

THE MUSE ABROAD

POEMS

By J. AQUILINA

OH ENGLAND

Oh England, whose brave sons once built an Empire
That held all other continents in fief,
What has destroyed the strength of manly fire,
What curse has brought your greatness to such grief?

Your glory now is but an ashen dream
From the Land of Broken Sleep, a burnt out moth.
Of all your glory there remains a gleam
Before complete black out – your day of wrath.

Can these (look well!) be your flesh and blood, these
Duds, dull creatures, drawn faces, sunken eyes,
Long hair unkempt, lacking grace and ease,
Who in large cities congregate like flies

In search of rotten meat in rubbish bins
That whets their appetite for dirty food?
Whose curse have they inherited, whose sins,
These less than men, such a degraded brood?

What wind or hurricane could blow out the light
That blazed your paths of glory in the past?
Your sun has set. Are you content with night,
From first among the first to queue up last?

But those that love you still in your decline
Believe and pray that you come back again.
The cloud-hid sun can yet come out to shine
And purify the miasmas of the Drain.

In your dark hour, seek the strength to pray
For the lost faith of those that made you great.
Though you have sunk so low, look lost today,
Pray for such faith, pray hard – 'tis not too late.

3.ix.69 – Vienna (in a Restaurant in Josefstrasse)

GOZO

With apologies to Robert Browning

Oh to be in Gozo now that the sky is cool and blue,
 And the arms of Xlendi, like the arms of a loving bride,
 Stretch out to embrace you, welcome you home,
 In a bosom-to-bosom affection, the warmth of its tide.

Oh to be in Gozo on the fifteenth day of August
 When the jockeys of the island ride the horses for the races,
 And the happy winner gives his prize-flag for the parish altar-piece
 And *It-Tokk* and Race-Course Street are full of radiant faces!

Oh to be in Gozo now that the sun has ripened plums and grapes
 And the boys and girls of Gozo swim in the bay of Marsalforn;
 For of the countries that I have seen, this island I love best,
 For the island of Gozo is the island where I was born.

3.ix.69 – Vienna

DEVIL'S EFFIGY

What, have we got as far as the moon
 And we still go on killing one another
 In the Middle East, Vietnam,
 Northern Ireland and New York?
 In Jungles and the deserts
 Where human blood flows freely – wasted blood?
 Say what you will, there must be something wrong with
 us, brother.

God have mercy on us for venturing out so far
 In our search for Matter
 In the space outside us
 Without ever trying to explore the universe within us
 That is the Human Soul –
 The spacecraft's ultimate goal:
 Only such exploration can mend, or make whole,
 Man's split personality
 Obscured by the devil's effigy
 In spite of his divinity.

4.ix.69 – Vienna

TO THE MUSE

Sweet Muse,
Long-loved, long-courted,
Permit me a little dallying, if you can;
And if you care, pause in your quick flight
Between the Dawn and Twilight of Tomorrow.
Do so but for a while
To answer a few questions:
'What age are you? Are you eighteen or sixty?
Or are you, as they say, as old,
As Methusalah,
Homer, Virgil and Dante, or older still,
As old as the unknown bards
That courted you on mountains and in valleys,
Prophetic scribes?
Are you the unaging Love and Hope
That haunts the imagination of long-suffering man
Throughout his life
From the cradle to the grave?
Who are your playmates?
Are they these young men
Basking lazily in the sun
To get the tawn of Autumn's browning leaves?
Or these firm-bosomed girls
Revelling in the warmth
Of their sex-prodded youth?
And can your playmate be also an ageing man
Who courted you no less when he was young
And you were young unaged as to-day
The playmate of the untarnished Dawn
On the Appennines unimpaired by Time?
Thank you, sweet Muse, my very constant love,
For our prolonged *amour*
Is surely more than a passing love affair:
It is indeed the marriage of true Love
Between the ageing poet and his Muse.

THE DREAM

I closed the door to let nobody in
 And drew the curtain to keep out the light;
 Soon, feeling sad and tired, I fell asleep
 Plunged into the silence of the night,
 Till you, I know not how, entered my room
 And stood erect before me smiling sad.
 I gasped for breath, and turned my face away,
 Feeling sick and bad, haunted by your eyes!
 But you, a ghostly image, still remained
 Beside my bed, tears falling down your cheeks,
 The while I felt an anguish in my chest
 And sweated feverishly like one sick for weeks,
 Till you had pity on me and withdrew
 Behind a cloud of mist that calmed my fears
 And, seeing you no more, I slept again.
 When I awoke my eyes were wet with tears.

4.ix.69 – Vienna Hotel Weisses Kreuz

JUST A QUESTION

When I am dead what will they say of me?
 The dead can neither hear nor see offence.
 Remember this: Once dead, we are all free
 From those disturbances that make life tense.
 If then my enemies are unjust not fair,
 Do not be sad, you know I could not care.

4.ix.69 – Weisses Kreuz Hotel, Vienna

HIPPIES

England and America have between them produced the largest number of
 hippies;
 These raw and scruffy creatures invade foreign cities, Vienna and Rome
 – The battered army of Anglo-American civilisation –
 The people look and walk on in disgust wishing them back home.

Vienna

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Pontius Pilate asked a question
Nigh two thousand years ago:
'What is truth?'
As we know,
Still the answer has not come:
We are still dumb.
In Herceg Novi, Yugoslavia,
The Professors of the world
Asked a question not less easy
'What is freedom of the mind?'
Find the answer; that's the problem,
If you can.
Where is 'oneness' for agreement
In a world that has no unity?
Who'll reject what he believes
For the formula of man's liberty?
And the answer will not come:
As for Truth, we are all dumb.
Truth and freedom are but seeds –
Different grasses, different weeds.
Take your choice and fill your basket.
That's the freedom of your mind.

4.ix.69 – Vienna

APOLLO XI

Three brave Americans landed on the moon and planted the American flag;
And brought down with them boxes of lunar rock and sand,
Crowning a scientific achievement with an amazing success,
But they'll have to fly much farther to bring peace to their land.

4.ix.69 – Vienna

AMERICA

Dollars and Coca-Cola – by this curious combination
You can assess American influence on every nation.

Vienna

IN VIENNA

This is a city which old kings made beautiful
 With palaces, museums of all kinds.
 Look where you will, every street is full
 Of works of Art conceived by Austrian minds.

I walk along *Der Rink*, look at many a shop,
 High, sculptured buildings, tramways all the way;
 Pause for a while to see the sparrows hop
 In search of food, some crumbs, then fly away.

And lazily I pursue my way along,
 Beyond the Rathaus, exhibits of Art,
 Yet I feel lonely without joy or song,
 Like one who cannot in such feast take part.

My heart awaits my bride, my Beatrice,
 To share with her Vienna's Danubian bliss.

7.ix.69 – Weisses Kreuz Hotel, Vienna

THE LIFE-GIVER

Reflections in the Naturhistorisches museum of Vienna

Oh God, life-giver, we who live must die.
 This multitude of birds and butterflies
 Crabs, fish and beasts can neither walk nor fly
 Nor can we hear the tigers' woodland cries.

There is no blood in them, no living breath
 In what is but the semblance of true life.
 Think well: this is the Museum of Death
 The wildest animals show no signs of strife.

For all are quiet as a grave, removed
 From their habitat with blind pearly eyes,
 Stuffed corpses whose cold lifelessness is proved
 By their rapt detachment: all that lives dies.

As I paced up and down the guarded hall
 With thousand exhibits of plumaged birds
 I thought: 'What wonder if God would recall
 Their parted spirit, re-create the herds

Of buffaloes, giraffes, stags and reindeer
Stirring the lungs of all lifeless creatures.
The miracle would shake Vienna with wild fear
Of the world's end, foretold by holy preachers,

Though this, in fact, would be not more surprising
Than teeming lives emerging from new seeds,
The spawn of fish, the eggs of fowls, comprising
Man's own fertility and different breeds.

Yet if He would, He could indeed do so.
Did He not summon Lazarus from the dead?
And did He not raise Himself at one go,
As easily from His grave as from a bed?

Say this is but a fancy, yet 'tis true
Life creates not itself: it must be given
By the Life-Giver whose Being populates
Death's dark dominion. He is our God in Heaven

Without whose breathing there can never be
Motion and recognition by dead things.
Whatever lives on land, in air or sea
Lives by His will: only a live bird sings.

10.ix.69 – Vienna

OBITUARY

Here lies the corpse of a well known widely travelled man
Whom seven, or more, feet of dust from idle gazers hide.
He liked travelling, knowing that there was to be a journey's end
Till, tired of travelling, he lay him down, closed his eyes and died.

Pray for his wandering soul which now travels in the realm
Of God's invisible continents beyond our planet, Mother Earth;
For the day he died to the world, he began to live
In the World of Infinite Existence through his second birth.

14.ix.69 – While on a visit to Wachau, Vienna

TIME

Time is a very small grain
Thrown into the mouth of a Monster
Called Eternity.
This Monster swallows us up
One by one
Till it destroys all vestiges of Man
On earth.
We do our best salvaging the ruins
In National Museums
But as these are also born of Time,
They shall also one day disappear
Into the mouth of the Monster
That swallows up cities and civilisations,
For time is mortal like every one of us.

16.ix.69 – Arts Museum, Vienna

CZECHSLOVAKIA

Jan Palack has not died in vain.
The flame that burnt his body
Still burns in the hearts of his people.
He and Masaryk shall return together,
To set their country free again
And gather
The fruit of their self-sacrifice
(The death of two such heroes has its price).
While they and their followers
Wait underground,
The Death of the two Heroes
One day, (Justice must be done!)
Shall overtake the enemy
Suddenly and wrathfully
To avenge the hope
Of Czechoslovakia.

17.ix.69 – Vienna

PAINTING

(Thoughts in Kunst-historisches museum of Vienna)

Imagination is of transparent colours made,
 The blended colours of the rainbow
 With an infinite number of shades
 That spread and grow
 On the canvas of the painter.
 The Titians and the Reubens,
 The galaxy in the mansions of great art,
 Dipped their brushes
 In this heavenly palette
 And left us immortal pictures.
 The artist in a moment of inspiration
 Catches the light of a fleeting vision
 That outshines the darkness of the world.

17.ix.69 – Vienna

MUNICH FESTIVAL

(Oktoberfest 14th Sept.-5th Oct. 1965)

To-day the heart of Munich beats a merry, merry tune
 With Bavarian rejoicing and mugs of excellent beer;
 Fireworks by night and many a laughing go-round
 For Oktoberfest in Munich is the festival of good cheer.

I rise to toast the good health of the United German people,
 The peace of the world and their peace in a mug of Munich beer,
 The peace of us all, the peace of heart and mind
 That drowns in a mug of beer the memory of Nazi fear.

Let us to-day, as we sing together, forget the graveyards of yesterday;
 The skies that were dark with death are now sunny and clear;
 Forget the betrayal of the Berchtesgaden Agreement,
 Forget it and sink it forever in a mug of laughing beer.

And I will forget, so will you, the years of horrible awaiting:
 The life underground, heroic but Oh how dull and drear;
 Forget the wrong done to my country, the suffering of my people:
 Forget it and drown it forever in a mug of München beer.

19.ix.69 – Munich

OBITUARY

Here lies buried a British patriot of the staunch Churchill school
 Who, travelling in Europe, got so hot under the collar
 That he died of apoplexy when suddenly he realised
 That Albion's pound played second fiddle to Uncle Sam's dollar.

19.ix.69 – Munich

OKTOBERFEST IN MUNICH

(20th Sept.-5th Oct. 1969)

If someone could call Hitler out of his grave
 To rejoice with his people on Oktoberfest
 Would he repent him of his heartlessness
 And ask the forgiveness of those he oppressed?

And would he realise (too late!) that human life
 Is larger than politics and politicians?
 That men and women being flesh and blood,
 Are not the dead figures of statisticians?

The people of Munich have no time for him now.
 How could they remember and not lose their zest
 For good beer, good food, fun and merry making
 Which they celebrate with brass bands on Oktoberfest?

20.ix.69 – Munich

MOZART

Memories of a visit to Schönbrunn, Vienna

'A six year old prodigy boy
 Conducted a concert before the Hapsburg family
 In one of the halls of this castle,'
 Said the guide to the tourists.
 The gilded halls of the castle
 Are empty of power and pomp
 They are to-day a money-raising memorial
 To a vanished dynasty
 Who contributes to Austria's tourist industry.
 The prodigy grew up to be
 A neglected prodigy composer

Who lived in poverty and is buried
 In an unknown grave
 With the poorest of the poor,
 The anonymous crowd.
 His *Missa Cantata* in Salzburg Cathedral
 To-day
 Raised my soul to the seventh heaven.

21.ix.69 – Salzburg

MEDITATION

In the Benedictine Monastery of Melk, Vienna

In the Benedictine Monastery
 Of Melk, devout men,
 Cut off from the treacherous world
 Of noisy traffic and intrigue,
 Pray for themselves and for us all –
 For us who live in the world,
 For the world and by the world;
 In which they do not glory, for they
 Glory in Christ, the Lord,
 Knowing that there is nothing
 In man, animal or thing
 That could satisfy the heart's craving
 For true love and peace,
 That craving which St. Augustine said
 Can be filled only by
 God's infinite dimensions
 That are Truth and Love.
 When the last hour comes
 For them and for us
 (One by one, we all take our turn on the way out)
 We shall realise, alas too late
 That they who lived in the world,
 For the world and by the world,
 Will have lived for a passing dream,
 That those who will live for God
 Will have lived also for Christ, His Son,
 In the Divine Dimension
 Of His Infinite Beatitude

In truth and Love.
 I, who have lived in the world
 For the world and by the world,
 But hating it all the time
 As one hates a silly puppet show
 Loving Christ truly
 Though without constancy and loyalty
 Pray that the merits of the Benedictine Fathers
 Of Melk in Vienna
 And of all those who live for Christ
 Save my soul.
 Would I could always say
 With the Benedictine Fathers of Melk
Glorior in Domine meo
Jesus Christus
Redemptor Mundi.
 Whatever will happen to me
 To-day or tomorrow
 In joy or in sorrow
 Let it be known (This is my Testament)
 That by this faith and love
 I will live and die
 Unto Him, my Master,
 Jesus Christ!

21.ix.69 – Salzburg

OBITUARIES

Here lies buried a famous actor, son of Harry Jones,
 Whose acting interpreted fun and human lives.
 He made a lot of money out of Comedy.
 His record: very fine acting and divorcing five wives.

Here lies Betty, actress of international fame,
 Whose blue eyes and bosom bribed the critics' pen.
 She made a Pharaonic fortune out of pictures.
 Her record: very fine acting and marrying five men.

Here lie buried two creatures neither man nor woman
 Who being animals, mated like cats, pigs and dogs:
 A dog who fathered twelve pups by six bitches;
 A bitch who mothered twelve pups by five dogs.

The two bipeds and the two quadrupeds
Who practised a common sex morality lie side by side;
Judge not the dead bipeds but be kind to them;
The denizens of fame have long been tried.

There is nothing you can do for them now,
But as you step aside
You can pray for the sanity
Of foolish humanity.

22.ix.69 – Innsbruck

THE TRAIN

As the train sped up from Salzburg to Innsbruck
Past mountain-clinging cottages, meadows green
And kine, I thought myself part of the picture
Part of the landscape with its sunny sheen.

22.ix.69

OBITUARY

Here we have buried a man who worried and fretted,
Imagining frightful situations and dreading the worst,
Till Death, having pity on him, carried him away.
And laid his head on the pillow of eternal rest.

24.ix.69 – Innsbruck

DUST

I picked up a handful of dust
And put it to my mouth,
And tasted it;
I spread it over the skin
Of my two arms
And felt it.
It was soft and soothing:
Last bed and last pillow
Of my mortal life.

24.ix.69 – On the first morning train from Innsbruck to Munich