

L'Après-Midi D'un Faune, Aldous Huxley

L'Après-Midi D'un Faune  
(From the French of Stéphane Mallarmé.)

I would immortalize these nymphs: so bright  
Their sunlit colouring, so airy light,  
It floats like drowsing down. Loved I a dream?  
My doubts, born of oblivious darkness, seem  
A subtle tracery of branches grown  
The tree's true self-proving that I have known  
No triumph, but the shadow of a rose.  
But think. These nymphs, their loveliness ... suppose  
They bodied forth your senses' fabulous thirst?  
Illusion! which the blue eyes of the first,  
As cold and chaste as is the weeping spring,  
Beget: the other, sighing, passioning,  
Is she the wind, warm in your fleece at noon?  
No, through this quiet, when a weary swoon  
Crushes and chokes the latest faint essay  
Of morning, cool against the encroaching day,  
There is no murmuring water, save the gush  
Of my clear fluted notes; and in the hush  
Blows never a wind, save that which through my reed  
Puffs out before the rain of notes can speed  
Upon the air, with that calm breath of art  
That mounts the unwrinkled zenith visibly,  
Where inspiration seeks its native sky.  
You fringes of a calm Sicilian lake,  
The sun's own mirror which I love to take,  
Silent beneath your starry flowers, tell  
How here I cut the hollow rushes, well  
Tamed by my skill, when on the glaucous gold  
Of distant lawns about their fountain cold  
A living whiteness stirs like a lazy wave;  
And at the first slow notes my panpipes gave  
These flocking swans, these naiads, rather, fly  
Or dive. Noon burns inert and tawny dry,  
Nor marks how clean that Hymen slipped away  
From me who seek in song the real A.  
Wake, then, to the first ardour and the sight,  
O lonely faun, of the old fierce white light,  
With, lilies, one of you for innocence.  
Other than their lips' delicate pretence,  
The light caress that quiets treacherous lovers,  
My breast, I know not how to tell, discovers  
The bitten print of some immortal's kiss.  
But hush! a mystery so great as this  
I dare not tell, save to my double reed,  
Which, sharer of my every joy and need,  
Dreams down its cadenced monologues that we  
Falsely confuse the beauties that we see  
With the bright palpable shapes our song creates:  
My flute, as loud as passion modulates,  
Purges the common dream of flank and breast,  
Seen through closed eyes and inwardly caressed,  
Of every empty and monotonous line.

Bloom then, O Syrinx, in thy flight malign,

A reed once more beside our trysting-lake.  
Proud of my music, let me often make  
A song of goddesses and see their rape  
Profanely done on many a painted shape.  
So when the grape's transparent juice I drain,  
I quell regret for pleasures past and feign  
A new real grape. For holding towards the sky  
The empty skin, I blow it tight and lie  
Dream-drunk till evening, eyeing it.

Tell o'er  
Remembered joys and plump the grape once more.  
Between the reeds I saw their bodies gleam  
Who cool no mortal fever in the stream  
Crying to the woods the rage of their desire:  
And their bright hair went down in jewelled fire  
Where crystal broke and dazzled shudderingly.  
I check my swift pursuit: for see where lie,  
Bruised, being twins in love, by languor sweet,  
Two sleeping girls, clasped at my very feet.  
I seize and run with them, nor part the pair,  
Breaking this covert of frail petals, where  
Roses drink scent of the sun and our light play  
'Mid tumbled flowers shall match the death of day.  
I love that virginal fury—ah, the wild  
Thrill when a maiden body shrinks, defiled,  
Shuddering like arctic light, from lips that sear  
Its nakedness ... the flesh in secret fear!  
Contagiously through my linked pair it flies  
Where innocence in either, struggling, dies,  
Wet with fond tears or some less piteous dew.  
Gay in the conquest of these fears, I grew  
So rash that I must needs the sheaf divide  
Of ruffled kisses heaven itself had tied.  
For as I leaned to stifle in the hair  
Of one my passionate laughter (taking care  
With a stretched finger, that her innocence  
Might stain with her companion's kindling sense  
To touch the younger little one, who lay  
Child-like unblushing) my ungrateful prey  
Slips from me, freed by passion's sudden death,  
Nor heeds the frenzy of my sobbing breath.

Let it pass! others of their hair shall twist  
A rope to drag me to those joys I missed.  
See how the ripe pomegranates bursting red  
To quench the thirst of the mumbling bees have bled;  
So too our blood, kindled by some chance fire,  
Flows for the swarming legions of desire.  
At evening, when the woodland green turns gold  
And ashen grey, 'mid the quenched leaves, behold!  
Red Etna glows, by Venus visited,  
Walking the lava with her snowy tread  
Whene'er the flames in thunderous slumber die.  
I hold the goddess!  
Ah, sure penalty!

But the unthinking soul and body swoon  
At last beneath the heavy hush of noon.  
Forgetful let me lie where summer's drouth

Sifts fine the sand and then with gaping mouth  
Dream planet-struck by the grape's round wine-red star.

Nymphs, I shall see the shade that now you are.

The end