

The Rhine

for Isaak von Sinclair

I sat in the dark ivy, at the forest's
Gate, just as the golden noon,
To visit the spring,
Came down the stairs of the Alps
Which are to me the stronghold
The gods built for themselves
After an old opinion, but from where
In secret many a resolution
Reaches men; from there
I learned without expecting it
Of a destiny when my soul
Conversing on this and that
In the warm shade
Had wandered towards Italy
And far away towards the coasts of Morea.

But now in the mountains
Under the silver summits at a depth
Under cheerful greenery
Where the woods with a shudder
And the peering heads of the peaks
Look down at him, all day, it was there
In the coldest pit
I heard him yammering to be released,
The youth, he was heard as he raged
And railed against Earth his mother
And against the Thunderer who fathered him
By mother and father with pity but
Humanity fled from the place
For it was terrible how he
Lightless in chains
Writhed and raved, that hero.

It was the voice of the noblest of rivers
The freeborn Rhine
And high at the outset he had other hopes
When he parted from his brothers Ticino and Rhône
And wanted to wander and his royal soul

Drove him impatiently to head for Asia.
But it makes no sense
To wish one's own wishes in the face of fate
But the blindest in this
Are the sons of gods. For men know
Their homes and to beasts it is given
To know where to build, but they
Start out
With souls that want direction.

Pure origins are a riddle. Even
The poem may hardly disclose them. For what
You began as you will remain
However necessity
And discipline work, and most
Is done by birth
And the ray of light
That greets us newborn.
But where else is there one
More made by a happy nativity
For lifelong freedom and only
To gratify the heart
Than the Rhine
Who was born of the blessed heights
And the holy womb of our earth?

His voice therefore is exultant.
He never loved mewling
Like other infants in swaddling bands.
When the crooked banks
First crept alongside
And thirstily twining around him
To lead him their way before he knew it
And guard him perhaps
In their own jaws, he laughed
And ripped these snakes asunder
And ran with the spoils and if swiftly
He were not mastered
And made to grow, he must like lightning
Have split the earth, and the woods flee after him
As though enchanted and the hills subsiding.

But a god likes to save his sons
Their fugitive lives, and smiles
When headlong but balked
By the Alps his rivers bridle
As this one does in the depths.
For purity comes
Out of such a smithy
And it is beautiful then
Leaving the mountains
How he contents himself
Dawdling through Germany and quietening his longing
With works and he ploughs the land
Our father Rhine and nourishes children
In towns he founded.

But he never forgets.
For house and home
And law will perish and the days
Of man become monstrous before
One like the Rhine forgets his beginnings
And the pure voice of his youth.
Who were the first
To spoil the ties of love
And make them fetters?
So overweening that they mocked
Their own justice and surely
The fire of Heaven too and then
Despising human paths
Elected overboldness
And strove to equal the gods.

But the gods have enough
In their own immortality and need
If anything
Heroes and men
And other mortal creatures. For since
The supremely blessed feel nothing themselves
Doubtless another must
If it is permissible to say such a thing
Feel in their name, in sympathy and that
Someone they need; but their judgement is
That he shall topple his house

And mix his dearest and his enemies in one scolding
And bury the old and the new generations under the rubble
Whoever seeks to be like them
And will not suffer the difference, the fool.

Better for a man to have found
A measured fate
On a safe shore where the memory
Of wanderings still
And suffering sweetly surfaces
To look here and there without rancour
And see the limits
Set him at birth
By God to live within.
He has peace, he is blessed, he is undemanding
For everything he desired,
Heaven's good, of itself
Comes over him smiling, unforced,
Now that he rests from his boldness.

I am thinking of demigods.
And should I not know them for whom
My heart has often quickened with love and longing?
But one whose soul like yours, Rousseau,
Endured and became invincible
To whom sure sense was given
The gift of hearing and speech
To speak like the god of wine
From such abundance
Holy, foolish and according to no law
Which is the language of the purest in heart
And the good understand it but it smites
The heedless, the sacrilegious hirelings
Rightly with blindness, what
Shall I call such a stranger?

The sons of the earth are, like the mother,
All-loving, for which they receive
Everything effortlessly and are blessed.
It startles a man
With fear
When he thinks of the heaven

His loving arms have piled
On his shoulders
And the burden of joy.
Then often what seems to him best
Is Biel, the lake, the breezy greenery,
In woodland shade
Where the light does not burn
And poor in tunes and cares
To learn like a beginner from the nightingales.

And to rise from the sacrament of sleep
How good that is, waking
From the cool of the woods, at evening then
To approach the milder light
When he who built the mountains
And drew the rivers their paths
Has filled the sails of our busy lives
So poor in breath
And steered us, smiling, with his breezes
When he too rests and towards
His pupil now the maker
Finding more good than bad
Towards this present earth
The day inclines. –

Then men and gods will have their bridal feast
Everything that lives will celebrate
And fate for a while
Is entirely even-handed.
And the fugitives look for shelter
And the brave a sweet sleep
But the lovers are
What they were, they are
At home where flowers delight in
Harmless fire and the foreboding trees
Are breathed about by the spirit, but people at odds
Have turned in their tracks and are hurrying
To take hands now before
The friendly light
Goes down and the night comes.

And some this hurries by
But others
Retain it longer.
The eternal gods
Are full of life for ever; but unto death
A man also
Can retain the best in mind
And crown his life with it.
To everyone his measure.
Unhappiness is hard
To bear, but happiness harder.
One wise man managed
From midday to midnight
And until the morning shone
To keep his wits at the banquet.

Sinclair, on a burning path among pines
Or in the darkness of an oakwood clad
In steel or among the clouds if God
Appears you will know him since you know
In your strength his and his goodness and he never smiles
The smile of power but you discover it
In daylight when
Feverish and chained it seems
The quick of life or else
At night when everything mixes
Without order and the ancient
Chaos returns.