

Max Wickert

POEMS IN PROGRESS



Stephan Wickert, *Eternal Saga* (1951), colored pencil  
Collection of Max Wickert

*NEAR WALSINGHAM*

False loves are a dime a dozen—  
They're too countless for my need.  
How should I my true love know?  
Should it die, or should it breed?

Yes, it's true that many an object  
Duplicates the ghost of self,  
But it's also true that many  
Subjects wither on the shelf.

Is the shelf the ground of being  
Or the ghost the scourge of time?  
Is true love a way of seeing  
A conclusion or a rhyme?

Are these questions none can answer  
Or the questions none should ask?  
What appears when we pursue them?  
An old rut or a new task?

There's a buzzing all around me  
All the time, a swarm of choices,  
And I never know for certain  
Which are echoes, which are voices.

Yet when love arrives, I always  
Tell myself: "It's not too late.  
Death means things will come together.  
Life means things will bifurcate."

*PARADISO XXXIV*

At each burst of divine light  
The devil makes himself more comfortable  
In the dark night of the soul.

*SOPHRONIUS AND OLINDA*

In vain she speaks. Her lover will nowise  
Unspeak his works or contemplate retreat.  
O mighty spectacle! grand enterprise!  
See true love and magnanimous virtue meet  
In contest, making death the victor's prize,  
And life the loathed issue of defeat.  
But now, the more each vies to take the blame,  
The more the king is fired with rage and shame.

He thinks they mock his state and sovereignty  
And into disrespect his honor call.  
"Be both believed!" he cries. "As he, so she.  
The palm of victory as it may let fall."

*THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERES*

Heaven's a place of harmony and proof  
against all dissonance. What's to explain?  
There none cries "Ouch!" or "Gotcha now!" or "Oof!"  
There's no offense at all, and there's no pain.  
When there's an issue, Heaven stays aloof.  
What's the big deal? All conflicts are inane.  
They play their tunes, like fiddlers on the roof  
strumming their chords again, and yet again,

with a few off-key notes (if you can tell).  
"And what does it amount to?" Heaven inquires.  
"Not much. Haven't you heard it all before?  
They're trying to be different, no more.  
So stay and chant the hymns in Heaven's choirs;  
and if you find they bore you, go to Hell."

*THE WAKE*

Forget, when all my words are spent,  
whatever sweetness I have wasted.  
Strip me, when my life is bent  
to break, of all I took from you  
but never tasted.

Leave my naked body bare  
when the cold knocks at my ears.  
As the final open door  
shuts, let me shed nothing  
but my own fears.

Often have the curtains closed  
on my weak, bewildered eyes.  
Much have I been dazzled, most  
by your prodigal body's  
unmerited prize.

You have always tendered me  
more than I needed.  
Take back the excess when I die,  
the poem that you alone have made,  
and I never heeded.

**NOT AS DESPERATE BUT MORE PROFOUND**

*--for Katka*

I can't make out the meaning but recognize the tone.  
Somehow that babbling is all about us.  
We don't so much hear it, we feel it in the bone.  
Weird pleasure in guessing what we are missing...

Time was when we were sure we had no time.  
Spontaneous joy, ephemeral grief — obscure joke we gaily  
admitted we couldn't explain to our satisfaction.  
Is it the world then we're in love with? Yes, I'm

yours, you're mine, and the rest are part of the action.  
The ice on the fountain grows thinner daily.  
What harm could there be in remembering the kissing?

To be apart is not to be alone.  
Light in the mountains keeps shining without us,  
not altogether imaginable, but known.

**VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY BLAKE**

*--for John Hollander*

Never try to cram your yearning  
down another person's gullet.  
Though your inmost heart be burning,  
let it burn and bite the bullet.

Words are the bitterest gall to a lover.  
Think how it feels, when the world's out of joint:  
"Say it," you hear, and you speak and discover  
nothing you speak of is quite to the point.

Exercise. Use your eyes. Move your hands. Bite your tongue.  
Do it now. Never try eloquence. Just be bold.  
Love all who yield to you. Don't ask why. You're still young.  
Do it now. You will find words enough once you're old.

You'll never feel loved if you think you must babble  
the secret you seek to each Tom, Dick and Harry:  
The secret can never be told, for the rabble  
will think all you need is to screw or to marry.

Secret pain floats above every word men can say.  
Secret joy flies away, yet it stings deep within.  
Pain must come. Joy will fly. Let the joy sting today.  
Heads will blab. Tails will play. Heads you lose. Tails you win.

To exist or else not to exist is the test,  
not to carve your confession in pools of the sea.  
Hear the voice of the Bard and don't speak of the rest.  
It will come, it will go, it will die. Let it be.

And when you find your love indeed,  
take all you can and have your fling.  
Be still, don't ask, and never plead.  
And if love asks, don't say a thing.

*ODE TO JOY*

Before the Big Bang happened (hey!)  
There must have been a Father.  
He saw the coming day.  
And must have said "Why bother?"  
And blown himself away?

*PRECIOUS BANE*

When night darkens the streets, then wander forth,  
seeking their hasty vows to rectify  
by some quick moment's marriage, creatures of swarth  
complexion and black humor. By and by,  
in some dark nook, one of them, while the sky  
lowers, as though by preconcerted plan,  
snaps at you, teeth a-glint: "Shell out or die!"  
and pockets your innocence. Think, if you can,

that man is you, yourself more truly than  
the candid equanimity you drape  
over those easy treasures that began  
your fine career of self unto self's rape  
abandoned. And you'll see it's all arranged,  
if you are he—but oh! how fallen, how changed!

*VARIATIONS ON A THEME FROM TASSO*

*Oh how I wish that I could end my time  
as neatly as I finish off a rhyme.*

The first step is the easiest, but I see  
how things get complicated at step two.  
Once I've pressed on, undaunted, to step three,  
I might as well stop counting steps, and do.  
I board my boat, but soon there beckons me  
a siren song: "What is it you pursue?  
Your heart rests on the goal of your endeavor;  
but will you live to see it? I fear, never."

Lashed to the mast, I plug my ears and sail  
onward upon my westward course, and bless  
the stars that seem to whisper: "You can't fail.  
This voyage is the way to happiness."  
But then, just after sunset, in the pale  
cold light of dusk, cock-sure of my success,  
I hear a voice that's singing: "Not so hot!  
Stop now. Turn back. There's something you forgot."

I find a shore and step by step ascend  
the accursed hill and there subdue the beast.  
Although the teeth and crooked talons rend  
my skin, I find my courage much increased.  
But leaving from that island, in the end,  
a wind of sadness rises from the east,  
enticing me to pause little while  
in a cave, a charmed wood, an enchanted isle.

There is a woman who awaits me here  
whom I must love to mad excess, but whom  
I'll leave to seek a love more sane and dear,  
despite her wrath and tears. So I resume  
my journey, eastward now, but once more hear  
the same old voice. Is it the voice of doom?  
"Stop now and look no further. Here there's love.  
Your love is not the one you're dreaming of."

And soon my quest on water or on land  
grows wearisome and I feel tired and old.  
Still there are things I think I understand,  
hid in the future, long ago foretold,  
till someone, as I push off from the strand,  
cries, snatching back the tiller from my hold:  
“Why place your faith in what you think you know?  
Illusion keeps you going. Just say no.”

But this is something that I cannot say.  
Though I may wade through offal, choke on dust,  
sniff the disgusting odors of decay,  
or taste foul meat, taste it because I must,  
there’s nothing in the world can bar my way,  
unless it be the call of primal lust:  
“Come here. Stop looking elsewhere. Close your eyes.  
This is the only way to paradise.”

And then the monsters launch their last attack.  
They rush at me, and I, all passion spent,  
slaughter them all or stop them in their track.  
feeling a great sense of accomplishment.  
I leave in triumph, but as I look back  
hear a sad song across the waters sent:  
“Oh stay! This haze of glory will not last.  
Your future fades into your fading past.”

So be it. Still, to live in hopes and fears  
and mile by mile to stay the course is best,  
to bear it out until the dark shore nears  
of the far country where I end my quest.  
Will the old song be ringing in my ears  
when I step on land, to find I’ve come to rest  
back home? That last step is the hardest. Why?  
Because, once I have taken it, I’ll die.

*For once my end seems like a perfect rhyme:  
The time that ends is not the end of time.*