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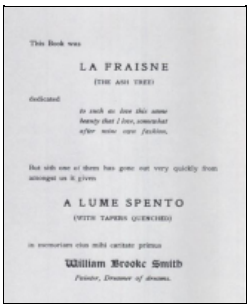
NOV 18, 2009

a lume spento

ROBERT P. BAIRD


This Book was

LA FRAISNE

(THE ASH TREE)

dedicated

to such as love this same
beauty that I love, somewhat
after mine own fashion,

But with one of them has gone out very quickly from
amongst us it given

A LUME SPENTO

(WITH TAPERS QUENCHED)

in memoriam cius mihi caritate primus

William Brooke Smith

Painter, Dreamer of dreams.

The original plan was to call the book *La Fraisne* ("The Ash Tree") after the title of the first poem, and dedicate it to H.D. Shortly before Pound sent the book to his Venetian printer, however, he learned that his friend William Brooke Smith had died of tuberculosis. This was 1908; Pound and Smith had met seven years earlier when the former was a freshman at Penn. It was Smith who first gave Pound a book of Oscar Wilde's (*Salomé*), and Smith whom Pound would lament to WCW some thirteen years later, "I haven't replaced him and shan't and no longer hope to."

The news of Smith's death demanded a change: now the book would be dedicated to Pound's *"caritate primus"* and titled *A Lume Spento*. The source of the title is easy enough to spot: half a line from late in *Purgatorio* 3. (The canto was fertile ground for twentieth-century quote-hunters: Robert Penn Warren found the epigraph for *All the King's Men*—*"mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde"*—just a few lines down.) *"Caritate primus"*—"first friend"—is another Dante allusion: it's a Latin version of the epithet Dante gave Cavalcanti in the *Vita Nuova*.

In the *Purgatorio*, *"a lume spento"* appears in the mouth of Manfred, King of Sicily and the son of Frederick II, the *stupor mundi*. When Dante meets him in the Valley of the Rulers, Manfred is "blond and handsome and noble in bearing," but he is also disfigured: his eyebrow remains cleft by the blow that killed him, and he wears a wound near the top of his chest.

Like many of the shades the pilgrim meets in purgatory, Manfred begs Dante to carry news of his fate back to the world of the living. He fears that his daughter Constance will think he died in contumacy of the Church, and with good reason. At the time of his death, he was the target of a crusade by Pope Urban IV, who had accused Manfred of heresy and excommunicated him "with malediction," a curse that announced him "damned with the devil and his angels and all the reprobate to eternal fire."

"Horrible were my sins," Manfred tells Dante, and though he does not specify, we learn from our commentaries that he had been accused of murdering his father, his brother, and two nephews. The chronicler Villani tells us that the young king was "just as dissolute as his father, or even more":

> He played music and sang, and liked to see jugglers, courtiers, and beautiful concubines around him. Manfred always dressed in green…. But his whole life was Epicurean; he cared neither for God nor for the saints, but only for the delights of the flesh.

The excommunication was still in place when Manfred died on February 26, 1266 at the hands of Urban's French troops, but his purgatorial shade insists to Dante that this was not the end of his mortal story:

> After my body was ripped
> by two fatal stabs, I gave myself
> weeping to Him who pardons willfully.
>
> *Poscia ch'io ebbi rotta la persona*
> *di due punte mortali, io mi rendei,*
> *piangendo, a quei che volontier perdona.*

The late tears that saved Manfred's eternal soul did not save his body. After their first burial, Manfred's remains were disinterred by an archbishop who ordered them thrown in the river Verde. (Yes, the king who wore only green was disposed in the Green River.) Here is how Manfred describes the postmortem fate of his body:

> Now the rain bathes them and the wind blows them
> beyond the kingdom, near the Verde,
> where he carried them with tapers quenched.
>
> *Or le bagna la pioggia e move il vento*
> *di fuor dal regno, quasi lungo 'l Verde,*
> *dov' e' le trasmutò a lume spento.*

"A lume spento" could mean "with lights out," but for historical reasons, most translators of the Purgatorio give something like Pound's "with tapers quenched." The phrase refers to the medieval tradition of burying heretics "sine cruce, sine luce"—without crosses or candles to accompany them. In this fashion Manfred was buried under a cairn at Benevento; in this fashion he was dug up and dispatched into the Verde.

The antiritual returns us to Pound. Taken together, the title and dedication of *A Lume Spento* put Will Smith—Pound's brilliant and handsome friend (and maybe lover)—in the place of the brilliant and handsome Manfred. Daniel Tiffany **suggests** that "Pound's elegiac gesture corresponds to the exhumation and reburial of his corpse. By dedicating the

book to Smith as he does…Pound…identifies his own first book of poems as a literary crypt." Even if we wonder how the desecration of Manfred's corpse at the far end of the allusion is supposed to count as "reburial," we accept this as responsible criticism. The comparison is plainly the one Pound wanted us to make.

I have to wonder, though, if the allusion to Manfred doesn't also beg some irresponsible criticism. Isn't the life it better fits Pound's own? After all, whatever minor heresies Pound appreciated in Smith were nothing compared to his own major heresy, which resulted in the closest thing to excommunication the modern world knows. And however we come down on the question of whether a person's art can or should redeem the failings of his life, it's hard to argue that Pound's late poems didn't serve him in something of the way that Manfred's tears served him—as a means of repentance, at the very least:

> But the beauty is not the madness
> Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me.
> And I am not a demigod,
> I cannot make it cohere.

A late translation of Horace's famous "Exegi Monumentum" ode—Pound's last sanctioned publication–gives just the barest hint that he might have held fast to the example of Manfred as a model. The third, fourth, and fifth lines of his version run:

> Gnaw of the wind and rain?
> Impotent
> The flow of the years to break it, however many.

They translate, very roughly, Horace's *"non imber edax, non aquilo impotens, / possit diruere aut innumerabilis / annorum series et fuga temporum."* But doesn't that "gnaw of wind and rain" also point back, however subtly, at Manfred's *"Or le bagna la pioggia e move il vento"?* Likewise, when Pound writes

> Bits of me, many bits, will dodge all funeral

we are supposed to hear Horace's *"multaque pars mei / vitabit Libitinam"* (Libitina is the goddess of funerals). But there's an echo in there too of Manfred's bones, scattered "quasi lungo il Verde," that will never find final consecration.

It goes against everything we know to believe that that fates are foreshadowed in life the way they are in novels or poems. We are not supposed to believe that history works this way, and yet still sometimes we do.

9 Responses

1. 
Joel Calahan
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

Thanks for the note. I found the last bit especially insightful, where you note the echoes in Pound's version of "Exegi Momentum". Beautiful!

Reply

2. 
Michael Robbins
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

This reminds me that I meant to ask you if you'd seen this: http://www.dantesinferno.com/home.action.

Reply

3. 
Robert P. Baird
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

Yes.

Reply

4. 
Michael Robbins
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

Ha. I missed that.

Btw, there's also Canto 74: "The wind is part of the process / The rain is part of the process." From Confucius, if I remember aright.

Reply

5. 
Anahid Nersessian
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

Bobby, says the pedantic Romanticist, do you think Byron's 'Manfred' is a possible intertext here? "Inter-" between Dante and Pound, that is. B's poem had a huge cultural afterlife in the 19th century (most notably in Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony*), and is also about inexpiable sin (incest), talking to spirits, death, and dying. And then there's the whole Italy thing. Anyway, if you haven't read 'Manfred,' the closet drama in a while, it might be worth casting an eye over.

Reply

6. 
Henry Gould
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

"It goes against everything we know to believe that that fates are foreshadowed in life the way they are in novels or poems. We are not supposed to believe that history works this way, and yet still sometimes we do. "

I will die in Paris in a downpour
a day which I can already remember.
I will die in Paris—and I don't budge—
Maybe a Thursday, like today, in autumn.
- Cesar Vallejo, "Black Stone on a White Stone"

Reply

7. 
Robert P. Baird
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

@JC: Thanks!

@MR: Nice one, thanks.

@AN: Yes, how could I forget the fateful chamois hunter? You may be right about the intertext, at least for the 1908 part of the story, though Pound was reading as much Dante as Byron then, if not more. I don't know enough about Smith to know how well Byron's Manfred fits him. It's a very different portrait than Dante gives, though he does tip his cap at least this once:

> My bones had then been quiet in their depth;
> They had not then been strewn upon the rocks
> For the wind's pastime– as thus– thus they shall be–
>
> In this one plunge.– Farewell, ye opening heavens!
> Look not upon me thus reproachfully–
> Ye were not meant for me– Earth! take these atoms!

@HG: Yes, but he died on a Friday in spring! Perhaps it was raining, though.

Reply

8. 
Anahid Nersessian
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

As we say in America, Bobby, Never Forget.

Reply

9. 
Henry Gould
November 18, 2009 (Edit)

@ HG : minus point. Nevertheless am fascinated by this idea. & the related schema, in which the inevitability & perfection of a poem seems to turn its sources & forerunners into prophecies. I think it's called "transumption".

Reply

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