

Peter Viereck: Reconciliation and Beyond  
By Michael A. Weinstein

In 1997, at eighty years old, Peter Viereck wrote the last of his dialogical long poems, which are his major contributions to contemporary civilization. "Gate Talk for Brodsky" is not simply the last of Viereck's "Persephone dialogues," which might be continued had the poet the strength to continue; it is a definitive posture toward final things, a conclusive meditation on death and dying, completing his masterwork of long poems in *Tide and Continuities*. Viereck culminates his life's thought with "gate talk," an act of "thread gathering" that pulls together the diverse, yet not contradictory, themes that he has developed and theses that he has expounded for nearly sixty years as a political philosopher (one of the progenitors of the conservative revival in the 1950s), a major American poet, and a poetry critic (defender of a classical modernism in a period of romantic free-verse revolt and formalist reaction).

Viereck's thought is diverse, not contradictory, both within each work and across time. From the beginning, when he attacked Nazism at its ethical-metaphysical core in *Metapolitics* (1941),<sup>1</sup> he has consistently defended the same complex position, varying it only by enriching it with new contributions and deepening it with the wisdom that eventuates from unblinking "looks into the abyss."<sup>2</sup>

As an act of thread gathering, "Gate Talk for Brodsky" gains its fullest intelligibility through readings of Viereck's major works and casts a shadowed light on them, illuminating facets that might have gone unnoticed in brighter days.

The continuity in Viereck's thought flows from a constant intellectual temperament that is manifest in all of his major writings. That temperament was best named by Walter Bagehot, a liberal conservative like Viereck, in *Physics and Politics*, as "animated moderation."<sup>3</sup> Although Viereck cites Edmund Burke and Clemens Metternich as his main political forebears, he evinces Bagehot's political and poetic virtue: Peter Viereck stands for and is an exemplar of animated moderation; he is the fortunate thinker whose work embodies his thought.

For Bagehot, animated moderation was the primary virtue sustaining and enhancing government by discussion, and inspiring great worldly literature; unifying theory and practice through temperament. On the side of poetics, animated moderation is a "union of life with measure, of

spirit with reasonableness," characterizing writings that "are never slow, are never excessive, are never exaggerated; that . . . are always instinct with judgment, and yet that judgment is never a dull judgment; that . . . have as much spirit in them as would go to make a wild writer, and yet that every line of them is the product of a sane and sound writer."<sup>4</sup>

On the side of politics, "this great union of spur and bridle, of energy and moderation," enables an individual to pursue his aims vigorously and to stop that pursuit short of undermining government by discussion: "A vigorous moderateness in mind and body is the rule of a polity which works by discussion; and, upon the whole, it is the kind of temper most suited to the active life of such a being as man in such a world as the present one."<sup>5</sup>

It is worth quoting Bagehot at length, because his description of the virtues of animated moderation is a match with Viereck: "It enables men to see what is good; it gives them intellect enough for sufficient perception; but it does not 'sicken them o'er with the pale cast of thought'; it enables them to do the good things they see to be good, as well as to see that they are good." <sup>6</sup>

### *Conservatism Revisited*

As a political philosopher, Viereck follows Bagehot in centering his thought in the defense of government by discussion. Bagehot, writing in the nineteenth century, could optimistically title the chapter of his book in which his description of animated moderation appears, "The Age of Discussion." He could confidently affirm that in a polity which works by discussion, "a strongly idiosyncratic mind, violently disposed to extremes of opinion, is soon weeded out of political life."<sup>7</sup>

In 1949, when Viereck's *Conservatism Revisited* appeared, it was clear that government by discussion was vulnerable to and threatened by totalitarian extremism. Rather than praising the progress of free institutions and adumbrating their virtues, it was necessary to defend those institutions against fascisms of left and right, as Viereck saw Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany.

Why had the promises of progress failed to be redeemed? In Viereck's reading, during the nineteenth century, the forces of constitutional conservatism and constitutional liberalism, both of them ostensibly committed to the moral values of the Western tradition, had destroyed each other in internecine conflict while the emerging forces of revolutionary socialism and totalitarian nationalism—Bagehot's extremist mind—played *tertius gaudens*. In World War II, constitutional democracies had fended off right-wing totalitarian nationalism, but they

were faced in the post-war period with the threat of the Soviet Union's "proletarian nationalism." *Conservatism Revisited* speaks to this crisis, calling upon all sides committed to the polity of discussion to unite against the extremist danger, aware that they hold civilized politics to be more important than their differences, and admitting that they are parts of a greater society and need the supplementation of their interlocutors.

Animated moderation means vigorous life within the limits of a flexible form. Constitutional liberals stress the flexibility and constitutional conservatives stress the form, but they embrace that dialectic in common. In a period in which government by discussion is threatened by extremism, animated moderation takes the specific form of reconciliation.

*Conservatism Revisited* promotes a kind of conservatism that is unfamiliar today: internationalist, humanist, and, more than tolerant, affirmative of its lack of self-sufficiency. There is no question, however, that Viereck is a conservative. He upholds the absolute value of human dignity against relativism and finds the best possibility for dignity's realization in received political and moral traditions and institutions, rather than in moral optimism about human goodness, which he believes leads straight to brutality when it crashes, and tends to blind its adherents to the presence of evil around them and in them.

Viereck's conservatism achieves a fine balance between absolute standards and the "realistic context" of particular situations and conditions through the mediation of "archetypes": "I believe in the rooted, not the newfangled, in archetypes, not stereotypes, in the ages, not the age, in the id-restraining traffic lights not only of law but of unwritten custom, in the organic social fabric, not the mechanical social contract, in Burke and John Adams, not Rousseau and Jefferson. And (as obsessive artist of sound, song, word) in the magical creative imagination that is released when the opposites of strict form and wild spontaneity coalesce in beauty."<sup>8</sup> Viereck is a reverse-chameleon, against all fashionable self-righteous surroundings, whether academic or commercial. He is allergic to any form of cant, whether "politically correct" or incorrect.

"The conservative way to freedom" is more sure than the liberal's, because it is realistic about human fallibility, including and especially its own, and, therefore, more alert to the dangers to freedom and less likely to be tempted by extremism. Yet, in a 1971 article, after writing that all that the New Left and the 1960s counterculture "ever set free was their hair," Viereck rejoins: "Let them strew their vine-leaves in it and health-food peanut butter—and pages of Charles or Wilhelm or whichever fourth Reich they now dig. But what if arsenic, too, is a greening? And

yet: we need them, we need them—without their spontaneity we'll all end up as I.B.M. cards."<sup>9</sup>

A spirit of reconciliation with everyone who does not impose their ideas and interests by force permeates Viereck's political writing. More than making a case for conservatism in the contest of ideologies, *Conservatism Revisited* is first an appeal to conservatives to reconcile with liberals and second an appeal to liberals to grant the legitimacy of a humanist conservatism.

Viereck's vehicle in his reconciling project is Prince/Professor Metternich, architect of the great European peace of the nineteenth century and staunch defender of traditional rights, who is wrongly remembered merely for his undeniable reactionary aspect. In his wiser aspect, Metternich sought to bring moderation to a divided Europe, but ultimately failed to do so because of the naive liberal alliance with a sinister German nationalism and the reactionary response to change by the forces of order. In his pursuit of constitutional reform in the Habsburg empire, Metternich, trying "hopelessly to persuade his emperor," defended his new constitution of 1832 as "*reconciling* 'the opposition between the monarchist principle and the democratic.' This is the western spirit; this is conservatism at its best, the evolutionary middle way between despots like Francis and the 1848 liberals."<sup>10</sup>

In the contemporary period, Viereck suggests that moderate liberals and moderate conservatives should be reconciled, not only because they are both threatened by totalitarian extremism, but because they are supplementary: "Mill and Burke are not opposites. They supplement each other, both being needed."<sup>11</sup> Viereck is an aristocratic democrat; as a principled conservative, he is wary of the consequences of liberalism's breaks with tradition and moral absolutism, yet he believes that his interlocutor is essential to the civilization that he defends; that is a position of honest, tough-minded reconciliation that respects difference, does not concede to it, and does not identify with it. Viereck's conservatism is animated in its defense of the inherent dignity of the individual and moderate in its self-limitation. As Viereck understands, this kind of distinction and complexity is alien to mass politics, in which opponents never acknowledge one another's value and necessity.

From the virtue of reconciliation grows Viereck's cosmopolitanism: " 'cosmopolite' was Metternich's favorite adjective against the mass men of nationalism. And, on the other flank, against the mass-men of class-warradicalism."<sup>12</sup> Reconciliation is also the source of Viereck's partial endorsement of Metternich's "conservative socialism": "What he meant by his 'socialism' was simply that the rule of law, moral and economic

in scope, must restrain the new middle-class seizers of power and must subordinate their capitalism to the common welfare."<sup>13</sup>

Although *Conservatism Revisited* can make fair claim to being the originating text of the conservative revival of the 1950s, Viereck's "international humanist conservatism" is unfamiliar in 1990s America, having been set aside in favor of an uneasy alliance of radical capitalists, defensive nationalists, and religious exclusivists, all claiming self-sufficiency for their ideologies. The new conservatives of the 1994 congress were no more ready for conciliation than their opponents had been when they were ascendant, leading to the 1996 budget deadlock. As the United States reassesses partisan conflict, Viereck's position might provide guidance to all moderates: "By their decorum of law and form, by their insistence on ethical means toward whatever ends, reconciling tradition with reason and building on the dignity of the individual soul, the principles of an international humanist conservatism are as basic to creative statesmanship as to art."<sup>14</sup>

As it was for Bagehot, poetics and politics share a common structure in Viereck's thought. The term expressing animated moderation in Viereck's poetics is "strict wildness."<sup>15</sup> In his major critical essay, "Form in Poetry," Viereck draws a tight analogy between the principles of poetics and politics: "Just as rooted lawful liberty is equally betrayed by reactionary authoritarianism and by its consequence, radical anarchy, so aesthetic form is equally betrayed by the anarchic formlessness of the barbaric yawpers and by the dead formalism of the elegant wincers. Formalism, by being an -ism, kills form by hugging it to death, whereas formlessness kills it openly."<sup>16</sup>

In his poetics, Viereck insists on rhythm and rhyme as disciplines that free the creator to dance and sing. He believes that rhythm and rhyme connote at a non-discursive primary level, giving poetry its unique advantage over prose by adding a dimension of tensional significance that the latter lacks. In the spirit of strict wildness, Viereck has devised new rhyme-schemes to refresh the tradition and has been a cosmopolite, seeking to reconcile the tensions in Western civilization between Athens and Jerusalem, and between ancient myth and technological culture. His poetry is steeped in tradition, yet hip to contemporary popular and avant-garde culture, and daringly original in its conception and execution. Even more than in his political theory, Viereck evinces the conservative way to freedom in his long philosophical poems.

### ***Archer in the Marrow***

In Viereck's dialogical poems and larger poetry cycles, he is a philosophical poet, for whom form subserves theme, which does not

mean that he could have achieved the same results in prose. Viereck speaks through the connotations of rhyme, vowel richness, and resonance, rather than only through the denotations of prose. The rich repertoire of his poetics generates the beautiful euphony of his formcraft. He follows Matthew Arnold in believing that many things are not seen in their truth unless they are seen as beauty.

Viereck's themes are the ones close to the dissenting humanist minds of his generation: How does one respond properly to Nietzsche's death-of-Christian-God decree? How can one best cope with one's finitude? How might one best live out the human fate? Is it possible to affirm finite life?

Viereck's favored site for his dialogical poems is Land's End, that strip of marshy beach, where the lungfish, the first air-breathing land animal, was beached and started the ascent toward man; and where each human being ends up to confront their own mortality, finally to spill the sea of briny body fluids within them back into the sea from which their lungfish ancestor emerged. Viereck takes the measure of the human being at Land's End or, in "Gate Talk for Brodsky," at west gate, and moves from there to different venues, only to return for the finale. The encounter with mortality is the master theme of Viereck's long poems.

In Viereck's dialogical poems, a cast of characters, expressly figures of the poet's imagination or himself, wrestles in poetic duels and waltzes over how the agonized human being can resolve his finally doomed struggle against being dragged back into the sea. The protagonist is usually a human voice, either "you" (everyman), "female you," or the poet; the antagonist is the voice of pitiless necessity, the Father or sky god, Pluto, or sometimes a female archetype; and the supporting roles are played by shifters and mediators, the most important being Son (Jesus returned to embrace earthly life) and Persephone, the shifter of the seasons. The god figures contend with and against the human voice as it vacillates and jumps from one position to the next. The poems have a dramatic structure of narrative development, but they are not plotted plays; they are dramatic poetry, not poetic drama.

In Viereck's long poetry, the drama of responses to the human fate is articulated in a prodigiously complex and complicated structure. Viereck sings and dances the most freely within interwoven nets of form; he exemplifies strict wildness. To be strict is not to be strictured; Viereck's rhythms are visceral and his rhymes are enlivening. He sets up a tensional play between rhythm and discourse, and then mediates that tension with a multitude of constructed forms: different genres, styles, and rhetorics of poetry; epigraphs, allusions, polyrhythms, and poems within poems, all of which he uses to make shifts in the dueling waltz and the waltzing duel. There is dazzling repartee and meditative

soliloquy in a Viereck long poem. There are endless shifts within and between characters. There is a copious repertoire of images symbolizing the drama: brine, thread, stain, bread. A wild diversity of forms and wildness within each form.

The most elaborately conceived of Viereck's long poetic works is *Archer in the Marrow: The Applewood Cycles, 1967-1987*. Begun a generation after *Conservatism Revisited* was published, *Archer* continues the quest for reconciliation of the earlier work, now on the plane of civilization rather than politics, though totalitarian fanaticism remains a brooding presence to be resisted. Its origins are no longer found in radical nationalism, but further back in the rebellion against the earth, signaled by Pauline Christianity, a modern counterpart of which is the reign of technology.

The major characters in *Archer* are Father, Son, and "you," supported by a Dionysus figure, female "you," other minor characters, and the voices of nonhuman things. The basic dramatic tension is a struggle over "you" between Father and Son, and a struggle of Son to be twined with the Dionysus figure and become a model for "you" to emulate. The 212-page work is organized into twenty cycles of waltzing and dueling among the characters.

*Archer's* conceit is that in creating human beings Father brought into being creatures who could stare back at him knowing that he had botched them, had given them a love for life, and had made them finite. The main duel in *Archer* is between Father and "you." Father tries to undo the damage by seducing, browbeating, tricking, and tempting "you" back into the sea. Though overmatched, "you" tries to assert himself and affirm life, but often slackens and seems ready to submit. Son, Jesus returned as a lover of the earth, gives encouragement to "you" 's resistance and tempers "you" 's frequent manias, seeking to instill in "you" a full-blooded affirmation of finite life (Dionysus) marked by compassion (Jesus).

Son returns to earth after having witnessed the passage from the star of Bethlehem to the yellow stars of David that the Nazis forced Jews to wear; he has repudiated sky (the heavens) and seeks to fulfill earth's limited promise. In order to do this, he must unite with his brother Dionysus, life's wild lover, so that "you" can be made whole and resistant to Father's bullying and blandishments, and to his own fear and despair.

Within this general structure, there are hundreds of shifts and nuances as the characters go through their rounds, spiraling to new intensities of their basic relationships and intentions. In Part One (preceded by an

introductory Part Zero), "you" gains strength, only to be seduced in Part Two by Pauline Christianity, which gives way, in Part Three, to the conflict between technology and nature's living core; reconciliation comes at the end of concluding Part Zero when "you" accepts the Dionysus-Jesus combination as his archetype.

Each of the cycles into which *Archer* is sectioned is integral to the work as a whole, but some mark decisive moments in the drama. The stage is set in the initial poem, "Showdown on Land's End," which precedes the cycles and reports the encounter of Father and "you" on an iced marsh on Allhallows Eve with only one seagull watching intently. Father announces that there will be "No rescue this round" (20). "You" senses ancestral animal life beneath the ice and resists identification with it: "Not mine! Each now alone./I've shed my dead" (21). The rejection is unsuccessful and the poem ends with "you" exclaiming, "I feel at my throat/Hot ice" (21).

The introductory poem is followed by the initial Part Zero, a safety zone outside time, in which Son and the Dionysus figure are introduced in three cycles. In Part One, the struggle begins, culminating in the ninth cycle, "Stain," where, in the final poem, "The Planted Clue," "you" has gained sufficient strength to stand up to Father and force his scorn to turn to grudging awe.

In "The Planted Clue," a human life is compared to a poem; for Father, a first draft that will be thrown away, a failed experiment. Father explains: "Each he and she is a sentence, a/Life sentence. Punctuated by dots of pain." "You" responds: "But not—pain hones the final draft—in vain." "You" 's response wins Father's respect: "You're an O-cratered, dash-eroded plain,/Caesura'd with pelvic San Andreas temblors,/The meter that stains my sun and my other stars" (111).

Father will not accept human eyes judging him and human consciousness, made in Father's image, refusing resignation. He decides to seduce "you" with the promise of spiritual salvation, the New Testament replayed, this time with himself in the role of Jesus, since Son has defected. The twelfth cycle, "Book," concludes with Father addressing "you" and casting the spell of Pauline Christianity: "These loving anathemas the Gospels preach:/Damn 'ye who mock me'—crime of thinking neat;/Damn 'things of this world'—crime of tasting sweet;/Damn 'scribes'—for passing ancient knowledge on;/Damn 'Pharisees'—for sticking to book one;/Damn 'publicans'—oh, that's enough damnations./Call my damn hate-feast 'brotherhood of nations' " (134).



"Auschwitz" (Cycle Thirteen) is the result of living for sky and being disloyal to the earth. In Cycle Fourteen, "Mek," which begins Part Three, the consequences of that disloyalty are broadened to include the reign of technology (Mek as mechanization—techno-ennui), powered by the revolt against limits. "You," now "a male lab boss of aggressive technic achievement," is filled with pride in having taken Father's place: "Once earth hick; hub of cosmos now" (148). Son launches a defense of the earth ("Terra's Manifesto") against "you" 's "Mek Manifesto." "You" begins a question-and-answer exchange with Son that shows the drift of the duel ("you" 's lines are in italics) : "*What, then, is Mek to Ge?/What's hysterectomy?/Steel versus woman?/And snow against rain./White-prone—hence black-prone—even in green,/Can I tell queened snow from rain's warm queen?*" (153).

Part Three remains unresolved, concluding with Son's wistful "Applewood Ballad," in which he sings: "A mountain offered me This World./I shrank, I said \_unclean.'/. . . I've changed: all's vain but *vanitas*—/Trust no caress that's not obscene" (189).

Reconciliation is achieved at the conclusion of the second Part Zero in "Cycles Two and Three Replayed: Gods," where "you" is given the strength to stand against Father by the reconciliation of "east and East" against "west's icy rout," of Dionysus and Jesus in the "goatfoot Jesus," the archer in the marrow. The synthesis is articulated in a dialogue between Son and "you," with Son the initiator: "None but your saltsweet earth-race grows/From strict brows/wild goat-grace./*Will it storm us the heavenly city?/When the village below binds fast/A Pan who finds out about pity/And a Jew-god drunk at last./Each flawed alone?—Myself too sober-paced./Then why not rites of spring? Fauns giddy-faced?/In statues grand, in life a bit inane./Too frisky?—Fluffed. No ballast of human-scale pain./What makes two rival god-lies true for us?/Crisscross*" (208).

Empowered by the crisscross that produces vital compassion and compassionate vitality, "you" is ready to encounter Father once more alone at Land's End, where they see a vision of "you" 's village and goatfoot Jesus dancing. "You" initiates the final exchange and Father duels with him: "*Two shapes—no, one shape—kicking . . . loam at sky./Warmed lifelike by her who came home, he's only your shadow./A shadow that sweats?/Well, then he's only—/—I see—/Some local wino—/—I see/Hacked hands; no, pierced—/—no, mere vine twigs./Pierced hands . . . bending cross into crossbow./Look: goatfoot Jesus on the village green*" (211).

The concluding Part Zero ends the cycles and their replay, but confident, hopeful "you" does not have the last word. In a short "Epilogue

(Prologue to New Spiral)," Father reasserts himself and starts the wheel moving again: "Somebody had to keep the show on the road" (212). There is no final cultural solution to the predicament of mortality, only transitory crossings.

### *Tide and Continuities*

Viereck's second and final cycle of long poems appears in his volume of collected works, *Tide and Continuities*,<sup>17</sup> and is completed by "Gate Talk for Brodsky." The portion of the cycle contains seven poems, five in the first section and two in the sixth (last) section: "At My Hospital Window," "Dionysus in Old Age," "Goat Ode in Mid-Dive," "Pluto Incognito," "Re-feel," "Tide," and "Persephone and Old Poet." Viereck has not given a name to his cycle, but his late long poems, totaling 124 pages, evince an even tighter network of theme and complexity than *Archer*.

The late long poems in *Tide and Continuities* are dialogues and monologues with the same kind of dramatic conception as the cycles in *Archer* and with the same predicament of striving to love the earth under the shadow of death, but the *dramatis personae* have shifted and changed. The sky god, Father, has disappeared and Son appears only briefly as a bystander to a Dionysian monologue. Their places have been taken by "touchable gods," Dionysus, Persephone, and Pluto, who are enmeshed in the cycle of the seasons, which is beyond their control: they are immortal, but they have knowledge of loss. "You" is replaced by Viereck or the "old poet" or "skimmer,"<sup>18</sup> who is not the object of a cultural struggle, but a stand-in for Dionysus. Dionysus-Jesus comes in for briefer mention; the Athens-Jerusalem reconciliation is partly soft-pedaled in favor of a loamy earth-rooted version of Hellas.

Touchable gods cannot grant salvation or even reconciliation, but they can vivify transiently, even Pluto. In Viereck's late poems, Dionysus/poet, representing life and love (spring and summer), and Pluto, representing death (winter), contend for the perpetual affections of Persephone, the shifter of the seasons, who is the consort of each of them for half the year. She knows both sides and has, thereby, gained a wholeness and independence that they lack, though only she is never alone. These touchable gods enliven by their shifts of voice and swings and reversals of position; in their own ways, each is a swinger.<sup>19</sup> None of the voices is reliable or decided, but they are always intelligible contributors to elucidating the poet's predicament.

Viereck's late long poems are introduced by "At My Hospital Window," a wonderful personal monologue in which the poet speaks for himself, beseeching his sea muse, after he has undergone a major operation and,

debilitated, faces a grimly uncertain future, to let him live long enough to write a poem to her and planning to write his Dionysus-Pluto-Persephone cycle if the cures do not kill him. He has become dependent on the life-prolonging technologies of Mek; though it is spring, the poet is not being reborn, but is living on borrowed time in his late autumn; he is not being carried on the tides of nature: ". . . Where's sea? My only tide/Is my catheter bag and my I.V. pouch:/My two ebb-flow machines./Plugged into gimmicks of expensive ouch,/I squint gray cataracts at what regreens" (13).

"At My Hospital Window" is dedicated to the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, Viereck's longtime friend whom he brought to Mount Holyoke College, where Viereck teaches; the poem is poet-to-poet and concerns the existential function of poetry, the grand theme of the late poems. Poetry, fostered by the female archetype, is Viereck's resort against death: the late poems recount the dying of a poet, a poetic way of death.

Poetry is Viereck's paradigm for the "self-surpass" of man, that quality which gives humans dignity, raises them above things, and allows them to confront sky God, cosmos, and their own Mek with knowing judgment. Mek surpasses toward the sky and ends, finally, in the reduction of humans to things; poetry surpasses toward the earth, toward the female as earth's core, evincing and confirming self-surpass: I sing and swing, therefore, I am.

In his late poetry, Viereck takes up the position of "you" when he outfaced Father in "The Planted Clue" in *Archer*: pain hones the final draft. He is alone with his muse and is not subject to Father's temptations of salvation or the human arrogance of storming heaven with Mek. Viereck's late poetry is his most personal writing; the tensions within it are not political and cultural, but are intimately his own.

In his genial verse foreword to *Tide and Continuities*, Brodsky writes: "this book, left to its own devices,/is an *hommage* to Dionysus:/it is a growth. In its design,/by turns malignant and benign,/it tends to leap, digress, meander;/in short its target is its grandeur" (xiv). In *Archer*, Dionysus was Son's brother, a pole of attraction who was not given voice. Now he comes into his own, providing the archetype for the poet to emulate.

Although Viereck's final cycle can be interpreted in another way than Brodsky has (as a brilliant full-blooded characterization of the female archetype, through Persephone<sup>20</sup>), Brodsky's way is the path to follow to "Gate Talk for Brodsky," and his description of Dionysus as poet/the Dionysian poet cannot be bettered. The elderly Dionysus, in autumn, whom we listen to in the late poems is Viereck's most achieved swinger,

leaping, digressing, and meandering through a dueling waltz and waltzing duel with Persephone, as Pluto waits impatiently for Dionysus's time to run out, when he will get Persephone back. Dionysus or the Dionysian poet is never absent from the six long poems that culminate with "Persephone and Old Poet," the prelude to "Gate Talk for Brodsky," except when Pluto gets his turn in one malignantly funny monologue. Dionysus is the center of attention, object of Pluto's jealousy and subject to Persephone's shifting seductions to embrace his death, to abandon poetry and feast on carnal love, and to persevere in poetry. These are the options, as Viereck sees them, for a finite life in the absence of the sky God.

Dionysus, Persephone, and Pluto are Viereck's most complex and achieved creations. Dionysus, the wine-god, the self-intoxicated god who is gathered by Persephone in the spring to be her consort until she hacks him apart in the fall before she winters with Pluto, might also be an old traveling wine salesman/trickster/con-man/poet. Persephone, shifter of the seasons, might also be the farmer's daughter in a bad joke. Pluto, ruler of death's kingdom, might also be a jealous janitor in a building where Dionysus and Persephone are having sex upstairs.

The motive force of the late poems is Dionysus's wish for eternal springtime, the ideal of earth love, which he knows cannot be fulfilled. Dionysus's predicament is most clearly expressed in his monologue, "Dionysus in Old Age": "November spliced with remembered June:/How tune such morose arpeggios/With chords that reconcile?" (24).

Reconciliation remains Viereck's quest in his late poems, but it is never named, always elusive, and deeply problematic. The best answer that Dionysus can give to his question is: "I'll sift one snowflake from the snows/And nestle it within June's whitest rose,/Two ivory keys, here merged from the year's two rival pianos,/Composing—lest my passion for oneness parch—/A counterpoint of half-year counterparts/. . . It takes—to sweeten music—/Sour notes" (24).

The human side of Viereck's Dionysus figure cannot be satisfied with the snowflake in the rose. The god Dionysus, in ancient myth, was reborn each spring in an eternal recurrence, but the human being is never reborn from death. Viereck's beautiful image is a purely symbolic reconciliation; there are sour notes: it is most deeply inhuman, for Viereck, to be reconciled with death. It is in the refusal to be reconciled with death that Viereck finds an often pathetic human grandeur.

There is a crossing that a great reconciler cannot and should not achieve. Far more characteristic of the Dionysian response to death is Dionysus's

answer in "Goat Ode in Mid-Dive" when Persephone mocks his mildly ironical, nostalgic hymning of the earth. She says: "An old guy exulting in earth makes earth-graves snigger./Sentenced to hang in an hour, would you start long odes to rope?" Dionysus replies: "I'd anyhow start what can't finish. Obsession in place of hope./Who needs hope? 'Don't be morbid' rings hollow" (38). From the absence of hope does not follow despair, but obsession. It is from such stained moments that dignity is wrought.

In "Tide," it becomes clear that there can be no reconciliation between life and death for the individual, but only in the cosmic cycle of death and rebirth. For Persephone, who is never alone, Dionysus and Pluto are as much necessary supplements as Viereck believed that liberals and conservatives were for modern democratic politics, and Dionysus and Jesus were for Western civilization. She says to Dionysus: "But only when you and Pluto are weighed as pair./Apart—you salesman, he janitor—/An equal fake./Paired in your duel, earth at stake,/You ooze real myth with every breath you take./Apart, unreal: unpaired, a dud" (281).

Yet a condition of their cosmic reconciliation is that they be unreconciled to each other. When Dionysus asks, "Why can't we unreal duds make a deal?," Persephone responds: "The stalemate wounds of your no-win war/Spark the beyonds, bind the rind to the bud,/The lungfish to land, the brook to the riverbed" (281). Neither Dionysus nor Pluto partakes of the wholeness that their conflict engenders.

The dialogues between Dionysus and Persephone begin in "Goat Ode in Mid-Dive" and are taken up after Pluto's monologue, "Pluto Incognito," in "Re-feel" and "Tide," to culminate in "Persephone and Old Poet." At the end of the last poem, the Dionysian poet (Viereck, who might also be "a goofy dying Everyman, trying to ululate past doc and nurse" [xvii] ) has to abandon hope that Persephone can do him any good in his predicament and takes off on a solitary "voyage" in search of "unexplainable warmth": "Fluke, needed fluke, is my argonaut, steering/To where new mess, new growingness is stirring" (317). Persephone chides him that he has lost his power and does not have "the spare parts of a robot," to which he replies: "My knack of fumbling empowers both heart and head." Then, after Dionysus has launched himself "half speed" ahead, Persephone has the final word, echoing Father's response to "you" in the latter's finest moment in *Archer*: "Brief humans, my eons still can't figure you out" (318).

*Gate Talk for Brodsky*

Dionysus makes his last stand in "Gate Talk for Brodsky," at the edge of winter, ready to be scattered. The male voice is Viereck's own, as it was in "At My Hospital Window." He is joined by his muse, "a woman of blurred I.D. card," the female archetype, but mostly Persephone. They conduct a dialogue, replaying "Persephone and Old Poet," but with a different and more decisive result. The poem, the culmination of Viereck's Persephone dialogues, is an act of "thread gathering," summing up Viereck's life of thought and putting each part in its place under the goal of "re-inventing not death but dying." "Gate Talk for Brodsky" is a *Phaedo* for modern times, not philosophy as a preparation for death, but poetry as "My no to nothingness. My futile no": self-surpass at its attenuated, but lavish limit.

All of Viereck's dramatic imaginative power is brought to bear in "Gate Talk for Brodsky." The players swing their way through duels and waltzes in seven sections—"At Land's End," "Calyx," "Landlocked Brine," "Gate," "Re-inventing Man and—," "—And Son of Man," and "Amazed to Care"—carrying off stunning reversals in shifting voices. In "Gate Talk for Brodsky," Viereck fuses life with thought, performing his new way of dying. At a physical extremity, his body collapsing from multiple grave illnesses and his fate delivered to medications, machines, and the whims and skills of a dizzying array of specialists, he has produced a credo that authenticates itself: he gathers threads at scattering time.

The poem begins "At Land's End," not at the east gate, where the lungfish gasped for voice, but at the west gate, where straight-line finite human life is broken, its body fluids ("brine") spilling back into the sea to rejoin the cosmic cycle of death and rebirth.

The poet is losing the duel: "Two rival scansions argue: heartbeat and sea. Sea wins." His muse joins him in a death waltz until she mocks him—"You're a boner, a rogue gene mistake"—which moves him to assert his dignity: "Yet with one goofy honor: as soul's—no, word's—brief owner" (5).<sup>21</sup> The duel begins, with female archetype (Persephone) bringing the finality of death to bear against poetry until she breaks the poet down.

The poet picks himself up and praises humanized, kinky, thoughtful, messy poetic-sexual union, to which Persephone still opposes death until she is moved to passion by "Bacchic rock-and-roll across myth's border" and becomes the "farmer's daughter" (6), praising herself as the shifter of the seasons. The poet expresses his bitterness at her wintering with Pluto, but she is indifferent and self-sufficient: "What makes earth earthly?/Gender, gender, MY gender" (7).

In "Calyx," Persephone woos the willing poet into worship of the female and her labia, chiding him gently to abandon Poetry for transient carnal union, but he follows his own step in this dance, bringing himself to the point of spiritualizing sex: "Can meat be soul, by awe made awesome?/Are paired physiques less physical than they seem?/Then flesh transfigures flesh in tangled twosome."

Persephone then rudely takes the poet down, telling him that her seduction was a charade: "I fibbed, I drugged you with odeur de femme,/Plus Muse-mush opium." In a decisive exchange, the poet says: "Your voice is oddly kind, yet your facts damn," to which she replies: "I love you; I love fact more." The fact is that "Calyx, though more than sperm-spit's cuspidor,/Is less than wisdom's door" (9). The poet will not give up after suffering repeated coarse indignities: "Calyx is still the core we're orphaned from:/Sheer rhythm, tide itself, the hint/Of grail we pilgrims hunt." Persephone is not seduced and leaves the poet with the remains of his enthusiasm: "Roots and continuities,/Tempered by gypsy laughter under the hill." She replies that he is left with "the lifelong sword-dance" of his "vaudeville" (11).

In "Landlocked Brine," the dance to the west gate begins in earnest. The poet bitterly accuses Persephone of being a fraud whose green "Is arsenic and reddens poisoned pasture," but quickly begs her to "Laugh me a crocus from frost's macabre humor" as he confronts the brine within him: "From sweat, spit, snot, tears, urine, not from pneuma,/Brine hollers at me like a slanderous rumor" (12). Persephone joins him in a death waltz and as she, too, is pulled toward the sea, begs him not to give up and to "enchant" her with poetry: "Enchant me. Be my seaweed-laureled chanter" (13). He rejects her and then hears a howl: "My kenneled brine throbs back. A heart attack?" (14).

In "Gate," the poet breaks down and begs Persephone to wait with him at west gate: "Then warm me through Act Five. Stay. Wait." She replies: "No waiting-room at west gate" and repeatedly takes him down into the factuality of death's finality as he vainly tries to vindicate poetry. The dual ends with a series of rapid-fire exchanges, as Persephone (in italics) quizzes the poet and gets him to acknowledge messy reality through two anagrams: "*Artist, spell 'arts live. 'Evil star. Vile rats*" (15).

The dance now turns into a waltzing duel, in which Persephone expresses pity for the poet, wishing that his "straight line could boomerang" and that she could wish him "back to May." He will not resign himself, even though he recognizes the absurdity of his resistance: "I'll clutch earth all the tighter. Can't let go/Of touching what I can't touch." The poet acknowledges Persephone's regret for him: "I know you wish. The body language of your crassest/Words is still, as before,

kind" (16). He begs her to embrace him, but he is at death's door and she concludes the section: "Cliff-hanger, hush, let go" (17).

"Gate Talk for Brodsky" could have ended here, if not for the work of thread gathering that remains to be done, in which Viereck reprises his life of thought.

First, in "Re-inventing Man and—" he returns to his political morality. Persephone asks him why he cannot, as poet, remain above contemporary mass brutality, to which he responds that "the now" does not ignore poets, but kills them. As he expresses resignation, Persephone encourages him to carve "an Ark" from "drowned songs" that "drape sea's floor" (17). He cannot rise to the effort and Persephone, after expressing her disappointment at his fragility, offers to make an exception for him and to wait at west gate with him. He spurns her offer: "Your errand-of-mercy I return unused./Too busy ending this life-end poem,/My no to nothingness. My futile no."

The poem now reaches its climax, the point of the poet's greatest power. Persephone responds: "Futile sweetened by the honesty of bitter./But earlier mortals said it all,/And said forth gods." The poet will have nothing to do with mythological gods. "True godliness" is found "In hospices, reeking of urine, but not on Olympus." Inventing gods "was a cinch" for humans: "Man re-invents man" (18). Persephone chides, "What you can't 're' is death," to which the poet responds, "I'm re-inventing not death but dying." Persephone tells the poet: "You write one poem and one poem only:/The gallant human mess." The poet continues his defense of human life: "Gods, we humans are a jealous people./We worship graven images, engraved by/Pain, another knack you lack./Pain plus brevity, making life/Keep re-inventing life." When Persephone tells the poet that there will be "No Act Six," he bravely replies, echoing the "Stain" cycle of *Archer*: "Were there more than Act Five, there'd be less."

God talk continues in "—And Son of Man," where Viereck gathers the threads of *Archer* and goatfoot Jesus. The female archetype, perhaps now Mary or Mary Magdalene, tries to seduce the poet by praising goatfoot Jesus as different in kind from other gods like Dionysus and Osiris: "Only the nailed one was doubly god. The miracle/Is in the mishmash, blending/A Pan who Found Out about pity/And a Jew-god drunk at last." The poet will not admire his own creation: "Man's crisscross made god-halves whole" (19). Persephone concedes and the section ends poignantly with the poet wanting to cry "because I want to cry," and concluding with his saying: "Let's both shut up just a minute and hear small raindrops."



Having made his unhappy parting response to the totalitarian century that he had engaged with animated moderation and having affirmed the "gallant human mess" that had always been his object, Viereck is ready to replay "Persephone and Old Poet," now that the gods have presumably died.

In "Amazed to Care," Persephone gets "back to business," asking the poet what becomes of her "year wheel." He replies that it spins without her. She tempts him with the immortality of poetry, but cruelly takes him down when he rises to the bait, saying, "For you, no reprieve" (20). Viereck here inserts a fond farewell to the dead Brodsky and then heads into the finale.

Reconciliation comes up at the end, as the poet shares his last thoughts with his muse. He laughs "because I have to laugh" and calls on "Doc Morpheus, sleep-god of I.V." to drip him "The last morphine,—the ages, not the age./All fragments of one lost lewd tune." Persephone asks: "Even the cold, cold seeker?/All interweaving though there is no weaver?" Recalling the snowflake in the rose, the poet responds: "Atoms, twirl on, twirl on: snowflake and morning star,/Calyx and lexicon,/Last leaf, kind storm."

Yet reconciliation will not be Viereck's last word. The poet hears "Tide talking," an "odd rattle" inside him. He becomes desperate and begs for his muse's reassurance: "Have I swallowed some toy? Lucky no rattlesnakes here./Surely merely some baby's rattle./Say 'yes' quick to confirm all's well." The mess asserts itself without much gallantry.

Persephone closes the poem with the wisdom of tide. Recalling that human attitude which awed Father in *Archer* and actuated her pitying respect for the poet, she answers: "Honing—not hoping—more from ever less./Outdream the gate. Until it seeks you out" (21). There will be no "flukes" for Viereck; beyond reconciliation is the intensity of waning life.

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1 Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941) . Revised version: *Metapolitics: The Roots of the Nazi Mind* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965) . [[Back](#)]

2 Said in personal conversation with author, September, 1997. [[Back](#)]

3 Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* (Boston Beacon Press, 1956 [1867]), 145. [[Back](#)]

4 *Ibid.*, 145-46. [[Back](#)]

5 *Ibid.*, 147. [[Back](#)]

6 *Ibid.* [[Back](#)]

7 *Ibid.* [[Back](#)]

8 Communication to author via letter. [[Back](#)]

9 Peter Viereck, "Review of The Wisdom of Conservatism," *New York Times Book Review*, October 31, 1971, 57. [[Back](#)]

10 Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited: with the addition of Book II, The New Conservatism, What went Wrong?* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 99. First published as *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Revolt, 1815-1949* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949). [[Back](#)]

11 *Ibid.*, 37. [[Back](#)]

12 *Ibid.*, 51. [[Back](#)]

13 *Ibid.*, 114. [[Back](#)]

14 *Ibid.*, 142. [[Back](#)]

15 Linzy Brekke, "History, art and the dionysian life: An interview with Peter Viereck," *The News* (Mount Holyoke College), September 26, 1996, 8. "His maxim on writing: 'No to formless wildness; no to the rigorous strictness of rigor mortis; yes to strict wildness.'" [[Back](#)]

16 Peter Viereck, "Form in Poetry: Would Jacob Wrestle with a Flabby Angel?" in Viereck, *Archer in the Marrow: The Applewood Cycles, 1967-1987* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 232. [[Back](#)]

17 Peter Viereck, *Tide and Continuities: Last and First Poems, 1995-1983* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995). [[Back](#)]

18 Viereck defines "skimmer" with this couplet: "A poet is someone who skims ever weightier/Stones ever farther on water" (106) . These are the lines from *Tide*, engraved on Viereck's pre-carved tombstone, that the poet chooses to be summarized by. [[Back](#)]

19 One of the epigraphs introducing Viereck's "Form in Poetry" is Duke Ellington's couplet: "It don't mean a thing/If it ain't got that swing." [[Back](#)]

20 For this interpretation, see the author's "Dignity in Old Age: The Poetical Meditations of Peter Viereck," *Humanitas*, VIII, 2 (1995) , 53-67. [[Back](#)]

21 Page references in this section are to Viereck's "Gate Talk for Brodsky," which appears in this issue of *Humanitas*. [[Back](#)]