure whatever is perceived and experienced, so that “My

and all together—

seem to make a pattern
 along whose edge we run
 putting in our bits and pieces
 until, overtaken, we become
 permanent parts of it

knitted up into a design
 those left along its edge keep glimpsing.

Why Paul and not me? George asks himself poignantly. Why did he have to be taken? It is the central question of elegy, and the poet knows there is no answer: the overarching pattern, the key design, is beyond human understanding: we can only “glimpse” it from the edges. Given his own origins, George turns instinctively to Greek mythology: he salutes the Three Fates—Clotho, who spins the thread of life, Lachesis, who draws it out, and Atropos, who cuts it off. One must submit to one’s fate, however painful. And now the elegy concludes:

So this Friday the 13th
 I write, make plans
 And think about the past.

By the force of what I
 will call some kind of grace
 when I close my eyes tonight

I’d still see
 the fields of seaweed at Wednesday morning’s low tide
 and the luminous greens of the freshly-watered garden.

“Grace,” as O’Hara put it, “to be born and live as variously as possible.” From the perspective of his Wellfleet deck, the bereft poet contemplates the merger of land and sea, as the “fields of seaweed” blend with the “greens of the freshly-watered garden.” Linear thinking--the list of dates, the specifying of “2 months and 11 days,” the 45th birthday-- gives way to the circular design, in which each one [is] alone / and all together.”

Reading this elegy for Paul Blackburn in the wake of George’s own recent death has a special poignancy. “Clotho Lachesis Atropos”: George accepted what he called, in his beautiful memoir of his dying father, “the gift of a condition” with a

disciplined equanimity. *Ave atque vale*, dear friend, and may the Elysian Fields welcome you.