

The Dream of Vetulus

Galileo Galilei (1564 - 1642)

“... Who seeks
To lessen Thee, against his purpose serves
To manifest the more thy might; his evil
Thou usest, and from thence creat'st more good.”
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book VII.

Here I lie, a blind man in an arid time,
Melded to this world by one unyielding past,
remembering.
What fruit bears triumph now to moist these corded lips;
What 'scope brings power of vision to these rheumy orbs?
My God, who gave me peerance power, has scorched my eyes;
My church, for all eternity, has fed disharmony.
And I, once damned by God, now damned by man,
Lie frozen in a dusty land.

Saint Lucy, throw your pennate beams
For pity through this soul-encloying dark;
Here I see no future passage through unforgiving time
Nor present ease to torment; only bitter past
Which stops my eyes with ceaseless tears.
What joy is knowledge caged or thought confined?
Verbigeration drives these questions round
Through endless circles to involve us all;
And always haunting, haunting, Bruno's end,
Their own whipped cur who dared aver
That Heaven's extent should match our God.

And in old age I dream of youth
And smell stale dust within the school
Where I was set to be a priest,
Save for my father's will.
I hear once more songs that he played,
Strident in their novel sound,
Rebellious to ancient form.

To plague humanity with irksome truth,
To set us all adrift about a poxy sun
By plucking from the hearth of God this little earth
Must shake the bravest heart's imaginings.
To pull rebellious music from the moon,
To widen in a moment mankind's gaze
Beyond fixed spheres; to plumb the cloistered depths
Of infinite black emptiness, whose rays,
Enfeebled by such passages, became
First visible to man, was glorious.

In the yard the papal spies pace back and fro,
Blocking contact with my friends,
And ointment for my eyes.
Here, even pigeons have a peck that scars
And I, who once debated Dante's Hell,
Know its wide circles and the Sixth Terrain too well.

In that dread chamber with unspoken Holy threat,
I smelt the acrid fumes seep through my rebel sweat.
If, disobedient to His strong will, I railed,
To that great depth, whose penalty is hope curtailed,
I must descend. By torn pathways steep and fickle,
Through the choking smoke which smothers that foul circle,
I see the burning tombs which no man's tears can quell.
Untenanted, one tomb ablaze in deepest hell
Is gaping to receive one condemned member more:
This excommunicant and heretic at law.
And thus the sickly hue of rampant cowardice
Clay-paints my trembling lips above that great abyss.

One supreme man has now transfixed the earth,
Unturning, rigid in his cramped cosmos:
Roberto Bellarmine. That small saint
Who scrubbed the scullery of his bleak cell
And lived the poverty that others vow,
For whom, compared to God and His bright eye,
The glory of the heavens were not great;
Who shook their very beauty with contempt,
At death was mobbed by crowds who relics craved;
While I die here, back-broken and alone.
That finest flower of learning in our church
Fought science as he fought the Protestants:
With zealous faith and fixed, unbending will;
But by insisting that to say "It moves"
Is heresy, prohibited and damned,
What swamps he breeds for all in Holy Church,
If braver men shall ever prove its truth.

That passionate defender of the faith
Unfazed by doubt, for whom perversity
Held dread more dire than fearful plagues could sow,
Confronted and confounded my attempts
To show that Holy Scripture does not err.
Yet Nature too cannot transgress her Law,
Nor cares one whit for understanding times.
The Bible has no word on planets' ways,
And leaves their orbits to the mind of men.
To use base scripture to interpret facts
Which might, with time, conclude another way,
Debases dignity and hidden faith.
To take as literal that lofty text
Has censored science and our mutual sense.

Emprisoned in this desiccated cell,
Each wince affirming threatened rack or screw,
I wait for news to percolate these walls
Ashake with terror lest they come anew.
Uncompromising terror from lost hope
Pervades the rigid realms of ritual man;
Yet Faith with Science, once entwined again,
Will break the Inquisition's most unholy plan.

Young Milton called, whose sober words
Admixed contempt with pity for my state,
Before returning to some civil strife.
He writes and travels widely as he picks
And talks of freedom in that English realm
To scrawl or discourse to his mind's dictate;
Our choking flattery and fustian
May serve to fire his rebel pen to march.
I hear his voice is if he's in my brain:
Though free, yet full of fury 'gainst his king.
Some spark, perhaps, he'll take to kindle there:
From imminent death, some freer, brighter blaze.
But with my death dies Italy's last hope;
Her voice to slighter subjects must now turn
And silence will reign here on matters deep.

I, knowing knowledge grows with spreading time,
Who added to that store of splendid lore
New moons, and craters none had seen before,
With certain knowledge know I will exchange
My present prison for that narrow one
Which long endures, and which awaits us all.

To pen me down by these garlanded gates,
Authority, in crabby purple dress,
Has wielded its might to wild effect.
Slow smouldering, 'neath gross iniquity,
Hard-yoked to that censorious edict,
In pity bound to full obedience,
I wait my end.
And yet - authority cohesion brings
To lives fragmented by such diverse streaks,
And pulls intemperate thought to conjoined whole.
What wars, invasions, pestilence and disarray
Befall us once authority is flouted
And right of Law suspended by base rule,
As Rome once saw, and England sees again.
Outside obedience struts anarchy,
Dictatorship and desolation's door.
Once cut from Mother Church, what chaos looms,
With fragmentation wild in disarray,
A myriad of Protestant profusion,
Foreboding bloodshed in the tussled earth.

Though undiscovered, Nature's Law and plan
Controls us all; no less must civil law
Dictate our acts, while sweet obedience

Conforms our once beleaguered souls to God.

None born in civil fields is wholly free,
Unless head of some barren anarchy;
All bow to some Law, subject to some king,
Controlled by others, and by force unknown.
Obedience alone lets freedom grow,
And following authority, our lives
May stroll in verdured lanes with quiet peace,
Untroubled by fresh thought or gloomy doubt.

And yet - authority itself can err:
Authority, from Aristotle's pen,
Has bound our universe with petty walls;
Authority, from wrongful ruler's sword,
Will rip as gentle breast as ever breathed;
Authority set Christ upon the cross
And ordered simple nails to weapons yield;
Injustice was defied by Dante's hand,
Till - banished by authority - he died.
And every step of learning must defy
The fundamental truths that went before.

And therein lies the pain of paradox -
For as a child I burst my bonds to stretch
Beyond the confines of my father's house
And leave my mother's warmth and tenderness;
Now I contain the essence of revolt
To leave the strictures of a rigid past
And break for regions new and insecure.
How weak must be this dressed authority,
Which fears the pen may strip it of its garb;
Exposure holds no fear for certainty;
Tradition's robes may mask doubts plenary.

Now so near death, I see their fear;
Yet my fear lies not in idle death, but hell:
To be cut off from God, abhorred, outcast,
Anathema to Holy Mother Church,
Has more of dread than truth suspended.
This bleak dulosis reeks of rotten choice:
To scorch in briefest agony
And face God's slow damnation,
Or change eternal for this earthly hell?
Under what stratagems do I so bake?
Science is not faith, to stand or fall on martyrs' backs;
Against such accusations I must stand alone.

Alone - and ever silent to their sneers;
The sarcasms and insults that they hurl
I swallow with no chance of slaked assault.
I might hope for a pardon if I'd erred;
Because I have committed no offence,
To free me broadcasts their more deadly guilt.
Alone - and yet perpetually called
By my beloved daughter's anguished plea,

That gentle nun, beyond the solemn grave
Yet calling still, with muffled prayer for me.
She wrote of simple things in Arcetri;
Of selling lemons for a holy mass,
Recited in her convent for my soul.
I took bouquets across the Tuscan hills
To bring a bloom of sun to her drab cell.

Conflict, deep love and longing made her ill;
Reciting Penitential Psalms each week,
And full of hope, with laughter in her eyes,
She even took my penance on herself,
Until she died within her cloister walls,
That winter when the roses bloomed in snow.
Now, frost in summer chills each fragrant bloom
As canker, curl, and rot their scent consume.
Beneath a coat in summer heat I lie,
Too weak to shiver, yet too strong to die.
I feel my God lives closely by your hand
And wonder if the world will understand.

(c) John Marr

References

St Lucy (luce, light) of Syracuse, 3rd century martyr, in The Inferno, was Dante's patron saint, saint of enlightenment, helpful to one troubled with his eyes.

Galileo went to Jesuit school, and was set to enter holy orders until removed by his father to help with the family business.

Galileo's father was musician, in Tuscan court.

Poxy sun: Galileo's account of sun spots, which so disturbed the Aristotelians and their view of the perfection of the heavens.

The sixth circle of Dante's Inferno, for the heretics and disobedient.

Milton visited Galileo in Florence in 1638, aged 30, on his way to Rome. He wrote Paradise Lost in 1665 when blind himself. Areopagitica, A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, was written in 1644 and refers to Galileo: "...themselves did nothing but bemoan the servile condition into which learning amongst them was brought There it was that I found and visited the famous Galileo grown old, a prisoner to the Inquisition, for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensors thought. And though I knew that England then was groaning loudest under the prelatical yoke, nevertheless I took it as a pledge of future happiness, that other nations were so persuaded of her liberty." [p31, lines 8-19]