

THREE POEMS BY THOMAS SHAPCOTT

Richard Wagner at Schloss Donndorf,
Bayreuth, 1873

The porcelain stove is not efficient.
It is too efficient, it dries me out. It drives me out
into the park: yesterday in this beech grove
foliage stopped me: some first leaves striking
off the mirror of autumn, already, like cupped hands around a
stove,
golden yet disconsolate. There should be light and warmth,
if only in my bones — this morning the smell of linden,
the blossoms littering their scurf and fragrance
tickled me up, Cosima says. I detest spring,
I hate more the last days of linden summer,
stiffening finger-pods under the leaf groups. Wasted seed.
I'm sick of playing Bach in E Flat Minor. I'm sick
of being in love, of falling, of falling out
of overheated rooms in search of search (children
were outside last night, why?)

This park is an imposture.

I do not believe in the lake; I ache at the edge, leaning
on the rustic bridge. I think I will dream the Rhine in flood,
pillars of flame, Gods in our petty squabbles searching into us,
aching into our very bones. I think I will dream linden forests
as a prayer — what prayer? The prayer for a god
stares at the myth that believes the power of music can ever ease
this scald of seeing one first leaf repeat autumn's search.
The prayer sees gold stain all green things
bound into the rot of air.

This is the richest summer

I have ever known. Inside

there will be coffee, warmed clothes, anxious looks again —
the larger my theatre, the more visible (you'd believe they would
see)

the burn of loneliness within. My axe will strike each linden
within the seed. I'll bring the whole world down, within
an orchestral song that is learning never to come to a point of
repose

— my design will power such a conflagration it will take sixty
years

to achieve. My theme: the loneliness of one who finds the
porcelain stove

too drying, too uncertain, too certain, too hot, too cold. My
theme:

the loneliness of one defying autumn in the planned garden. My
theme:

one who has planted gardens to transfigure your world,
who has opened a prospect here, landscaped a glade. Theme:
Power.

Theme: one who is crowded by devotion into the shade of beech
trees,

linden. A stove that is not efficient, a heart likewise, an anger
at leaves, loves, loveliness — an anger, always,
at the unspoken presence of fire, even in damp.

Walking in Circles

There was the time out on the Nullabor
when we realized bluebush had wiped out
all trace of the dirt track. I looked up
at flat sky, appalled. Not even wind-trees
could identify place. A cloud over the sun
and direction vanishes.

Now, pushing through autumn tangles of Canadian bush
thick underfelt-footed, gold, crackling out moisture
with swamp rumours, our footprints are rubbed out
by peatbog. We see horizontal. We remain
vertical. We return to log-rot quizzed
fifteen minutes before. Rain overhang, leaf overhang,
branch cording them tight, everything repeated.
You promised us the confidence of old logger's tracks
but we are in this together, lost, European
as the idea of the circle.

Silence

for Fay Zwicky

“suggest there comes a point in one’s life when silence is called for.”
— FAY ZWICKY, radio interview 20.9.1979

1

As if we should have been engineered for
silence
we cry out in the very act of birth
to express anger at our pulse
we cram head and shoulder through
lips
to the cavern. Darkness supposes us
already full-grip, toes splayed
in ironcap boots, terrestrial.
Air holds us now
entirely within its opening.
No sound of lips, no closing.

2

Smetana in his dream of deafness
envied Beethoven the sanity
of no hearing. He himself,
jabbed by a long high A,
turned sound to a silence
aching with yellow teeth.

3

“But having conceived of it,
man must bring it to be.”
Here on the sand floor
well in from the shaft
skeletal friction fondles our clothes.

Breath takes our time. The urge
is to tap messages, move the walls back.
They close in. Silence
is the dream that earth
is immobile. The earth is a body,
settling.

4

“Space is a vast silence.” Space is the tuning-board
of energy, meteor displacement, pizzicato.
Silence may be called for but the music
of the spheres has unheard pitch — is that
the same? Louis Jullien told Berlioz
it was perfect A, the terrestrial globe
revolving in space in his ear, God
as a blue cloud.
Whatever we dream, it is not silence.
Whatever we call for, it has a body.

5

Spliced by word strands
the rope jarrs, a conjurer’s trick
heading upward. Out of this basket
snake music
turns out the whole cave
like a pocket
full of clicking stones.
Fossils remember motion.
Inside those stern boots
someone’s toes are tapping.
We have designs against time,
but that is to say
we have conceived of God.
Who holds us
in his mouth, considering.