

GHOSTS, QUERIES, AND THE PROLEPTIC ELEGY

Gjerrud Schnackenberg, *Heavenly Questions*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010.

Rosanna Warren. *Ghost in a Red Hat*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Heather Treseler

"The dead still participate in our imagination of them," the poet-critic Susan McCabe claims with her characteristic incisiveness. "[P]oems become ceremonies to mourn departure through repetition." The ghostly citizenship of the dead in the psyches of the living mark the two collections paired here, *Ghost in a Red Hat* (2010) and *Heavenly Questions* (2011), each by a nationally distinguished prolific poet in mid-career. In lyric "ceremonies" both startling and seemly, caustic and consoling, raw and duly ritualized, Rosanna Warren and Gjerrud Schnackenberg offer a species of elegy—and portraits of transmuted grief—that flour clinical paradigms of mourning and the post-9/11 collectivizing turn in public sentiment around death and tragedy.

Both Warren and Schnackenberg bring a summation of their powers to these collections, which resist popular depictions of mourning as a linear process, a psychological algorithm, a publically incorporated event. In these volumes, grief has no symphonic music separable from a privately tuned melody. While Schnackenberg's collection reframes in metaphysical and runic terms the traumatic death of a spouse after a protracted medical emergency, Warren's collection appears to eulogize the death of a beloved mother; the end of lengthy marriage; the loss of a friend to cancer and the chemical holocaust of chemotherapy; the death of Robert Schumann and, more recently, the drowning of Schumann's biographer, John Daverio; and the domestic tragedies that informed the transformative gardens of Frederick Law Olmstead, architect of Central Park and first secretary of the organization later named the Red Cross. Thus, Warren's collection registers losses expected at middle age, but alongside refractions of earlier selves and attachments to other writers, composers, and cultural stewards both living and dead. In this way, Warren's individual eulogies form a larger narrative arc: a proleptic elegy for an evolving poetic persona in all of its tender allegiances and restless itineraries. The architecture of such reconnaissance (and mid-life remaking) appears in a passage of "Palaces," stirring in its obliquity:

Loss opens the way, I wrote in a letter
that was not a letter of love.
On Sophienstrasse, a small, grubby-faced boy
works with scholarly concentration
to dislodge a cobblestone the size of a scone
from the sidewalk in front of Queen Sophie Luis's church.
The neighborhood shakes to the dentist's drill:
panel by copper panel, girder by girder,
new labor dismantles old labor's Palast der Republik.

In a letter "not a letter of love," the speaker seemingly revises her heart's habitation. Meanwhile, she witnesses an ancient city undergoing its own incremental transformation among quaking girders and uprooted cobblestones. This urban circumstance rhymes with a pastoral scene that appears earlier in the collection as "Mistral II": "I have broken some forms, I am waiting to see / what survives this tumult of leaves / and cloudlight ... / ... it was I who prayed / yesterday to make this refuge cry with a different breath." Here, in a poem named for the cold northerly wind that squalls on the coast of southern France, we are reminded that "prayer" and "precariousness" share a Latinate etymology. And it is with the precariousness of secular prayer, with the vulnerability of half-started wish, that the poet's language squalls and finds its necessary expansion. Warren's poem stages this dialectic movingly.

Indeed in *Eros, the Bittersweet*, Ann Carson posits that "all human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies." Elegy turns tightly on these axes in Schnackenberg's *Heavenly Questions*, which takes us directly into the theater of a husband's dire hospitalization, fifth surgery, and twilight death. In six long poems of blank verse, Schnackenberg retraces the trauma of final days and hours; a surgeon's last consultation; the persistent hope for survival. Two intervening poems, "Archimedes Lullaby" and "Fusiturricula Lullaby," syncope these crisis moments with a Hellenic chorus of characters and a maritime music of the spheres. As *post facto* lullabies, these poems cradle the figure of a dying man and a mourning woman within the generous sweep of mathematical theorems and ocean tides, the seeming infinity of numbers and the seas' perpetual sway.

Nonetheless, as in Warren's collection, Schnackenberg's speaker nearly hallucinates in her grief. "The Light-Gray Soil" revisits the speaker three months after the event, still residing in the haunted neighborhood of loss.

Shambles of grief in daylight under heaven.
I sit among the living, in a park,

Three miles from where he's laid to rest, three months,
Foot traffic dimly swirls around me, throngs
Of the unbidden pass me, the unburied.
I sit inside a coat he gave me once.
Systole and diastole. Not knowing when
I ceased to stalk the sidewalk, came to rest,
Not knowing, since it doesn't matter when.
My heart-walls moving of their own accord.
A helpless deed, systole and diastole,
Two halves carved from a pre-existing whole.

The speaker sits in an urban park, noting the "unbidden... the unburied" as if she were perched on the riverbank of Stryx. Acutely aware of her anatomy's persistence—her own biological continuing—yet oblivious as to how she has "ceased to stalk the sidewalk," the speaker "[s]hambles" as if in shell-shock. Similarly, in "Bedtime Mahabharata," the speaker fatalistically claims that we are merely "Ashes impregnated with human souls / Who couldn't save each other or themselves / In never-ending wars compounded by / Oblivion," a bitter elegy for life's determining end. With references to a chess board abandoned in mid-play, to Scheherazade's life-saving stories, and to the fallible powers of Krishna, the poet reifies the limits of lyric solace. Her verses track, unflinchingly, the errant haunting of a beloved ghost. Both Warren and Schnackenberg resist the normative recipes of mourning in collections compellingly refractory in their recuperation. These are poems to which no platitudes need apply, and elegies in which scarcely little redems. This is poetic art meant to measure the costliest loss.

TWO FRIENDS

Henry Weinfield

I Lyric of Disaster / Disaster of Lyric

Norman Finkelstein. *Track: A Poem*. Shearsman Books, 2012.

[First, a caveat: Finkelstein is an old and dear friend, and he and I have been in conversation about the long poem that forms the subject of this review almost since its inception. Indeed, in the "Statements for Track" that he has appended to this new, one volume edition of the poem (it was originally published in three volumes between 1999 and 2005), he alludes to some of our discussions. I think I can serve as an honest broker, however, because, while I have great admiration for Finkelstein's work (he is the author of seven previous volumes of poetry and of five volumes of critical prose), and while the poem has exerted a certain fascination on me, I continue to feel, even after many re-readings, a fair amount of ambivalence about it. Track is a courageous, ambitious, and in some respects important poem, but to what extent it succeeds in taking us beyond the impasse it confronts is a difficult question—one that I shall try at least to explore and put into perspective. End of caveat.]

"Track is the lyric of disaster, the disaster of lyric," writes Finkelstein in his "Statements for Track" (303). This assertion is clarified by the poem's title, much as the title is clarified by the assertion; for if, among many other possibilities, the track of the poem's title leads ineluctably to the death camps, then the assertion partly alludes to Adorno's famous pronouncement of 1949 that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Adorno did not actually specify *lyric* poetry, but his pronouncement is often quoted as if he had, because he was clearly associating poetry with the "lyrical" values of beauty and refinement, and asserting that continuing to pursue such values as if nothing had happened was barbaric. And if, for Adorno, the disaster of the Shoah ruptured the fabric of civilized life, putting all humanistic values and ideals into question, including traditional aesthetic ones, then it would also, in Finkelstein's phrase, have constituted the disaster of lyric—especially if the lyric is construed (as it all too often is by American poets and critics) as an unmediated expression of the self. As Adorno was himself aware, his pronouncement is markedly one-sided. In his great essay of 1957, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," he writes: "The universality of the lyric's substance...