Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Death’s Head, Proud Flesh

Death shadows text and trouble emerges, even as it recedes; or the dead recede from trouble, leave it behind for the ones who can’t do without it.

January takes another light. Just as David Bowie’s last two videos, for “★” and “Lazarus,” foreshadow the obvious only after Bowie’s passing, a poet who departed with even greater haste left the sleepless remainder with death-charged books.

The American poet C.D. Wright, in Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil, in a passage from the previous decade that made the rounds of the living in the wake of January 13, 2016 feeds, writing her headstone, anticipating ours: Poetry is the language of intensity. Because we are all going to die, an expression of intensity is justified (61).

Like Bowie, Wright left us with new work, though her book of poetry ShallCross was forthcoming at her sudden passing, so

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9 for Danniel Schoonebeek and Claire Donato
10 The song includes a choral provocation — Somebody else took his place and bravely cried: / I’m a blackstar —, possibly an open invitation meant for Kendrick Lamar, whose 2015 album To Pimp a Butterfly was an acknowledged model for the sound Bowie wanted for ★. Reports that Kanye West almost immediately announced himself as Bowie’s torchbearer via Twitter were greatly exaggerated, perhaps an opportunistic Yeezy backlash that reflects the shadow side of Bowie’s blue-eyed-soul appeal.
11 Though if Bowie has an alter-ego legacy, let it be mutable as he was, and more so. Let anyone wear the mantle of gender-abstract changing — turn to face the strange — with or without guitar.
12 Here with apologies: We all die, some sooner than others. The videos present a death rite and a temporary resurrection, a visiting wraith, respectively. Again, cf. Fred Moten: “the phantasm that the mechanical reproduction of the silenced voice emits” (118).
13 An inch higher on that page is a declaration of poetics that serves as a Trouble Songs credo: be critical and sing.
14 though a poem by that title could be found at the journal Lana Turner’s web site
its consolation was yet a promise.\textsuperscript{14} Nor was its maker likely to thumb her nose, hand us her bejeweled skull, and return to her wardrobe, only to reappear with rags binding her eyes, blind buttons winking over the top,\textsuperscript{15} as in Bowie’s final, looping testaments.

In the days after Wright’s and Bowie’s deaths, for those who mourn the poet and rock star with the particular, half-guilty displeasure of those who know them only by their works, a number that now includes us all, they dance together into the cabinet. Those left at the station will get there soon enough.

Meanwhile, we refrain,\textsuperscript{16} with the last book of poetry we do have: \textit{the year in which this particular round / of troubles began}.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Almost secretly available at the time (compared to the elaborate promotion for ★), however, was a new book of poetics, \textit{The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures}, \textit{El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All}, released like Bowie’s album the previous week. A companion volume to \textit{Cooling Time}, which mixed poetics in prose with line-broken poems in clear homage to William Carlos Williams’s \textit{Spring and All}, Wright’s new prose work borrows also from sequencing techniques she used in poetry books and encouraged in the work of her Literary Arts students at Brown University. For example, her introduction to the 2011 facsimile edition of \textit{Spring and All} is broken into multiple sections, as is a reflection on her friend and Brown colleague Robert Creeley, and an essay first published online in 2011 at \textit{The Volta} (aka \textit{Evening Will Come}), “In a Word, a World.” Those sections are each given a page, and the essays are interspersed among the volume, so we are in effect reading all of them at once, if we read the book from front to back.

\textsuperscript{a} This latter essay is notable not only for its excellence, but for the way its multi-page online layout anticipated Wright’s formal, modular sequencing technique in the 2016 poetics volume.

\textsuperscript{15} Bowie’s final character, Button Eyes, visually captivating if not as smartly attired in language as The Thin White Duke. David Jones, rest in peace.

\textsuperscript{16} Fred Moten: “Sometimes you are afraid to listen to the voice of the dead, to its palpable, material sound” (117). Wright’s full recorded performance of \textit{Deepstep Come Shining} from July 16, 1999 (posted at PennSound) is an achievement of voice and breath equal to the written text.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{One With Others} (2010), 14. Poet and teacher Carolyn D. Wright, rest in peace.