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POEM

## The Grilling

Tony Harrison

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I'd just walked up and down Vesuvio  
as Goethe did two centuries ago.  
At the bottom with a bottle of white wine  
I heard the great poet talking to Tischbein:

*Vesuvio puffing smoke out not far off  
flavours this fine vino that we quaff.  
That force that belches forth its molten mass  
has poured this tinkling gold in my raised glass.  
Devastation, Tischbein, ancient waste  
gives this Vesuvial vintage its fine taste.  
While we're drinking let's remember hope's  
what goes with hoe in hand to smoking slopes,  
ploughs blistering cinders into ashy fields  
knowing the fine vines cooled lava yields.  
Before the hoers came and earth showed green  
singed Satyrs would be first back on the scene,  
as before spectators' tears have time to dry  
the Satyrs enter with their cock-tips high.  
After the mask, with always opened eyes  
seeing the worst, the phallus of gross size.  
When lust for life is bankrupt, head and heart  
get bridging loans from that exuberant part.  
I think of the Satyrs dancing on the coals  
and celebrating life with blistered soles,  
or, if seen as half-horse, hooves, not feet,  
gelatinous from jiggling on that heat,  
and they dance more featly, fleeter, faster  
because their dancefloor's on the site of a disaster.  
Does their acrobatic goat/horse/man gavotte  
come from the ground they jig on being hot?  
All I'm suggesting is we might enquire  
if the dancing is dependent on the fire.*

Tragedies, extinctions and the night  
trodden by dancing into draughts of light.  
The world's unjust to Satyrs. They enact  
a valetudinous Walpurgisnacht,  
(I'm pretending not to notice, but I see  
Tischbein, all this while, 's been sketching me!)  
Goethe's in full flow. I see him glug  
two great draughts of wine straight from the jug.  
I knew he liked to drink. His favourite wine  
came from Würzburg's vineyards on the Main.  
I felt like saying it's OK for you –  
your cut-off point is 1832!  
Between then and my own day  
there've been far worst disasters than Pompeii ...

Once he's glugged his wine I hear him say:

Martial, that poet of Priapus, remembers  
love's green haunts beneath the glowing embers,  
a dappling of grape pattern where sun shone  
on slopes ash scoria now slither on.  
It's this ash-strewn bleak volcano, this  
that Marcus Valerius Martialis  
makes so vine-clad and beloved of Bacchus,  
those oozing wine vats, madidos lacus,  
and this, black as it looks today, the Satyrs  
dedicated to Dionysian matters.  
I've never been particularly partial  
to the rather puerile epigrams of Martial,  
but his poem, particularly the last line  
rather tolls the knell of the divine.  
More wine! More figs! And while I pour  
read me 'Epigrams' IV.xliv.  
Thank God for real figs not those charred  
Pompeian relics carbonised and hard.  
Tischbein looks it up, and line by line  
reads it for Goethe's benefit. And mine:

*Hic est pampineis viridis modo Vesuvius umbris  
presserat hic madidos nobilis uva lacus  
haec iuga, quam Nysae colles plus Bacchus amavit;  
hoc nuper Satyri monte dedere choros;  
haec Veneris sedes, Lacedaemone gratior illi;  
hic locus Herculeo numine clarus erat.  
cuncta iacent flammis et tristi mersa favilla  
nec superi vollent hoc licuisse sibi.*

They improvised translations and sipped wine.  
Here's Thomas May's then Addison's then mine:

Vesuvius, shaded once with greenest vines  
Where pressed grapes did yield the noblest wines;  
Which hill far more than Nysa Bacchus lov'd,  
Where satyrs once in mirthful dances mov'd,  
Where Venus dwelt, and better lov'd the place  
Than Sparta where Alcides temple was,  
Is now burnt downe, rak'd up in ashes sad.  
The gods are grill'd that such great power they had.  
(Thomas May 1595-1650)

(grill as in to grieve to hurt, give pain,

grill as in 'The grones of sir Gawayne  
does my heart grille' But grill as well has heat  
and whatever gods there were have blistered feet.)

Vesuvius cover'd with the fruitful vine,  
Here flourish'd once, and ran with floods of wine:  
Here Bacchus oft to the cool shades retired,  
And his own native Nysa less admired:  
Oft to the mountain's airy tops advanced,  
The frisking Satyrs on the summits danced:  
Alcides here, here Venus, graced the shore,  
Nor loved her favourite Lacedaemon more.  
Now piles of ashes, spreading all around  
In undistinguish'd heaps, deform the ground:  
The gods themselves the ruin'd seats bemoan,  
And blame the mischiefs that themselves have done.  
(Joseph Addison 1672-1719)

*Vesuvius, green yesterday with shady vine,  
where the crushed grape gushed vast vats of wine,  
ridges, Bacchus loved and put before  
his birthplace Nysa, Venus favoured more  
than Lacedaemon, and where Saytrs stomped  
till now, and Herculaneum, all swamped,  
engulfed by cinders in a flood of fire:*

*power like this not even gods desire.*

(Tony Harrison (1937- )

Goethe dashed his own off, and his wine  
in which he tasted AD 79,

then spoke to my portraitist Tischbein:

The gods are grilled to have such dreadful powers.  
But what gods' hands let go of ends in ours.  
What Martial's gods say no to, Man says yes;  
his cold palm weighs the orb of Nothingness.  
Gods refuse the powers and late Man weighs  
like a regent the recentest of days.

Drink!

There is no danger of the thing erupting?

Excuse me, *meine Herren*, excuse my interrupting ...  
I've just been listening to your conversation  
about wine tasting of old devastation,  
Vesuvio, vine-enricher and crop killer  
spouting fatal/fertile hot *favilla*.  
In Santorini vines from cliffs of clinker  
give, even to the life-affirming drinker,  
an old extinction in its strange bouquet  
the Knossos catastrophe haunts that wine today.  
Pompeian figs turned carbon in their bowl  
can only, if you'd crunch them, taste of coal  
figs from the cinders now can still taste sweet  
but the wine still has the tang of rubbled Crete.  
How does the *vino* here compare to wine  
you're said to have drunk so much of from the Main.  
Not under the volcano the vines there  
but in '45 our fire rained from the air.  
Not volcanic wine but since we bombed it flat  
disaster goes with grapes into the vat.  
If you drank those Main wines now you'd taste  
Würzburg and its vintages laid waste,  
Würzburg where you bought 'goat's scrota' from  
was levelled by the British Fire Bomb  
bodies in the poses of Pompeii,  
9000 filled the rubbled streets next day.

(Wine in glass *Bocksbeuteln* – 'goat's scrota' –  
from Würzburg was the *Liebestrank* of Goethe.)  
and all the glass goat's scrota popped  
and fused together when the bombs were dropped.  
From that molten mass of glass like boiling glue  
Riesling steam clouds rose into the blue.  
Does that *Stein Wein* you guzzled taste the same  
after the vineyards passed through fire-storm flame?  
Würzburg vintners always quote the line  
your *gewohnter Liebestrank Frankischer Wein*

your, at least reputed, yearly quota  
of *sehr gut* gluggable 'goat's scrota'  
was 900 litres – well, I suppose  
colleagues in Weimar quaffed some of those.

*Entschuldigung*, Herr Goethe, Herr Tischbein,  
I didn't want to spoil lunch with my story,  
let me at least replenish your white wine:

*Cameriere, Vesuvio bianco per le signori!*

*Signori? Quali? Dove? You OK?*  
*Sit there, talk to self all bloody day.*

But Tischbein had torn his sketch out of his book  
me, half finished with a haunted look.  
Behind me smudged with spilled Vesuvial wine  
a cloud from the crater shaped like Pliny's pine.  
I picked it up but in one blinding flash  
it erupted into flame and turned to ash.  
On one frail flake the outline of an eye  
went floating on the heat into the sky.

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