Spring 1957

A Reckoning

Philip Greco
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope
Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Greco, Philip (1957) "A Reckoning," Calliope: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol4/iss2/8

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Calliope by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
A Reckoning . . .

I would like to comment briefly on "A Reckoning." It was originally written as a kind of oratorio for six female and three male voices. The female voices act as the chorus and never speak singly except for a solo female voice which reads the short italicized verse at the very end. The male voices, on the other hand, always speak singly except when in Part III, two male voices read the dactylic hexameter section.

Chorus:

In these sad times of milk and honey
Waiting for a curved sky to open all its woes upon us
Small boys sit grubbing by a curbstone
Trying to reconstruct their mother's woof

We do not know our ageless face
When seen reflected in a sewer pool
We only hope that sifted sunlight
will one day reach us here beneath the grating.

Salamanders waltzing by with swinging gills
Remind us of our past endeavors
And the stillness of our ringing triumphs
Only echoes and re-echoes in our brains.

Virulent seems an easy word to say
While we try our best to hide it
Making fretful peeps into the light
And disbelieving what we see there.

Up jumped Pythagoras
A triangle in his hand
He summed and squared
And then declared
And loudly played the band

And dirty Archimedes
While getting in a tub
Saw water rise
And copped a prize
Beneath a Grecian shrub

And Isaac Newton took a walk
And sat beneath a tree
An apple dropped
The heavens stopped
And gravity was free

Old Ben Franklin flew a kite
A latch key on its tail
The lightning broke
And from the smoke
A lightbulb from a gale

Then Darwin came of age
And spewed a simple plan
Amoebas quake
Peking spake
A monkey from a man

And Max Planck took a turn
A simple proof to lay
A nation churned
A city burned
The First Law dropped away

Now men like Wiener speak
And try to do their best
Machines that whirl
Machines that twirl
And play a game of chess

But who can say that this is good
Or beautiful or so:

Or a drunken Persian’s
Simple version
“... And like the wind I go.”

II

Chorus:
Silently, stealthily
Hoping against hope
The ages creep into the future
And the wisdom of Confucius
Settles gently in the mire
Of a half-forgotten vision

Little Miss Muffit finds it more difficult
To make her two ends meet
Forced to live on curds and Whey
Because she can’t buy meat

Flannel suited gentlemen
With bright Bis Ad degrees
Manicure their finger nails
And perch in barren trees
They try to snipe a client’s purse
Along the Madison trace
Employing tricks of “Salesmanship”
They sell the Human Race  
And now the standard peak  
Of Everyman's mirage  
Becomes a five-room bungalow  
With every new garage

III

Chorus:
Muffit, Muffit, the Wisdom tree is bare  
Its apples have been plucked  
The seeds are scattered now on barren ground  
Your loin is barren too  
For you have touched the runner  
But have felt no child within your womb  
Muffit, O Muffit, we feel the ache of fear

"This is the forest primeval  
The murmering pines and the hemlocks"  
And here Muffit comes in the noon-day  
In search of a log for her fire  
She walks as a dreamer of dreams walks  
Afraid of the shadows she sees there  
Reality gives her no notice  
For green grass she steps on will bend not  
And clay sod accepts not her footprints  
But Muffit bent on her journey  
Keeps trying to make her world know her  
Impatience and anger excite her  
She siezes a tree twig and snaps it  
But finds it is she who feels pain

Far away  
In a distant city  
Far away  
In a distant town  
Full of horns and bricks and glass  
Old men sit in public parks  
Or humbly chew on grass  
A tall man in his prime  
Walks briskly down its streets  
And gives straight-forward smiles  
To everyone he cheats  
Young girls in their bloom  
Marry dull young men  
And disappear in little homes  
To play house once again  
Pussy Cats are free  
To roam the streets at night  
But freedom isn't everything  
One must be in the right

12
IV

Chorus:
We hear the step of Muffit on the stair
But we know its tenor means a sadness
We know a mournful step upon the stair
Waiters and watchers such as we
Know sorrow in a footstep
Our vigil has been long and taught as well

In the silence of every still night
Death seeks his reward
For he is watching too, and waiting
He begs a rightful claim

Frenzy reigns at times
Violence, Fear, Horror, and Deception
Patriots give breath to paradox
Shame and dignity become a sword

The battle rumbles on
The great machine of sorrow
Casts no backward glance at shattered hopes
It is driven by the hero

V

Chorus:
Expectation mixed with dread
Make us listen carefully
To what is said
Metered phrases grow in density
While the situation grows
Gathering intensity

Standing in the filtered light
Of immortal truth
Poets on an island waste
Crucify their youth

Hoping through agility
To mend the ways of men
They state in terms unmodified
The old sweet song again

A jangle on the Jabberwock
A trill from Johnny Donne
And Eliot's sweet inspection
Beget no pride or fun

Chorus:
Why is there so much anxiety
Why is there so little truthfulness

13
Why is there always economy
Why is there so much ruthlessness
Why is the burden of guilt so heavy
Why is the chance of salvation so slim
Because man is never so humble
Because man is conscious of shame
Because man has never liked loving
Because man must search for a name
Because death must always mean sorrow
Because life should always mean joy
Because man is forced to borrow
Because Christmas won't bring a toy

When will the truth be satisfied
When will the lovers be free
When will the old men rest easy
When will the sighted see
When will the fortune be won
When will the poet be heard
Now is the time for pestilence
Now is the age of crime
Now we must loose our maidenhead
Now we must live in the grime
Now we must watch husbands worry
Now we must end life in anguish
Now we must try and hurry
Now we must settle in languish

Where is the joy that blessedness brings
Where is the fine enchantment
Where is the new horizon
Where is the old encampment
Where are the promises gone
Where is the freedom from guilt
Here is a sniveling school-boy
Here is a ring in the dust
Here is a tired mother
Here is a vestige of lust
Here is an absence of reason
Here is a feeling so shallow
Here is attempt at treason
Here is a land never fallow

Sleep now well my son
You can wake tomorrow
St. Anthony will help us find
The joy we lost in sorrow
Sleep now without fright
I will sit and watch the night

... Philip Greco