

Peter Heitkamp

Readings

WILLIAM OF ORANGE TO GUIBORC

Spring made everything strange and urgent in a green wind:
The flutter and shuffle of hawks and horses, and the creak of harness
Had the call and falling pull of the future in old things.
The air ached with the fields of France, and danced with forms
Remembered slim and lifted in smooth samite. But more
Was meant by that disquiet, as though before the note
An echo. So I knew you from the first report:
Leaning stem-lovely in a wind of hair in the secret stone.

They said there were no eyes like yours from here to Ind,
Lively and mutable as a moulted hawk's. I saw
That breathless tale of towers all as clearly limned
As though it were a dream seen many times before,
Long held unknown within me as a seed of marvels.
But still it wasn't what I knew or didn't know,
But some part of me that I wasn't yet, some part
Leaning stem-lovely in a wind of hair in the secret stone.

I have known anger and blood-blindness, I have met grim
And fell black-bristled paynim swarming in estor,
But never such watery dread unmanned me as within
Those heathen walls I moved by ruse through fuming courts
And dimmest images of clattering kings to where
The center burst upon me. God! All things then flowed,
All days, in wide and quiet circles from you there,
Leaning stem-lovely in a wind of hair in the secret stone.

Lady, and love, and warden of our common tower,
You know and test me by my laugh and crooked nose.
I am the resonance of what you were and are,
Leaning stem-lovely in a wind of hair in the secret stone.

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A LIFE OF CHARLEMAGNE

After Einhard and Notker

In the days when Charlemagne was sole king
In the western regions of the world,
Kings were as common as railway conductors
And a good deal easier to deal with,
Since they could be hacked about the helm and byrnie
Or otherwise harried and reduced.

Charlemagne's head, according to his biographer,
Was round on top, and his eyes were large.

Peoples and forests filled them,
All beyond telling, umbrageous and endless,
Ringing with the loud quarrels of crows
In the dark pines, and the oaths of kinsmen.
The sleeping shade rustled and snapped
Like a quick cloak or the snick of a scabbard,
Where the map ended in mist.

From the Western Ocean there stretched eastward
An arm of the sea of unknown length,
And around it lived many peoples:
The Danes and Swedes, whom they called the Northmen,
Lived in the north on shore and islands;
To the east the Slavs, the savage Wiltzes;
And farther south the faithless Saxon,
Who cost the king thirty years of warfare.
These he subdued, and others.

Over the rushing passes of the Pyrenees,
Through tenebrous vales to the sound of trumpets,
His host wound down to the Saracen plain
All buzzing with sun and the dust of horses
And the rich cities of Cordoba.

Over the pathless ridges of the Alps,
Where the snow hissed on the ringed byrnies
And glistened in the stout mustaches of the Franks,
He went to establish the lands of his line
And those of his friend the Pope.

Charlemagne was the lord of many kings
And the equal of emirs: Harun-al-Rachid
Was said to have sent him his only elephant,
As well as the keys to the Holy Sepulchre,
As a gesture of courtesy.

Through all these things the king maintained
Dignity and a cheerful countenance.
His mother he kept in honor in his household
Until her death at a very great age,
And never a cross word.

He caused to be gathered and written down
The old tales of the kings of his people.
He gave names to the twelve winds,
And to the months also suitable names—
The month of joy, the wood month—
All these in his own language.

Other tongues he learned and spoke—
Latin as easily as his own—
And took pains to surround himself
With men well worth the speaking to,
Like Alcuin, come from England.

Together they worked the common good
(And even ours) by making books.
All these wise men and their disciples
Held fortresses of faith and learning
As bishops or abbots, but around the house
They referred to the kind fondly as David,
And Alcuin he called Bezaleel.

At his death he left a table of gold
On which the universe was inscribed
In three concentric circles.
He may or may not have agreed with Alcuin
The mild and sage, who once remarked
(A propos of scholarship,)
"Alas, we are dwarfs at the end of time,
Dwarfs at the end of time."

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Peter Heitkamp teaches French at Green Mountain College in Vermont and has also taught at the University of Vermont and at Norwich University. In 1975 he participated in the summer seminar conducted by Stephen G. Nichols, devoted to "The Spirit of Truth: Interaction of Myth and Culture in Medieval Narrative Literature" (see Olifant, 2 [February 1975] 3, pp. 199-204). The poems printed here first appeared in Vermont Poetry Chapbooks (The Stinehour Press, 1976), which also contains "William in the Monastery," by Mr. Heitkamp. We are indebted to the Vermont Council on the Arts for allowing us to reproduce these works in Olifant.

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