



1-1-1996

Aorists of the Decrepit A Composition on Harmony

Henri Volohonsky

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Volohonsky, H. (1996). Volohonsky, H. (1996). Aorists of the decrepit: A composition on harmony [Poem]. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 15(1), 46–62.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 15 (1). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies/vol15/iss1/7>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Newsletters at Digital Commons @ CIIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CIIS. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ciis.edu.

AORISTS OF THE DECREPIT
a composition on harmony

HENRI VOLOHONSKY
TÜBINGEN, GERMANY

Translated from the Russian by
Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky

double speech

a long-bearded nephew asked his glabrous uncle:

oh uncle!
uncle oh uncle
reveal to me
why do combinations of words never die?
grant me to know
what sort of life
animates the breath of the flute?
tell me
what fable
lurks in the afternoon air?

the uncle, all a gleaming of spherical cheeks, answered him:

oh my lengthy-bearded little nephew!
you are asking me a great, a lofty
and mean question
a yellow question, a bad question
I do not understand it in the least
I do not even understand
what it is you're after.

I ask you:
repeat
repeat your question
for I don't quite understand it.

oh wondrous uncle!
—so he spoke to him again—
your question throws me deeper still
into the pit of doubt
straight into the abyss
and so
I'll mumble it once more unintelligibly:
I simply wanted to know:
that you should tell me again:

where does the flute's whistle abide
when the flutist
is dead drunk?

where does the afternoon light evaporate to
at the time when thousands of tiny angular birds
start flitting about
madding in the blue-gray air?

by what means does it echo
that which has never been
and we easily recognize it again
though we've never seen it before?

for some reason their damp emptiness even denies all talk of them . . .

explain to me:
why don't they die?

uncover your heads at once, please!

if the talk turns to butterflies
—answered his unbelievable uncle—
then perhaps you're right . . .

and horror came over the young bearded one at these words
yet he found in himself both manliness and valor.

not every wife's father-in-law confronts such a subtle hitch.
the mother's brother, however, had the air of an eagle, perhaps
—or a parrot.

and so . . .

–with these words the stone began to shine brighter still . . .

but, anyway, why when left to itself

does it not all just fall apart?

–and would you dare say such a thing

if all you had was the intention alone?

the sudden brightness of the stone in the serpentine uncle's forehead
forced his interlocutor to shield his eyes with his hand.

thus they both sat with heads uncovered

and for some time did not say a word.

then the cloud of the young man's face again cleared a little.

and so

–repeated the bare-cheekboned gray head–

you seek to know

who she is, this–HARMONY?

silence was again the reply of the bearded and bald young man–

an expert in the art of questioning

but quite puzzled himself

when his dubious uncle began speaking about the unseemly

the principles of harmony are narrated in the heights

–the venturesome kinsman went on again–

look up at the sky

look up at the sun

yes, I have looked

but I have seen nothing

look up at the heavens then

examine your sun there

where their paths are traced through the heights

yes, I am looking

but again I see nothing

except the sky itself

and the self-same sun

except what I am looking at

the luminary, even that I do not see

it being that bright

in its highest position in the heavens

then what finally do you see there?

I merely gaze
and observe a yellow-green shining disk
at the highest point of the sphere's semicircle.
but I also hear my own talk
and hear again how both sky and sun disappear in it.

thus silently spoke the long-bearded old-looking nephew
and wept bitterly.

the measure of the sphere

the dried-up talk of the young man was quickly drawn into the web
under the spider claw of the cunning old codger who deftly
wrapped in a cocoon of meaninglessness the silky thought of this one
who listened to him incautiously after the manner of a fly.

what do you hear?

I hear my own personal talk
from which the breath and the blue
have disappeared.

what is left in it then
if not the blue
and if the pale blue breath
is no longer in it?

with a face gone blue, breathless
I hear my flown speech
and I go on repeating something
muttering emptily
about the disk
and the semicircle of what
was once a luminary
and what once was but now
is an openness falling apart
in which it once processed majestically
and now look:
here one ought first to try testing
how the said cross-section will warm us

to whom will the semicircle of a trumpet raise
the eternal drum of sleep?

listen!
even the sacred cocks long ago stopped squawking their heads off
early each morning!
oh, where are you now, oh royal eagles
government gryphons
eastern monarchs from the flora of persian tales
a shrubby little copse?

is it not at them—
at their not being there—
that the leaden finger of harmony points?

forget your regrets
forget them!
said the old one
rather pleased with the whole turn of affairs.

it's no disaster that he no longer cock-a-doodles
one can learn instead exactly how he silently strides.

the disc in its full diameter
steps three hundred and sixty times
on the noonday semicircle of the sky.

720 steps, each equal to the disc's diameter,
make up the full heavenly circle.

divide the circle in half, the half into three,
each third into four, each of these fourths into five
and each fifth into six equal parts,
and in turn will come out again
the 720 equal parts of the full circumference.

three hundred and sixty steps of the sun
and three hundred and sixty steps of the moon—
that is the full circle of the heavens.

broken-up sound

questioned and questioning turned as if into two skeletons.
just the scant pale beard in the emptiness of the one
and the smooth cheeks whitened like bone of the other
betrayed the difference in their age and station.

both were silent.
between them there was heard only
a dryish knocking
and mixolydian singing:

ancient ancient
archaic as a kouros from the isle of samos
stands the cadmean serpent
with the bird of a lyre in its hands
the cadmean serpent is
a pythagorean reptile
eight arms it has
eight legs it has
and on each hand
forty-five fingers.

we had only to command the sun: stop!
and the rains ceased
see the moon too has stopped growing
and being born
with each month rounder and rounder

but will the wet phoenician reptile
give us back the moisture of breathing?

why is it wet?
because it is an assiduous punic serpent
powdered with a purple dust of water
sister-in-law of swift-handed europa!

forty-five fingers on every hand or foot
of this equilibrious monstrosity
a monster made up of nothing but proportions
qua-qua
qua-qua

what is inaccessible to reason
we achieve by repetition

if a semicircle becomes a string
and a full circle another string
then their sounds will embody
(qua-qua)
an octave
—an octave
as a thought about the repetition of sound
when the two are sounded at once

and a quarter of the circle is also an octave
and an eighth, and a sixteenth.
in a sixteenth portion of the circle are 45 parts;
in an eighth—90;
in a quarter—180;
in a half—360;
in the full heavenly circle—720 portions,
each equal to the diameter of the solar disc.

but with the help of octaves alone
it could hardly do more than mumble

the forty-five individual parts contain
three portions of fifteen parts
and fifteen portions of three parts,
five portions of nine parts
and nine portions of five parts.
on each such portion
it is not hard to arrange a similar sequence of strings
so that the first portion in it would be the same
as an individual part in the first sequence:

1	3	5	9	15
3	9	15	27	45
5	15	25	45	75
9	27	45	81	135
15	45	75	135	225

in all, twelve strings and parts in them:
1 3 5 9 15 25 27 45 75 81 135 and 225

for each of these twelve strings
one must choose its octave, doubling its length,
until they are all arrayed on a great semicircle—
in the main octave between 360 and 720

225 doubled is 450
135 doubled twice is 540
81 doubled thrice is 648
75 doubled thrice is 600
45 doubled thrice is 360, once more—720
27 doubled four times is 432
25 doubled four times is 400
15 doubled five times is 480
9 doubled six times is 576
5 doubled seven times is 384
1 doubled nine times is 512.

we have hewn out twelve steps on the great semicircle
this is the celestial law—the principle of memory
why are you sad, my left younger brother?
does it come out so bitter for you, this blue-gray smoke
from the pitchy ring-shaped serpentine octaves?

these are the twelve steps of the octave,
their numbers and the names known to musicians:

720	648	640	600	576	540	512	480	450	432	400	384
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	H				

henceforth—viva, simony!
we may imagine we've really succeeded:
we are about to lay down a pledge for the soul here
a handful of obsolete fish scales—
good as pearls!
since we've been so successful
in papering over the heavens with indulgences
or half-dollar banknotes
in the guise of pieces of silver
the size of each one exactly the diameter
of a cheap little marketplace sun

. . . and white like the sun in a mist
swayed the skull
of that two-bit uncle
beating out with his beechen brow
his three quarter time
for the soon-to-emerge melody of the sky
as a pledge of its evaporation

fifths are 2:3, fourths are 3:4, major thirds 4:5,
minor thirds 5:6, major whole tones 8:9, minor whole tones 9:10,
major half-tones 15:16, minor half-tones 24:25.

half-familiar little mugs in half-profile.

past marches the tin guard
of the porcelain maiden, harmony
-honor to her-
raising up from the mass of heads
the points of halberds
and the undried foam of two days ago's binge
hierarchically drips into the trumpet of the drum
where it bursts and plays a resounding reveille:
pot, boil, augustin,
or for marching: mary had a little
yeomen of hung-over memory
with her in her honor ever on the march
kicking up their boots
for the sake of a long past future
in the leaden dance of the porcelain maiden, harmony
with her in her honor ever on the march.

new words about harmony

o carthaginian wench–
novgorodian beauty of beauties
streetwalker-hawker of naples
hustling houri of nablus
far alexandrian novocherkassian
forget it!–
old hag of new york!
that is, old new maid of new orleans
mahalia jackson!
the bird harmony
the lizard harmony
the old maid harmony–
a-gallop she goes guffawing through dismal chaos
astride a folding ruler
or a sweet humped symmetrical creature
in form like a hedgehog
an ingenious guffawing gray witch!

“nay, I heed not the grief of sweet fragrant muses,
deceiving us with gifts of ephesian bees”–
oh, undried uncle!
why do you finally fall silent
when you've barely begun dangling baubles of neo-european fecature
from the same drama?

in dismal voices
in blind blandishments
bodiless sounds
noseless exhalations
in consonants only–not even an “a”–
which do not resound
do not moo as if they were microscopic bulls
do not whistle like shepherds calling their dogs in the sun
do not hiss like chameleons sitting with a mouthful of water
do not cluck
do not chomp
do not smack
do not twitter in the spiderwebs of a thousand tiny birds
do not growl
do not bellow

do not ululate
but never fall silent
in such voices strangely we tell of harmony:

bear harmony
iguana harmony
simony harmony

flowers of this fowl

o blue valkyries!
where do you soar—icy naiads of the element wind?
what measures are opened up now
under your voiceless wings of futile feathered proportions?

so the flock flies on in the cloudless air—
a triangle of white-winged valkyrian triads

but we
shall place on our heads
an icy caldron of bubbling, boiled valkyrie
the done hamadryad of a stump of cooling fire
and, grown visibly wise,
shall reflect on the transparent fate of their egyptian triangle
so as again (in the spirit of the octave's cooled thought)
to mumble out the naming of its names
settling on the icy pillars of the bare-tooth towers of our white memory
like the hoarfrost of the valkyries' flight.

zing-zen
what the mind cannot conceive
we shall overcome by muttering.
but don't forget to chase that coloratura strumpet
out the front gates of your soul!

so then:
twelve bones make up the skeleton
of the white owl, harmony.

and white as death
as a perfectly guiltless tablecloth
comprehending nothing he pipes the pipe of his dark violinist's soul

he keeps muttering softly:

three sides of the egyptian triangle,
the one made from a loop of rope
with twelve knots
3: 4: 5
is nothing other
than a minor cord
of the swift-handed white-faced blue-eyed

pink-cheeked simpleton europa,
or, repeating its "3" as an octave:
4: 5: 6

she can do nothing but gratulate and grieve,
but to her that seems a lot:
where the one is already absent
maid two looks like plenty.

here it's worth mentioning at once that our interlocutors' bones
whistled over by the icy winds of blue valkyries,
washed by thunderous discharges and settlings of misty dew,
warmed by the heat of houris hopping about,
scorched by the flaming convictions of numerical envy,
gradually began to disintegrate,
shining ever more noticeably in the black darkness.

this was the phosphorus coming out of them—
evaporating in yellow-green smoke.

we could be convinced
—rustled the smoke of the more decrepit one—
by honest learned people
that every light supposedly
is a certain sound
like an inaudible peep,

therefore I think
that the yellow-green color
from the smoke of our phosphorescing bones
the color of the luminary's body
at the highest position in the heavens
must—having the form of the body of harmony—
contain the same seven hundred and twenty parts.

from 720 the fourth drops down to 960,
and the fifth goes up to 480.
both are invisible.
this is the black octave,
this is the proportion 2: 3: 4, black at the edges,
with yellow-green, almost white, in the middle

yellow-green, color of the disk
at the highest position of the sphere,
the smoke curled up from the bones
barely visible in the dull semi-darkness
of the strange questioning about harmony.

three triple proportions from among the simplest
will adorn for us the singing amphibian's body:

2: 3: 4 or 480: 720: 960, black–light–black.

3: 4: 5—the fourth above 720 and the major third below,
that is: 540: 720: 900, violet–yellow–green–red.

4: 5: 6—from red up: 600: 750: 900, blue–yellow–red,
the three primary colors, deadened to the condition of number.

from violet down: 540: 675: 810, violet–green–orange,
the three secondary colors.

from yellow-green up and down: 576: 720: 864,
dark blue–yellow–green–light red, three shades.

from yellow up: 500: 625: 750, black–purple–light blue–yellow.

480: 500: 540: 576: 600: 625: 675: 720: 810: 864: 900 and 960 again.

of this anyone can be easily convinced, because each part here
equals 7.715 angstroms of tiny sound-like vibrations of light or thereabouts.

we have proclaimed some from among the deeds
of the singing peacock-salamander.

tint

the two had finally obtained what they hoped for.
the phosphor-winged solar mouse
rose brightly in the celestial darkness.
with a sharp unpleasant cry
it announced its appearance.

we will not surrender our lyre to the gnawings of rodents!
—cries came from all sides.
but I've also heard that dogs who urinate on the walls of mosques
rarely suffer from the pains of old age.
—so it's just a stupid monster, made of nothing but proportions,
merely fluttering its dragonfly kingdom
in the foundations of our memory?

she's what, then? prison or gorilla?
or is she simply a sclerotically flabby
and forgetful-cheeked drunken slut, harmony,
with breasts in abundance
and who can say how many buttocks to boot?

say it's this, say it's that . . .

but even if the ape harmony
crouched in the first causes of things
before harmony itself was born—
then what about us?
for the fourth millenium already
kneading with our feet the grape-dough
of voices
of the same dozen hallooing genies?

so, really, what a fool
he must be who heartily rejoices
in calling himself a teacher!

at this the pearly whisper of the shell of the universe fell silent
stilled were its plaintive shimmering sounds
ended were the aorists of the decrepit
and a kingfisher dove into the emerald water.

Author's Address: Henri Volohonsky, Beim Kupferhammer 13, Tübingen 72070, Germany.