

Stéphane Mallarmé

The Afternoon of a Faun

Translators' note:

Stéphane Mallarmé wrote the first version of this poem, *Monologue d'un Faune*, in 1865. He had hoped that it would be performed at the Comédie Française, but it was refused. A second version, *Improvisation d'un Faune*, was rejected by the Troisième Parnasse Contemporain in 1875. Finally, in 1876, a third version, *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*, was published in a deluxe edition with illustrations by Edouard Manet. The definitive text of this final version was published in 1877.

The poem, which Mallarmé called an “églogue,” retains some of the theatrical intention of its first version. There is no simple narrative line, as there is in Mallarmé’s Ovidian source (where Pan pursues the nymph Syrinx, who is metamorphosed into the reeds from which he, sighing for his lost love, produces beautiful music). Rather, the Faun’s monologue or interior conversation, which is punctuated with dramatic silences (between and within the stanzas), “cued” with capitalized instructions, and interwoven with italicized addresses to the audience, moves back and forth between memories and fantasies, dream and reality, story and flute song, disenchantment and intoxication. The poem is made of complexly articulated and enjambed alexandrine rhymed couplets, which are dense with alliteration and assonance. The musicality for which the poem is so justly famous has been successfully “translated” only once — into music, by Debussy. Our hope in this translation has been to approximate in English the poem’s rhyme and meter and to stress its dream-like logic, its “armature intellectuelle.”

These nymphs I would make last.

So rare

Their rose lightness arches in the air,
Torpid with tufted sleep.

I loved: a dream?

My doubt, thick with ancient night, it seems
Drawn up in subtle branches, ah, that leave
The true trees, proof that I alone have heaved
For triumph in the roses' ideal folds.
Look, perhaps...

are the women which you told
Ones your mythic wishing-sense has schemed?
Faun, the illusion, when the fountains teemed,
Fled her cold, blue eyes — she untouched.
But the second, full of sighs, say you how much
Like a hot day's breath she thrilled your fleece?
If not? Through this still, slack-flesh peace
That would, if heated, choke the fresh morning,
No stream goes but that my flute is pouring,
Over assent-sprayed groves; the solo breeze
— Agile from my double pipe — it is eased:
To shower down the sound in arid rain
And then, on the unrippled world-plane,
Be breath — visible, serene, man-sent —
Of inspiration, lodged in firmament.

O you Sicilian marshes with your calm edges
That my vanity, to the sun's envy, ravages,
Quiet under these flower flashes, let me RENDER:
"That I cut here the hollow reeds I master,
While on golden veils the greens nearby
Their traces, to the fountains, inscribed,
Like wavelets, now, of still animal white;
And that in slow prelude to birth of pipes
These arching swans, no! naiads, up turned
Or plunged..."

Inert, all in fulvous hour burned
But of the art of their escape, nothing wrote.
Too much hymen he wished, who sought their note.
Next I will awake to that first appetite,
Upright, alone, under antique waves of light,
Lillies! and you one who spell my artlessness.

More than the lip's secret, sweet nothingness
 — That kiss, soft, assures of falsities —
 My breast, virgin of proof, attests for me
 Strange teeth of some mouth, majestic;
 But cease! Choose such sounds for secrets
 As the spacious twins you play, azure-bent,
 — Your own cheek's uneasiness indent;
 Dream, in long solo, how we might amuse
 The beautiful environing to err, confuse
 Herself and our song, so readily believed;
 And make, as far up as love can key,
 A distillate of accustomed schemes
 Of back, pure flank, sealed eyes' after-dream,
 A single, sheer and so sonorous line.

Strive, then, escapist instrument, malign
 Syrinx, to bloom again, where you wait!
 I, proud of my rumor, still confabulate
 Of goddesses; and by my words of worship
 Undress their shadows of imagined vests:
 As when I've sucked the vines of clearness,
 To shun regret with sham unloneliness,
 And, laughing, lifted up the empty grapes,
 Blown their luminous skins; thirsting, gaped
 In longing, down to the penetrable dusk.

O nymphs, we diverse MEMORIES instruct.
 "My eyes, piercing the reeds, downed each neck,
 Immortal, which plunged, fires in the lake,
 With a cry up of rage to the forest sky;
 And the brilliant bath of their hair lies
 Under the shimmer and thrill, o gems!

I run; when at my feet they are fastened
 (Being two have tasted bruising langor)
 These sleepers, asleep in arms of danger;
 These I seize and steal, still enlaced,
 To this thicket, by fickle shade unloved,
 Of roses, all sucked of scent by sun,
 Where trysts must fade, like day, undone."

I adore you, virgins' ire, you fierce goad
 Slipping down some sacred, naked load,
 To flee my lip aflame, like a full lash
 Of lightening, this secret dread of flesh;
 From the cruel one's feet to the timid's heart,
 In this time, their innocences depart,
 With wild tears and some less saddened mists.
 "My crime is that gaily I divided this
 Ruffled complex — conquered then the traitoress
 Fears — of kisses that gods kept well enmeshed;
 For scarcely could I hide my ardent smile
 In the happy folds of my one (I whiled
 With my finger this unblushing nymph, nai-
 Eve, until her plume's openness had dyed
 the flutter of her sister with gleaming eyes:),
 Out of my arms, untwined by vague demise,
 This thankless prey went free, without pity
 for the sob that, still, intoxicates me."

Ah, so, toward happiness I will be borne
 By others' hair-leashes hooking in my horns:
 Know! My passion, that purple and just mature
 Each fruit bomb bursts and is a full bee-lure;
 And our blood, heated by the one it warms,
 Flows for all of desire's eternal swarm.
 Any time this wood is hued like gold or coal,
 A feast erupts in the stark tree-folds:
 Etna! Here it is that your Venus sets
 On lava-flesh her artless, quick footsteps;
 When the flame dies in sad sleep's roll
 I hold the queen!

Penalty sure...

No, but soul
 Of words void and with body overfraught
 Sinks at last to noon's so proud naught:
 No more; come sleep, of blasphemy oblivious,
 On these dry sands will I love, and lie thus
 To give my mouth the wine's strong star-fame.

Both, farewell! I wait the shade that you became.

Translated by Hope H. Glidden
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