

The True Vine

Virescit vulnere virtus

Learning from childhood of the cultivation of vines, I follow each part of this metaphor:
No vine can flower on old timber, new shoots only grow after pruning,
But then you must cut them, allow the sky into the branches,
Thin out the clusters themselves, or rot takes them late in the season.
My grandfather's villa was heavy with the scents of olive and vine –
Sharp oil and olive-wood smoke;
And sour heavy air from the cellars, grape must and ullage of wine.
Beyond the cypress gardens, were the stone grounds of parched earth and olive trees,
Salt on the evening wind, vines on the landward slopes, below the dust-shimmering hills.
There it was always late in the day, heat in the air pressing down,
Sorrow and thunder, the heat haze hiding the mountains,
Last migraine days of late summer,
With the new wine unquiet in its barrels,
Working under the slumbering villa.

Many years later, and far in the north, I mended a ruinous vine-house:
The leaves of the black Hamburg vine sharp against white nights of summer.
There my wine-merchant cousin taught me over again to manage the vine-shoots,
How the stem lives for ever, comes back from the darkness each year,
While the shoots are ephemeral,
And must be pruned hard after Easter, if they are to flower in the light,
And pruned at midsummer again, with the light on the northern horizon,
If the grapes are to fruit with the darkening rains in September.
*But here you must never make wine,
You lie far too far to the north,
Where the soil tastes of apples and snow,
And you and the vine are in exile.*

I have studied the vine-emblem long: *virescit vulnere virtus*
Sorry baroque ingenuity, a church and a country divided:
The Queen of England is childless, the Queen of Heaven's sweet likeness,
Was gashed by the pikemen in the terrible raid upon Cadiz;
All things are broken, the pruned vine turned token of treasons,
The Queen and the Duke on the scaffold, only the poet-saint in hiding
Sang how we are lopped back on earth that we may flourish for ever,
How those whose end is worldly failure grow to vines and rose-trees in heaven:
Smoke of incense rising in clear air, the bud of the rose set free.

I moved for years in this maze of emblems from a broken time,
Restless, cut-back and fruitless, in the remote silent house;
Such bleak years have their purpose, known only when they are over
And grow at the last to paradox of unsought, God-given harvest.

Look about now:

May passes softly, hawthorn flowers go to brown dust,
Elderflowers constellate, roses blow blood-red on the wall.
The willow-dust has passed over, the soft leaves drift in the waters,
Along the green reaches of river, briar rose and bramble flower open,
Spread their enamel work over the cut-work of branches.

All things move invisibly to their vintage,
In the cathedrals silent after Trinity,
In the sullen August-dust gardens.
Grapes ripen, work goes on, days move under the heavens,
Through this late and lasting, this unlooked for summer,
In life as in metaphor, this continuance and holding in love.
In all my small works I move forward,
Under my late-pruned vine-arbour in the town garden,
Hoping for fruit at the vintage;
And I will do so (by the mercy of God)
Through all my quiet harvests,
Through all my remaining Septembers.

I set down these words remembering my great-grandmother,
Emilia Wadsworth from Lancashire, wine shipper's wife at Cadiz,
Remembering also,
(since the Sacrament was administered at Culloden in oatmeal and whisky)
the repose of the soul of my father, Robert Davidson of Comrie, distiller.