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## Songs as Actions

Peter Viereck

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## SONGS AS ACTIONS

*A scene from Peter Viereck's Verse-Play*

### THE TREE WITCH

*WHAT WENT BEFORE: This singing contest of Scene 5 is the fifth of a series of maneuvers for which our three guardian-aunts (the THEY whose secret names are Alecto, Megaera, Tisiphone) are using the modern machine-age WE against our captured dryad (the SHE) in a collision of values: the mechanical and adjusted against the organic and spontaneous.*

#### SCENE 5. THE COLLISION CONTEST

*[Curtain remains down—we in front of it—during our opening speech to each other.]*

WE: Gloatings on death and autumn but renew her.  
We've rubbed her face in; she sang twice as strong.  
Let the grand plan unwind the Fifth Maneuver,  
A duel fought with her own weapon: song.  
By our own sweepstakes we are swept along  
And cannot stop the wheel, whose turnings prove her  
Each time a more unfathomable mover.

Now we, she, they—as gong collides with gong—  
Sing out our prayers in contrapuntal throng.

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[Curtain rises. Stage in three partitions, aunts in one, dryad in another, we in third. All kneel for our respective creed-songs; aunts beside human-size bird cage; dryad beside tree, with Greek lyre hanging from it; we beside tractor. Contest opens with "THE AUNT CREED."]

1ST AUNT: Decode by force the mixed-up hint of things,  
Extort this truth which every scalpel brings:

ALL 3 AUNTS: Cages teach useful lessons to daft wings.

2ND AUNT: At times we ogle a trapeze that swings  
With plagues of foolish, feathered carolings;  
We rescue it with rocks that soundness flings;

ALL 3: Cages teach useful lessons to daft wings.

3D AUNT: Catch childhood young with rings  
Round its imaginings;  
Dry up those springs.  
Pull it with dazzling strings;  
Pelt it with Fact that pings  
Whatever sings.  
Because rash necks invite the fist that wrings,

ALL 3: Cages teach useful lessons to daft wings.

1ST AUNT: And yet,  
                  though brows are stuffed with parrotings,

Some traitor-pulse unking  
(In brows beyond our stings,  
In songs beyond our slings)  
Wisdom with wonderings,  
Soundness with flutterings;—

ALL 3: In vain, in vain do cages preach to wings.

[*Spotlight shifts to dryad, speaking "THE TREE PRAYER":*]

SHE: You high ones, old ones, watching two by two  
 Wherever shrineless gods are exiled to,  
 Send down your lightning. But your olive too.  
 Cool whisper of the ages, not the age,  
 Expand the shallows of men's anchorage,  
 Apprentice them to more than they can hear.  
 You earth-deep resonance they dare not hear,  
 Be everywhere, like fragrance of the orange,  
 Yet single and sonorous as its root,  
 Till lives are sweet and inward as an orange,  
 And every death a quilt of leaves on root.

[*Spotlight shifts to WE; AUNTS temporarily enter "WE" partition.*]

1ST AUNT [*to us, with melting voice:*]

Now your turn; crow a credo we'll be proud of.

[*to 2ND AUNT, with crisp military voice:*]

You check for deviators,

[*to 3RD AUNT:*]                      you for doubters.

WE: We want life horizontal; what  
 Is vertical we roll down flat.  
 Our strength is as the strength of ten  
 Because we are replaceable men.  
 Replaced from infinite supplies,  
 What's duplicated never dies.  
 Jam-packed and yet frictionless  
 On the oil of civic bliss,  
 Perpetual motion standing pat,  
 We look like humans but we're not.  
 We are ball-bearings in disguise.

[*Looking satisfied by our recited credo, aunts return to their own partition.*]

WE [*furtive voice, to each other:*]

It never happened again, it was like this;

Just once, at snooze of aunts, when sap kicked out,

We were backsliders. That hour, pride in size

(Near dinky vines)

Seemed but a piling up of what won't grow.

SONGS AS ACTIONS

349

Drunk in the grapeless reel and strut of splurge,  
We sagged like puffballs belched by their own bulge.  
(Now near her vines  
Our fit returns.)

Now when, guffawing in cahoots with wheels,  
We boil whole countrysides in eight-lane tar,  
What goat-foot smears lewd shapes on it at night?  
Our smooch with mammon sulks in paradise  
Because of some bleached moon we hanker after,  
Some glassblower's lost algebra of shimmer.

[AUNTS *re-enter grim-faced*; WE *snap to attention, eager-voiced again.*]

WE: But quick rebounding, bland and pink as ever,  
From that last wobble of that backslide hour,  
Let's all intone the modern litany,  
The positive-edited digest of Great Books.

[Now comes "THE MODERN LITANY"; tone of incantation; instead of enjambement,  
WE-SPOKESMAN *pauses solemnly after every verse-line, regardless of punctuation:*]

Aunts, guardians, toilet-trainers, lend us your deafness  
To prejudice and make us nonconformists  
Like everybody else. Tell Sparta  
These truths we hold to be semantic blurs.  
For we are alone among mankind  
In combining free individualism' (that is, personalized stationery)  
With sense of community (our folk-dance classes).  
Lead us not into deviation, but  
Make us feel guilty near No Trespass signs  
As we make guilt-ridden those who trespass against us.  
Give us this day our daily treadmill  
Of keeping up with those who keep more up,  
But deliver us from psychosomatic heart-attack  
By granting free parking to customers. For thine is  
The working-hypothesis that moves the sun and the other stars.

... ..  
SHE: The air clogs thick with creeds; that was  
[*pointing to where our litany came from*]

the third one.

All rise like incense: crookedly—

WE [*looking upward:*] —and twining  
Their incompatibles (ours hers, theirs hers, theirs ours)  
Into collision songs. Each song two voices.

THEY: Each song not pause nor dream but song-as-action;  
We all as rhythms and those rhythms wars.

[*The separating stage-partitions drop and thereby re-unite actors for song-duels that follow, each time with new backdrop. Now comes first collision song, entitled "LINE AGAINST CIRCLE"; backdrop of big barred windows opening onto vista of stars and clouds.*]

WE SPOKESMAN:  
Solidity rushes on.  
We move in a moving maze.  
Vertigo—praise it—alone  
Stays. Cling to it tight.  
Man is a flare-up of clay;  
Shall he wait to be snuffed, shall he run?  
"Run!" the windows invite;  
Express, expand while we may.  
Man is a skidding of light  
Bogging in clouds, a daze  
Of longings and fruit, a stone  
Thrown by thrower unknown.  
Praise elation of flight.

SHE:  
Solidity rushes on—  
Brittle ghost at play—  
Onto the window bars.  
"Stand, wait!" they invite;  
Compress to the core while you may.  
Center and farthest sun,  
Thrower and throw are one;  
Pattern stays.  
Alternate heart-beat of light  
Grooms and dishevels stars.  
Rest in that heart. Praise  
Repose of flight.

[Now second collision song, called "GOLDEN BANALITY, PRO AND CON." Backdrop of paper sun, swinging back and forth between alternate speakers, who look up and address it during first four quatrains. Each of the three "WE" quatrains is spoken singly by different one of us.]

SHE:

Who here's afraid to gawk at lilacs?  
Who won't stand up and praise the moon.  
Who doubts that skies still ache for skylarks  
And waves are lace upon the dune?

WE:

But flowering grave-dust, flowerlike snow-dust,  
But tinkling dew, but fun of hay,  
But soothing buzz and scent of sawdust  
Have all been seen, been said—we say.

SHE:

BANALITY, our saint, our silly:  
The sun's your adverb, named "Again";  
You wake us with it willy-nilly  
And westward wait to tuck us in.

WE:

Trite flame, we try so hard to flout you,  
But even to shock you is cliché.  
O catastroph-i-cal-ly dowdy!  
O tedium of gold each day!

SHE:

Who's new enough, most now, most youngest  
Enough to eye you most again?  
Who'll love the rose that love wore longest,  
Yet say it fresher than quick rain?

WE:

You'll see. You'll say. You'll find the word.  
Even we must lilt then, willy-nilly,  
TRAPT by one banal triple-chord  
Of woman, sun, and waterlily.

SHE: And here's the magnet

[*touches lyre*] to compel that trap,  
Eking out essences you lost in you.

WE: Being so compelled, our old lost self wakes up,  
 Lost childhood of the hour before the aunts.

THEY [*to each other:*]  
 Step in to save the singing-contest from her;  
 Snuff their lost self; she fires it up in them.

[*Now third collision song, called "THE LOST SELF." It has only two speakers, both fussing with tea pots: young child (i.e., WE-SPOKESMAN in child costume) and AUNT SPOKESMAN.*]

CHILD:            Underground-rivers ripple.  
                     Ripples are sometimes heard.

AUNT:                Child, don't hear them.  
                     Sit down, tea is served.

CHILD:            People get used to each other.  
                     Sometimes this leads to harm.

AUNT:                Elsewhere. Here's a  
                     Potful; cover it warm.

CHILD:            Younger, were years more under?  
                     Later, less haunted by blue?

AUNT:                Patience; soon now  
                     You will be deaf to them too.

CHILD:            Once in a lifetime, buried  
                     Rivers fountain and call.

AUNT:                Child, child, hear the  
                     Daily kettle boil.

CHILD:            Once; and who follows, touches  
                     Sand? Or gods? Or—tell!

AUNT:                Child, stop trembling;  
                     Porcelain cups may spill.

CHILD:            Children whom tides have altered,  
                     Live fierce and far. And drown?

AUNT:                Quick, move nearer.  
                     Tea is served, sit down.



[*We sit down at tea table with air of wallowing in total submission to AUNTS.*]

WE: Things being so, let them be with gusto so,  
The lost self fevered off, the clambakes coming.

[*Now fourth collision song, "QUESTION AND ANSWER," accompanied by moon, made of green cheese, careening from ceiling just out of our reach.*]

SHE: What do you see in the holy dread of the moonlight?  
(Is it fire-lures dawdling on treacherous bogs?  
Or a goat-leap you cannot quite glimpse through the fogs?  
Or some slut of a goddess with red-eyed dogs  
Hunting her lover, the moon?)

WE: Clambakes, clambakes on cranberry bogs;  
Cans piled up to the moon.

SHE: What do you hear in the holy dread of the moonlight?  
(Some stalker whose reverent pouncing Yes  
Affirms new unicorns of delicate loveliness?  
When he kills, is it true that his beautiful claws caress  
A painting, a poem, a moon?)

WE: Clambakes, clambakes on cranberry bogs;  
Hamburgers dimming the moon.

SHE: What do you feel in the holy dread of the moonlight?  
(Are you drunk—till the hush of it chills your hair—  
With the wager of man and his gay-tragic dare  
To be moon of his own inner tide down here?  
O pronounce me the wine of the moon!)

WE: It's clambakes, clambakes on cranberry bogs;  
Gumdrops all over the moon.

[*WE leave stage, re-appear wearing—for this song only—gray flannel suits, placarded "MADISON AVENUE."*]

WE: We're not successful only but refeened.  
As proved by our new song, "THE CULTURE-HUG BLUES."

[*This fifth collision song is begun by three "we" and resumed by AUNTS. Only one speaker at a time, but chorus at refrains. Night-club backdrop and orchestra. Actor intonation, and accompanying night-club orchestra, alternate between a vulgarly sentimentalized wail and an offensively raucous gloating, a marriage between old-fashioned spirituals and modern advertising jingles.*]

WE:

We no longer starve culture; we SWITCH \*  
 And hug it to death; the new PITCH  
 Is to croon antiquarian love-that-librarian CULTure-hug blues.  
 When Status Quo feels safe enough to ITCH  
 For scripts that let it laugh at its own TWITCH,  
 What's big bold "beat" bohemia but Babbitt's latest NICHE?  
 When "liberal" is but a stance and "Tory" but a pout  
 And "radical" a tease to get still more for selling out,  
 When suburbs shriek with tongue-in-chic,  
 When ads for fads ape art-technique,  
 They all croon the CULTure-hug blues.

If she isn't culture-snooty, there's a cooty on your cutie;  
 It's the duty of a beauty to be arty at a party,  
 Smarty with CULTural booze.  
 For Madison Avenue's guilt at its revenues,  
 What is the medicine? BLUES!  
 Not your mass-culture muse but our SENSitive muse,  
 Our anti-vulgarian, NEO-vulgarian, culture-hug blues.

If genius is an infinite capacity for faking PAINS,  
 Our Weltschmalz tears erase our huckster STAINS.  
 Art is an exorcism better than bell, book, and COUCH;  
 We're three blind Sensitive Plants, see how we wince, ouch ouch OUCH.  
 We've got to play with boors by day in order to stock the LARder;  
 We put to flight that guilt at night by hugging culture HARDer;  
 A cultural ouch does more than the couch to purge that guilty ARdor.  
 From cash's clink aghast we shrink, to prove we can affORD it;  
 With snoot held high we pass it by, because we've already STORED it;  
 High sen-ti-ment plus six per cent need never hug the SORDid:—  
 Except in office HOURS, except in office HOURS.  
 Culture is like a FOReign rug; we hate its looks but need its hug  
 To prove we can affORD it, to prove we can affORD it.

We're crisp executives at dawn, *poètes maudits* at dusk,  
 But even a sensitive weed must feed its HUSK;  
 The culture we hug is a culture for dusk, an afterthought culture, a rarefied musk  
 And not for office HOURS.

\* Each capitalizing of a whole syllable is stage direction for exaggerated loudness and vowel-lingering; all non-capitalized syllables of such a line, even those normally accented, get chanted in unaccented monotone.

That's why, no matter how soulful we wince,  
Our culture-hug muse and your mass-culture muse  
Are identical sisters under their skins:  
Both whore with who can affORD it.

[*Music stops; AUNTS take over stage, addressing audience and us.*]

THEY: That's local culture. True folkways now are global.  
Though tiffs replaced a toast two sages drank  
Inside a tech-tech-techniculture kitchen,\*  
What counts is their shared faith: in gadget-fidgets.  
Forget all dreams outside that common faith;  
Keep parroting, "Relax all global tension."  
Knife out the gray stuff in the frontal lobe;  
It spreads contagious dreams and won't relax.  
Take lower cultures: Greek or Britons. They  
Had tension: at Thermopylae, at Dunkirk.  
Relax—here come "THE GLOBAL LOBAL BLUES."

[*Music resumes in night-club background for AUNT-song that now follows. At "plastic bag," AUNTS play catch with plastic earth-globe; at "snip," with surgeon-scissors.*]

THEY: Now when dacha nouveau-riche and hot-cha profit itch  
Merge brands,  
When brain-wash sociology and sublim-ad psychology  
Join hands,  
When Folksi-Cola toasts unite vulgarians of all LANDS  
And "peace" means the homogenizing global churn of kitsch,  
You'll be FORCED to croon the global lobal blues.  
First they toasted, THEN they tiffed; yet—through summit OR through rift—  
Here's a truth will never shift while any bureaucrat comMANDS:  
Human heads will get short shrift from ROBOT hands.

So strike up all rotarian proletarian pan-barbarian BANDS.  
Progress is a PLASStic bag;  
Come stick in your head and what AILS you will gag.  
Gasping the BLUE-in-the-face blues.  
When our propaganda spasms turn your isms into wasms,  
We'll bag the earth in a PLASStic globe and disconnect your frontal lobe  
With our gadget-pop Agitprop air-jet-hop think-no-more blues.

\* Dispatch of July 27, 1959: "Today two of the world's leading statesmen and rivals—a vice-president, a dictator—exchanged Pepsi-Cola toasts in Moscow, at an American kitchen-exhibit dedicated to their common aim of industrial progress."

In the oldfashioned day, to make citizens stay reliable pals of big BROther,  
 There were salt mine and whip, but now we just snip the gray stuff that causes the BOther.  
 That snip is metaphorical, its blade a doctored word;  
 For the pen of the rhetorical is mightier than the sword;  
 And the blanker the grin, the blander within,  
 When a tranquillized planet must spin to the din  
 Of the world-lobotomy blues.

Let justice wobble sloppily in monolith monopoly;  
 Forget about Thermopylae; let Hungary bleed properly;  
 Cringe happily, vox populi, and dream it saves your skin—  
     While your culture-hug muse, when she muses on booze,  
     Keeps keening these meaningless Mother Goose blues: . . .  
     “Little boy Geiger, come blow your horn;  
     There’s beep in the meadow, there’s borsht in the corn.  
     Rockabye fallout, on top of the show;  
     When the wind blows you, the tuna will glow;  
     When the nerve BREAKS, Humpty Dumpty will fall;  
     Down will come baby, CULTure and all.”

[*Now scene's concluding song, "IN THE MONTH OF MARCH THE SNAILS CLIMB TENDER TREES"; rendered by dryad casually, slowly, undramatically; alone on dimmed stage:—*]

In the month of March the snails climb tender trees  
 To be nearer the Pleiades.  
 Grass fingers nab heat.  
 The fish jump for the fun of it.  
 Later the roses are willing to fall.  
 The wasted thistle-fluff isn't sorry at all.  
 A vineyard, met while walking, is a shelter  
 Good to hold to in that helter-skelter.  
 For fun — or food? or hooks? — life likes to twitch;  
 After the ice, it will not matter which.  
 After the ice, the feathers — once all throat —  
 Are shushed; the paraplegic lakes can not reach out.  
 And so, from hooked exuberance to numbed retreat,  
 The gamuts have no meaning; or, what they have of it  
 Encysts in chunky particulars, —  
 The specific timothy-grass, the ungeneralized tears,  
 The vineyard met while walking, a lifebuoy of Here,  
 Good to hold, in wave on wave of Anywhere.