

Poetry

Martin Robertson

Almost before I can remember
the Schooner Hesperus carried me,
a pressed man, to serve a lifetime
under the sail of poetry
—the old moon in the new moon's arms,
the little daughter dead in the sea.

Lays of Ancient Rome on my seventh birthday:
Horatius breasting the Tiber race,
Mamilius and Herminius dead—Black Auster
gazing into his master's face
while the grey horse whirls through wolf-wild passes,
brings fear to the Tuscan market-place.

A little later came Kipling's ballads:
two men riding through a death-sown plain,
pursued and pursuer—the talk at the watercourse—
the tall son whistled down; the young men,
East and West, brothers in blood;
two men riding out again.

With Meredith at eleven, I think, or twelve
I fell in love—the only adequate phrase:
Love in the Valley, Phoebus with Admetus,
colour luminous through sun-drenched days,
cold dew, shelly horns, bulls walking pastures
in kingly-flashing coats under burning rays.

By now the tide was running: Keats, Housman,
Milton (L'Allegro), Marvell, Donne
(Go and catch a falling star), Border Ballads,
Campion, Wyatt. A little later on
Lycidas draws ahead of L'Allegro
as The Ancient Mariner of Kubla Khan.

Soon Yeats—*maestro ed autore*—
Eliot, Auden, Ransom, Hopkins, the rest
of Donne, a little Langland, a lot of Chaucer,
other Milton (flawed glory of Paradise Lost)
The White Devil and the Duchess of Malfi,
Byron's Juan and Marlowe's Faustus.

And gradually, a peak behind hills
that rise or shrink as we move through miles and years,
establishing unchallenged supremacy,
Shakespeare standing above all appears,
until I looked beyond the lands of my language
and Homer and Dante joined him as peers.

But now the net's cast in other waters
more gleaming wonders leap from the mass:
Catullus, Villon, Aeschylus, The Song of Roland,
Leopardi, Theocritus, Palamas,
Heine, Hoffmann von Hoffmanswaldau,
Baudelaire, Du Bellay—let it pass.

How have I forgotten Emily Bronte,
so many years my constant star and love?
There must too be many darlings of a season,
more of recurrent moods, I'm forgetful of:
De la Mare very early, Christina, the other Emily
—trees specially sacred in the holy grove.

You that I've named, you that I've forgotten,
you that I've remembered but not named, lest
the proud procession should wind on for ever:
I have been, am ever, in your converse blest
—masters of the impurest of the arts
which is for me (perhaps for that) the peerless best.