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FROM THE DIARY OF A POLIPHILIC TOURIST

**N**ote: "Reading, Admiring, and Translating the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of 1499", the paper that Prof. Godwin read at the "Waters of Hermes" Conference, has been published in expanded form as Chapter 2 of his book *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press; London: Thames & Hudson, 2002). For that reason it is not printed here.

Thursday, 5 October. Montepulciano. The usual struggle squeezing my bloated Citroën, absurdly named "Picasso", in or out of any old Italian town. I should be taking a year over this and doing it on a donkey. Eventually found the road to the church of the Madonna of San Biagio, a foursquare temple sitting all alone in the plain. Sangallo's fantasy of the Doric order in honey-colored sandstone, with shell-niches, rosettes, oculi under heavy entablatures. So clean and crisp I could eat it for breakfast. Then on to Viterbo. First stop Bomarzo, and the Gormenghastly palace of the Orsini which was closed on my last trip. Courteous bureaucrats let me roain ad lib through the sad empty rooms. Pretended I owned the place and filled it with *Kunst-und-Wunderkammer* stuff, musical and philosophical instruments. The only human presence a mummified saint propped on his elbow, with neat satin robe, knitted gloves, and toothy grin. Bought cheese, olives,

and the best loaf of the trip and ate in the picnic area of Vicino Orsini's Sacred Wood. All the old friends: the elephant, the turtle, the dragon, the unicorn, Ceres, the cruel giant, the siren, the lopsided house, the river god, the Magdalene, the dreaded Orca, the mouth-cavern. Everything a little more moss-grown and eroded since last time. Give it another century, and it'll either vanish into the ground, or be encased in plastic.

The inestimable gift of solitude. Every stone is oracular, as in the Aborigines' song-lines, and holds a story of epiphanies and gigantomachies before this world began, or in a parallel universe. I am Vicino, and I know what they all mean. But I am not telling.

Even the plants here are unearthly. There's a species with leaves the size of bedspreads that look fit to poison at a touch, but something has munched them into lace-like patterns. I hope the something won't drop down my neck. On the terrace of giant urns, alongside the heraldic bear of the Orsini is the rose of their cousins, my Rosenberg ancestors. Perhaps one gene among myriads hums and resonates here. All the urns were once inscribed, but the letters are vanishing fast. No time to copy their remnants, like Poliphilo copying the Greek and Latin inscriptions in the seaside cemetery. I hope someone recorded the texts of the Sacred Wood while they were still there. It's like that opera in Ljubljana where I couldn't understand the plot, much less the words. But these gardens are very like music. This is what music must be like for an untrained music-lover: full of wordless feelings, free from analysis, exegesis, and the busy left brain. And what sort of opera would Bomarzo be? Well, Ginastera has done it already, but I'd prefer Cesti or Cavalli.

At the end of the path, Vignola's little temple, prim, polite, and Christian, like an absolution after indulgence in the decadent mysteries of the Sacred Wood. I record its restoration by Giancarlo and Tina Severi Bettini, "to whom, with their family, goes the merit of having saved from destruction this monumental complex, one of its kind in all the world, at the same time as having contributed to giving work for several years to the unemployed of the Comune of Bomarzo". What good people. Peace be to their Manes.

To Bagnaia, which I cannot pronounce. Leave my Picasso in the

middle of the town square with an imaginary angel to guard it, and walk up to the Villa Lante. First, the lusciously decorated conservatory beneath the right-hand pavilion, painted top to bottom with grotesques, mythologies, portraits of other villas and their gardens. Last time I was at Lante, alone but for the guard, a thunderstorm drove us in here. I'm almost alone again today, but halfway up the garden I hear English voices. There's a group of tourists, patrician-looking, average age upper 60s. Playing the innocent abroad, I accost one: "Are you visiting all the gardens in the region?" "Not exactly; we're the Fountain Society". (How marvelous that such a thing can exist! English eccentricity not yet extinct). I learn that the Fountain Society goes on trips twice a year to look at, of course, fountains. Beside the Viterbo region, they have been to Paris, Rome, and New York City. "New York City?" Yes, there are many interesting fountains there, especially the indoor ones in the lobbies of corporate buildings. Some of the members are retired engineers who know all about hydraulics and can explain it to the others. Their next trip is to Marrakesh. I want to sign up immediately, but the Atlantic Ocean, a job, etc., intervene.

All the fountains of the Villa Lante are going at full spurt. Just as there is a garden mood, so there is a fountain mood, when one leans over the edge and immerses ear and eye in the music and abstract patterns. One could live a whole existence in this state, and perhaps that is what the Undines' life is like. For the moment, I firmly accept Paracelsus, the Comte de Gabalis, and Rudolf Steiner on the lives and habits of elementals. If ever one might meet them, it is here. Up to the twin pavilions of the Muses (ah, to give a concert of *cori spezzati* in them!) and the overhung pond between them, where the water enters the garden through a mask. Incredibly green, damp, and female. That's the finale, but I want to see what it's like backstage. Out of the formal garden, through a little wood, and out into a field with one square and one round pond, quiet and still, evidently the reservoirs. Astonishing change of atmosphere, like waking from an enchantment.

Down the hill again, following the watercourse and its events like recalling a sequence of dreams. I pass some Fountaineers, puzzled

by the stone lobsters which make a chain or slide for the water to pour down. I explain that the Cardinal who built the villa was called Gambara, and that these are crayfish, *gamberi*. (Shakespeare was making bad puns around the same time). I imagine the Cardinal and his entourage at the outdoor dining table, with a runnel in the center for cooling the drinks. Were they as awed as I am by the recumbent river gods who preside over the noisiest of the fountains? Did they pour a surreptitious libation to them, and to the other pagan presences? Plunged deeply into the garden mood, I hear and echo the prayer of Socrates and Phaedrus on the banks of the Ilissus: "Dear Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, grant me beauty of the inward man, and may the inward and the outward man be one".

The watercourse of the Villa Lante cadences in a great flat, formal garden, with box hedges cut in knife-edged cubes. Like the sanctuary of a church, it's reserved for the priesthood and its servants. These symmetrical parterres are such an obsession of formal gardening, but compared to the fountains, bosquets, terraces and grottoes I find them two-dimensional and sterile. In any case, I couldn't resolve their patterns at ground level. Only the birds and the gods can see them properly.

On to Viterbo, find my hotel, set the alarm for 6 and sleep for an hour. Out to find chiaroscuro clouds lowering over a somber, crowded town. Most things are closing now, everyone in more of a hurry than me. The best I can do is to walk from one end to the other, and find some dinner. First stop, the sarcophagus of Galiana, set in a church wall. I must pay my respects to "a girl whose beauty caused a war between Viterbo and Rome in the Middle Ages, and whose purity was such that, when she drank, the wine was said to be seen passing down her throat". So says the Blue Guide: it could come straight from the *Hypnerotomachia*. Next the octagonal oratory of Our Lady of the Plague, one of those centrally-planned buildings so beloved of Poliphilo, built 1494, just before his book. Its doorway is heavily encrusted with classicizing decoration, but too dark to make out the details.

No hope of seeing much more this evening. There's something

insane about this kind of butterfly tourism: ten days scuttling round Venice, ten more to flit to Rome; but what is the alternative? What do I really long for? To be born and bred in Viterbo (or better in Ferrara, or Urbino), to have its every street and stone lodged deep in my psyche, to know every face in the forum, to possess the place and be possessed by it. And preferably to do that in the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century. And please, not as a peasant!

As I pass the precious month of my butterfly existence on a pilgrimage to the gardens, villas, and palaces where the *genii loci* of the pagan Renaissance still lead a half-life, modern Italy and its inhabitants are an unavoidable detail. Funny that Poliphilo felt the same way about his own era, as he went in search of the genius of Antiquity. Should I forget about the Renaissance and go straight to the source? But where will I find the villa of Hadrian, the temple of Venus, the gardens of the Palatine? In ruins.

In the medieval quarter, an antique shop is still open. I want something material to anchor my memories of this journey, and especially this day, and I start leafing through the prints. Hermes, patron of collectors, has planted an irresistible treasure: Orpheus singing to his harp before Pluto and Proserpine. Unsigned copper engraving, I'd guess mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Pluto looks bored, Proserpine entranced. Hordes of monsters, surely by an ancestor of Dr. Seuss. Half the price it would be in Venice.

Up to the papal palace with its celebrated Gothic loggia, but too hungry to care by now. I blunder into a restaurant which gives a discount to the military, but not to me. That accounts for the strain in the atmosphere of Viterbo that I sensed, and didn't much like: it's an army town. On the way back to the hotel I overtake two members of the Fountain Society. They haven't had their dinner, are exhausted and lost. I happen to have seen their hotel quite near mine, and steer them homewards. Tomorrow I see the gardens of Caprarola and Tivoli, and then I shall be in Rome.