

Quartet (Quarteto)

by Octavio Paz

(translated by Michael Schmidt)

Ore, fermate il volo
e, carolando intorno
a l'alba mattutina
ch'esce de la marina,
l'umana vita ritardate e'l giorno.

—Tasso

I.
KNOWN yet always strange, the lie of the land,
the riddle of the palm of one's own hand.
The ocean sculpts in each wave, stubbornly,
the monument in which it falls away.
Against the sea, a will that's turned to rock,
the faceless headland keeps the sea in check.
The clouds: they are inventing sudden bays
—where a plane is a barque that melts away.
The rapid scribbling of the birds above
—others are fishing where the water moves.
Between the sea-foam and the sand I tread,
the sun is resting light upon my head:
between what's static and what will not stay
in me the elements enact their play.

II.
THERE are tourists also on this strand,
death in a bikini, death with jewelled hand,
there are rumps and bellies, loins, lungs, thighs,
a cornucopia of bland enormities,
a scattered abundance that precedes
the meal of ashes where the worm will feed.
Adjacent, yet divided by those lines
strictly kept but tacit, undefined,
are vendors, and the stalls where fries are sold,

and panders, parasites, untouchables,
the rags of poor men and the poor man's bones.
The rich are stingy while the poor man fawns:
God loves them not, nor do they love themselves:
'each does but hate his neighbour as himself.'

III.
THE wind breaks forth and gathers up the grove,
the nations of cloud disperse above.
The real is fragile, wavering, unsure
—also, its law is change, it does not tire.
Round and round the wheel of seemings spins
upon a fixity: the axis time.
Light sketches all and then turns all to flame,
with daggers that are brands it stabs the main
and makes the world a pyre of mirrorings:
we are mere white horses of the sea.
It's not Plotinus's light, it's earthly light,
a light of here, but it is thoughtful light.
It brings, between me and my exile, peace:
my home this light, its shifting emptiness.

IV.
TO wait for nightfall, I have stretched myself
under the shadow of a throbbing tree.
The tree is a woman in whose leaves
I hear the ocean roll beneath noon heat.
I eat her fruits that have the taste of time,
fruits of forgetfulness, fruits of wisdom.
Beneath the tree, the images and thoughts
and words regard each other, touch.
Through the body we return where we began,
spiral of stillness and of motion.
To taste, to know—it is finite, this pause:
it has beginning, end—is measureless.
Night enters and it rolls us in its wake;
the sea repeats its syllables, now black.

through 25 centuries and because they read backwards into that chronicle the evolution of system-formation from Thales to Wittgenstein and Ricoeur.

Another by-product of the "revisionist" view is the rehabilitation of religion as an enterprise in which the greatest minds of the West engaged. If, from Augustine to Gilson, it is said that one cannot philosophize without taking religion into account, we have Plato's confirming testimony that the philosopher must have fair thoughts and live a good life in order to qualify.

This would leave our academic philosophers and Ph.D.'s out on a limb and would mean that they are unable to teach their discipline because it cannot be learned from twice-a-week courses or from so-tagged Great Books. Our students want an A, in philosophy not less than in home economics, and are not ready to devote their lives to *sophia* unless she is a pretty coed.

But let us draw a more substantial lesson. It is not relativism to say that things change according to the viewer

and the perspective—in our case, that philosophy is not the search for truth but a personal conversion because, obviously, the disciple of Plotinus had little in common with the adept of Epicurus. Only through this wider grasp can we advance to the overall ideal of ancient philosophy: finding among the itineraries of conversion the privileged one, the *via recta*. Yet the last thing that the post-Kantian era, in which we are still orbiting, would suppose is that spiritual exercises (Hadot refers to those of Ignatius of Loyola) were at the heart of Greek wisdom. Our philosophy lessons usually begin with the Cartesian *cogito* or, nowadays, with the structure of language which is said to determine it. At any rate, the modern student's first encounter with philosophy is a thorough skepticism in regard to the outside world, as well as to his own existence. *Cogitur* (it thinks) is the watchword three centuries after Descartes. How does it feel for student and professor to be told that the gray plaster busts of Greek sages do not hide iconoclastic inquiries, but ways of going beyond mere self and seeking out the Good?

EXECUTION *a story by Momcilo Selic*

Vukota Vlahovic said to his mother, "I am a grown man."

But his mother just smiled. "You are a boy until you marry. Even then you will be my son."

"God be with you," she said, as he walked away without looking back.

His pouch filled with bread and cheese, Vukota Vlahovic went down Trmanje, watching the birds and the hares.

He descended to the Dead Man's Vale and crossed the River of the Dead. Its pale blue waters almost touched his soles as he shuffled over the planks. He threw a pebble into the water, and the fish scrambled, their bellies silver.

Then he climbed, high, past Hazelhut, along the smaller Gorge. He could hear the River of the Dead gushing out of the mountain.

Twin white jets, twice as tall as a man, formed the river outright; Vukota crawled away from the Rim and rose, brushing away the pine needles and moss. He walked briskly, through an airy forest.

* * *

By noon, he reached the Grand Vale and lodged with his cousins, the Pizurice. He had to stuff himself once more, while his aunt said to him, "Watch out for the Niksici, they've been under the Turks too long. May God watch over you." And she made the sign of the cross over him.

The next dawn he climbed out of the Vale, passed the Captain's Lake and walked towards Nisa's Marker. The plain, high in the mountains, was flat and yellow, deserted like a battlefield. Silence pressed upon him, as did the purple clouds and the opaque, purple water he was leaving.

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In Niksic, King Nicholas cried to the assembled students, "We need men to bring literacy to Montenegro! Your duty will be as honorable as anyone's in the army!"

Vukota looked at the other students, and their faces were also glum.

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In 1912, the long columns of Rovcani crossed the White Mountain and reached the Lim. There, the Vasojevici

