

A PRESTO?

Stephen Romer

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It seems we were both waylaid
in the Vasari Gallery en route
for the Pitti
by the little chapel of Santa Felicita
where Pontormo's
elongated stary-eyed angels
in their pastel bodystockings
of pink and green
most elaborately
depose the Crucified.

It seems we both sat down
in the Piazza Santo Spirito
and then walked on
in the warm evening
to where the Duomo
shepherds her houses
and Africans fold and unfold
their cloths of merchandise
in a game of cat-and-mouse
with the languid police.

It seems we both deplored
 Botero's squat Roman
 showing his buttocks
 at Verocchio's angel
 but smiled inwardly
 at the affront.

It seems, on the face of it,
 with all this in common,
 we might even meet.
 What say you, Benedetta?

ASCENSION DAY

One entire Ascension Day
 riveted to the earth
 hunched against a radiator

reading *La fugitive*
 like a fugue, where death
 is the theme, *elle ne revint jamais*

as if time could be halted
 in the heart of a paragraph, with the entire
 giving over of the self

to mourning and desire,
 to stasis, to the abolition
 of time, her time and mine,

as long as I went on reading, re-reading,
 no harm could come
 to anyone, nothing could be transformed

and nothing could move on,
 or be forgotten,
 destroyed, or built upon.

CORNFLOWER

(after Apollinaire, "Bleuet" from *Il y a*)

Young man
 Twenty years old
 You have seen such horrors
 What do you think
 Of your childhood mentors now

You know
 the gallantry and the guile

You
 Have
 Seen
 Death
 Up
 Close
 More
 Than
 One
 Hundred
 Times
 You
 Do
 Not
 Know
 What
 Life
 Is

Pass your braveness on
 To those who come
 After

Young man
 You are joyful your memory is bloodied
 Red too your soul
 With joy
 You have absorbed the life of those who died around you
 You are decisive
 It is seventeen hundred hours and you will know
 How to die
 If not better than your elders
 More piously without a doubt
 Since you know of death more than life
 O sweetness of a different age
 Agelessly drawn out

LOVE AND THE NAME

Like rays from a nucleus, the existence of
 the loved one proceeds from her name,
 and even the works created by the lover
 proceed from the same source.

Walter Benjamin

When I speak the names
 they compose a mantra
 I have sobbed or murmured
 in my pillow.

The lullaby of their names

neither shortened nor sweetened
 is suddenly solemn
 like the Aleph or the Om:

the fount of clear water
 the saint of music
 the golden stone

– names you wear so lightly,
 my lost ones, when each
 rhymes ecstasy with pain.

METAMORPHOSIS

(Albert Mérat, one of the *Vilains Bonshommes*, the circle to which Verlaine and, briefly, Rimbaud belonged, requested that Fantin-Latour paint him out of the group portrait *Un Coin de Table*, fearing his reputation would be tarnished.)

Poor Albert Mérat,
le grand Albert,
 the elegant, the choleric,
 the neurasthenic,
 known to his friends as
 “the scornful cigar”
 met his nemesis
 in a baby-faced terror
 stalking in from the countryside
 with huge hands and huge feet
 burning up the foothills
 of Young Parnassus.
 Genius came at poor Albert

with a sneer and a sword-stick.

He too had his sensitive *Chimères*
 praised by *l'oncle Hugo*,
 he too had his ode to the cul
 censured by Lemerre –
 he too his promising beginnings.
 He too wore his pen down
 and then walked out
 of a dreary sinecure.
 Wit, wag, *Zutiste à ses heures*,
 ladies man, gossip, poet, poseur.
 Yet of Albert Mérat
 who took fright
 nothing is left
 but a pot of flowers.

THE PROFESSOR OF IDEAS

“Nature is sublime” – A student

“Wordsworth in the Alps,
 Frankenstein on the *mer de glace*,
 Shelley scribbling his graffiti
atheos, demokratikos, philanthropos,
 somewhere below Mont Blanc,

that massive abstract breast –
 all this talk! They stretch and yawn
 and challenge with turquoise eyes,
 a row of plunging *décolletées*,
 the seven Ravines of the Arve!

I speak more and more of “gender,”
of penetrative science
and incestuous necrophilia,
of the repressed and weeping
silent Eve,

of climactic evolution,
the vigorous coupling of mammals
as crucial to health,
I recall the Eternal Feminine
– by now I’m nearly pleading.

I summon the female monster
from the workshop of dirty creation,
Frankenstein’s Daughter
rising with gigantic organs
to beget upon men,

I’m thumping the desk,
an evangelical homunculus
among the fleshpots,
a monster, an angel with horns,
issuing smoke and imprecation

as they file out cool as you please
leaving their ravages behind,
the male hypercephalus
consumed in a self-made fire
dying out at last among his books.”