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The Crownless A. Mary F. Robinson

In the nineteenth-century, Leamington Spa in Warwickshire was a strange echo of an ancient Roman way of life; its great characteristic being that it sat upon medicinal springs of waters. The Romans had enjoyed and cared for their benefits but, when they left, their way of life remained as occult as its wells; the Anglo-Saxons condemned or forgot the gifts of nature. In the eighteenth century, its benefits were rediscovered; as in the past, the potential for growth lay again in the earth beneath their feet, in the warm waters flowing underneath. The sleepy town grasped reluctantly the opportunity and numerous spas began to proliferate. The Royal Pump Rooms, built in 1811, brought in fashionable, well-off tourists looking for rest and recuperation. Queen Victoria, who cared greatly for a place she had visited when she was still a young princess, granted the town the title of 'Royal'. Industry and commerce required architects, painters, dreamers.

She had been trying to recollect something eventful or interesting that might have happened to her in her life. But all in vain, she confessed to the German novelist Eufemia von Adlersfeld-Ballestrem in an early 1879 letter, hers was the simplest of biographies. And at 22, she recited it, in case Ballestrem could make some use of it in any German journal she may write for, so that her little book *A Handful of Honeysuckles*, only one year old, may travel well abroad. 'I was born on the 27th of February 1857 at Milverton Crescent near Leamington in Warwickshire, my father being Diocesan Architect for the district: rather more than a year afterwards my Mother gave me a little sister' (Mabel, prose writer, only sister, dearest friend). The family circle was never any larger.

Children make poignant poets. When she would write of her childhood in Warwickshire, she would recall the countryside, full of animation, colour, and form. How carefully she and Mabel would kilt their skirts and go down the garden of the Hesperides to pluck ox-lips, pinks and woodbines, laying them later at their bed. With the intensity of which she was capable, she soon pronounced herself an old poet. That she was so little she could not write her verses down did not worry her much or at all. The imaginative child was blessed with imagination, and though she did not know, her littleness was a triumph that liberated her from the discipline of the pen. Her mother, alert to her fancies, jotted the verses down and kept them for many years. The only thing at all noticeable in those early nursery rhymes was that she was very obstinate in describing things and sensations ‘exactly as I felt and saw them, however absurd or false these descriptions appeared to grown-up people.’ Her letter to Ballestrem confirms what one might have already unwittingly divined: she had been a Preraphaelite child.

Her supple mind early turned to books, reading easily at five. Her education as a gifted child is familiar because recurrent in the case of female writers. Her father was a lover of old books; allowed her the use of his library. He taught her old literature, caring to explain the difficulties of old spelling. Thus prepared, her intellectual hunger drew her freely into other older literatures of many periods; Old Chronicles, Elizabethan Dramatists completed the wondrous exuberance of Grimm’s and Hans Andersen’s fairy tales - aesthetic readings for a girl allowed to indulge in her love of reading. To her vividly coloured imagination, textuality was a revelation; her mind expanding as she enlarged the breath of her interests. It is natural to suppose a dreamy child easily impressionable by beauty. What else did she love? ‘After books the things I cared for most were wild-flowers and German music.’ ‘I love Beethoven

all through, early works and late!’ We know today of her love of Pergolesi, of Berlioz. Music would always haunt her dreams yet awake from her deep bedtimes, she systematically would feel that that vividness suffered in the writing down, such was the power of her dreams that demystified the conscious physicality of the writing: ‘Octaves from Death’s Gamut’, ‘In the Organ Loft’, indeed ‘A Child-Musician’. Music would thus always be a constant, a curiosity, a yearning, the fabric of her thinking and of her poetry, the intense pleasure, beyond reason – she would write – one gets from combinations of harmony on music. ‘Music and poetry have their fortune in the modern world’, says Walter Pater in *Studies of the History of the Renaissance*. Robinson felt a pang of recognition reading that very line in the ‘Winckelmann’ essay; yes, she would say to herself, in my youthful poems too. Louder, louder, louder sing.

By 1870, the young poet – she is thirteen – is learning Latin, and writing a History of Athens. One of her poems, ‘Sunset at Kenilworth’, has appeared in January in the local newspaper *Leamington Courier*. Firmly she believes in the emotional capabilities of her dolls, the result of which is a bad brain-fever that takes her time to recover. It is her first break down. [In 1888, she would strip her suffering in ‘In Affliction’: ‘I am underneath. They do not dream how deep below the eddying flood is whirled’.] Yet at thirteen the sought remedy is schooling in Brussels with her sister Mabel. Three years later she is back in England. By now her parents had left Warwickshire. The family will continue to spend the holidays there, but they are now living in bohemian London, in Gower Street. She becomes a student of University College London, close by, and where, after a year or so, she gives up General Studies to attach herself to Literature. About this time she joins a Greek Class in the college, and for five years - from 1874 to 1879 - she finds her chief interest in the study of

Greek Literature. She cherishes reading Plato in Greek; she is the only woman in class, and her professor treats her like a boy. More garlands: the Women's Debating Society at University College London selects her to be on the Committee. She feels 'dreadfully out of place', 'a frivolous poet, among all the learned ladies in checked Ulsters.' We today are unperplexed, for we understand she was chosen for her Hellenic humanism. The poet is frivolous because confident: she is the fashionable woman of genius.

Gracious, illusive, dreamy, Romantic, elusive. Was the young poet humbly looking back to the imaginative compositions of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in *A Handful of Honeysuckle*, some wondered. There are daring humument moments. And *yet*, one finds oneself admiring how the little book of verses, her first!, is a substitution of the typical for what actually took place in her thoughts; what she took with her from her childhood, that passion from wild flowers expressed as a sensibility, a desire of physical beauty – transcendent like day dreaming. Her world as it seems, as she day-dreams the world. A flight of the imagination, a command of fantasy, wrote to her D. G. Rossetti upon reading the book in May 1879. We notice that her sunshine-yellow flowers are highly perfumed. That her honeysuckle, indeed, weaves poem with poem, twists them with fantastic grace into wreaths of fancies in paradise. Not even part of the bunch but the gift of a single flower is the opening sonnet that ties the book,

'Honeysuckle'.

I gather from the hedgerows, where they spring,
These sunshine-yellow flowers, grown sweet i' the air,
Fearing to hope that ye can find them fair,
Who at your wish could have a costlier thing.
Lovers, for you no passion-flowers I bring,
Nor any roses for your ladies' wear,
No violets fragrant still from Sappho's hair,
Nor laurel crowns to garland them that sings.

But these are all I have, and these I give.
True, they have languish'd since they came to town,
As music suffers in the writing down,
And well I know they have not long to live.
Yet for your sakes these left the country ways,
That, taken thence, are gown too poor for praise.

Robinson offers us the humble flower, conscious of its worn out sweetness. Roses, violets, laurels mean too much. It is the honeysuckle that attracts the hummingbird. She knows that by the time of the gift, the honeysuckles may be jaded but hopes that in their dying faintness we may find that *fadeur exquisite*, that certain tenuity and caducity. The languid poet thus reveals herself for she has her fantastic experiment be welded in metal; she joyfully selects filigree gold honeysuckles for the cover of her book surely to anchor it on the steadfast rock of immortality. Gold, one also discerns, because it is a transitional metal. And so it goes in 'Past and Present': 'I had great aims in youth (well it is right, those fair unfruitful flowers should flourish then though they fade soon) and now in the eyes of men my life seems worthy and my future bright.' It was like a portraiture outlined in severe relief, though in itself a wonderful fancy work, her metal honeysuckle.

The peculiar character of her honeysuckle in gold was noticed by the curious as a distinction in her verse, such an elastic force in word and rhyme. The gold curvature of her flower seemed to indicate poetic triumph over a material partly resisting in its fragility, which yet at last took outline from her thought with the firmness of antique forms of poetic mastery. The antiquarian aesthetic of 'A Rime of True Lovers. (After Bocaccio)' impressed as it transmitted the pleasure from the past becoming the sweet force of present desire:

All lovers, who are beloved,
All followers of Love's vagrant feet,

All ye whose mistresses have proved
Constant to change, true to deceit,
Listen, I'll sing old rhymes to you,
Of years gone by when Love was true,
Till through your dreams my signing soundeth sweet.

'Queen Rosalys', 'Le Roi est Mort' 'A Ballad of Lost Lovers', all partaking in different fashions - because from different traditions - of a joyful sensuousness; in truth one wishes to escape to those antique histories to feel the violence of that Love. The poems are fragrant and colourful, mournful; one is eager to hold onto the sensation of their subjective immortality, to use a modern phrase, as we enjoy the secondary existence of those forgotten feelings. Ancient rhymes and meters feel refreshed to make us feel a naïve affinity with their forms, stirring yet pensive, passionately attached because detached. 'Fiametta: A Sequence' enchants:

Her eyes are a flame
To fire the heart of me!
A flame is her name,
Her eyes are a flame,
My heart burns the same
The fiercest of the three.
Her eyes are a flame
To fire the heart of me.

Boccaccio's sonnet 'On his Last Sight of Fiammetta' is the source. D.G. Rossetti's sonnet-painting, the haunting red double work, finished the same year as her *Honeysuckles* is one echo and one refraction of many. The Robinsons and the Rossettis (the William Michael Rossettis – parents and children; Christina Rossetti and her mother) are Bloomsbury neighbours. They have known each other since 1876 and their friendship is intimate. Robinson's move away from the sonnet form into an octave enables the fiercest ecstasy, the intensity of the moment. In a letter to John Addington Symonds she opens her heart: 'I consider Mrs. William Rossetti as good & loveable a woman as you consider Christian a man.' Are we to take from this that

Lucy Madox Brown Rossetti, painter and Pre-Raphaelite beauty is her Fiametta? Robinson will have her portrait painted by Lucy's father, Ford Madox Brown, in 1881.

Honeysuckles is a success yet Dante Gabriel Rossetti warns her of her experimentalism, 'the extremes to which you carry form seem to hamper you sometimes: and indeed the simpler poems please me best.' Though with an air so disengaged, she seemed to be living as intensely in the invisible as the visible world. She is easily seduced by materiality, disappearing in it, as it decomposes into disembodied thought. Her friendship with Symonds is frank: he talks about his lover, Christian Boul, and shares photographs of other lovers with her. 'I cannot understand why people see, think "aesthetic" and "immoral" synonymous', she writes to him. The virginal poet is capriciously read, her Epicureanism worrisome. She complains to Symonds: 'Why would accurate perceptions of physical and natural beauty make one insensible to moral Beauty. I have always thought of them as different phenomena of one noumenon.' She had met Vernon Lee sometime in 1879 (soon their relationship begins). Under the auspices of her father's home, she has a salon where she receives, dressed in medieval costumes. And in 1879 she engages in finishing a translation of the *Hippolytus of Euripides*, which she was hoping to bring out in 1880. The very pleasure of verse meditation which the little drama affords her as she mimics and then implicitly delightfully feels the passions of her characters. She thinks of the translation as a new aesthetic for verse composition and she begins to feel an even stronger appetite for fame, for distinction among her fellow poets. At the turn of the 1880s, when the spirit of pre-Raphaelism was everywhere, and people were beginning to move towards more decadent forms of aesthetic culture, she comes to represent a new and peculiar phase of the period, a poet that blended the somewhat

attenuated lines of a thriving fin-de-siècle vision of an antique Renaissance with the strong lines of a modernity in verse. *The Crowned Hippolytus* when finally published in 1881 would complicate and slow down her fame. She knows her modernisms of feeling will be seen as a flaw but she is determined: the arrangement of Choriambic and Iambic, *her melody*, will beat like prose. She wills her contemporaries read her *Hippolytus* like Euripides' contemporaries read his *Hippolytus*. But she is also struggling and, fascinating to our imagination, also doubting.

With a flutter of pleasure she meets unexpectedly Walter Pater during her first ever visit to Oxford. The date is sometime December 1880. The classical scholar and poet Frederick Myers, a former lover of Symonds, had set up an amateur theatre group with the aim of staging Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in the original Greek. Actors who could read and perform it in the original language however were difficult to find and Robinson, in the thick of her correspondence with Symonds is asked to play the part of Cassandra. [Hellenism is a form of friendship, friendship a form of Hellenism - the inverse copula vitalises the intimacy, Symonds and Robinson discover, confident friends at the inner corner of the soul]. Robinson writes of the strenuous, long rehearsals; and of the rigorous attention paid to the play, which involved impenetrable choruses speeches requiring a crowd of actors. At home she can be heard declaiming naturally lines in Greek. In between the rehearsals, Myers and Robinson discuss her modern translation of *Hippolytus*; he too is concerned about her modernisms; she remains firm, sympathetic to Euripides' feminine tones, jealous of his virtuosity but rewriting his blind spots. Too many difficulties face the production of *Agamemnon*, which is in the end taken up by one of the Oxford colleges to be staged by an all male

cast. Robinson loses the part and as a token of appreciation, she is sent an invitation to the premier. She stays in Oxford with her friends Thomas and Mary Humphrey Ward and so she meets Mr Walter Pater and his sisters, Hester and Clara.

He is intrigued by the young Hellenist and immediately borrows *Honeysuckles* from a common friend, Edmund Gosse. Avidly he reads the book and writes from Brasenose to Gosse on 29 January 1881. He had hoped to return the book in person, but what with the bad weather, and the quantity they had to do during their short stay, added to one of his sisters being far from well all through it, he had to leave without seeing Gosse, to his great regret: ‘Many thanks for the loan of the poems, which I, and some others here, much enjoyed especially the “Ballad of the Heroes”’.

O conquerors and heroes, say –
Great Kings and Captains tell me this,
Now that you rest beneath the clay
What profit lies in victories?
Do softer flower-roots twine and kiss
The wither bones of Charlemain?
Our crownless heads sleep sweet as his
Now all your victories are in vain.

Robinson can hardly imagine that the refrain has captured his perplexed imagination, the grave figure of beautiful soldiers, their corpses surrounded by flowers, the whimsical brutality of violence. The mad rage of blood; bodies placed in a hollow space prepared secretly or sacredly. Those who fell when Athens lost Amphipolis, those who fell dead at Salamis, Roman armies, Hannibal, Lascaris. The vain heroism by which the national wellbeing had been achieved or placed in danger. The ballad has the candour of decay and he rejoices in the subtle reference to Ariosto as he thinks of his growing manuscript, some imaginary portraits of young aesthetes, shadows of unhappy heroes – quivering, alive, prismatic – of which he has finished but one ‘The Child in the House’. ‘What’, Pater thinks, what now about “An English

Poet"? After two years, still unfinished; should I entwined or disentwined it? He is compelled (so to speak) to adjust it to it; to ascertain and accept that in it which should least collide with, or might even carry forward a little, *his* own characteristic tendencies. He is not ready for a host of minute recognitions on his part, of what that might involve. Then there's also the Euripides' *Bacchae*, the *Hippolytus*. Robinson some may reason as the English poet. There is no theoretic equivalent – he reasons – to account for such connection with each other modes of thought and feeling, such is the matter of imaginative or artistic literature – a transcript, not of mere but, but of fact in its infinite variety as modified by human preference in all its infinitely varied forms. Beauty ascribed to measure.

Robinson's first thought upon meeting Pater and his sisters is 'three celibates'. She does not know what the learned man is writing - it is too early in their friendship. After seeing *Agamemnon* she pauses and imagines her *Hippolytus* staged by an all female cast. Her mind goes back to the pressing translation. *Hippolytus* will tell his father:

'I love the Gods and fear them, and I use
No sin-experimentalists for friends.'

The unconquerable Eros that is chaste Dionysus. The plot and her modern translation of Euripides weigh heavily on her mind. Symonds helps yet interferes, there are many points she thinks, on which the heart of Phedra greatly needs to be touched. Mothers who love young men, then the terror of husbands who may not forgive and of fathers who may kill their offspring. She is daunted by what Vernon thought of her before she knew her, that her poetry was probably of the sort manufactured by Mallock's recipes. Her poem begins with *Hippolytus* singing to the Virgin goddess Artemis. He brings her a plaited wreath of flowers (had he learned knitting from his mother, the

Amazon?) ‘All hail, most holy and virgin daughter of God!’ echoes the chorus. But the chorus insists as it warns, will Hippolytus hear any advice? ‘I bring a gift of council – will you take it?’ asks the Retainer: ‘Why greetest not one mighty goddess? Cypris, I mean; the goddess at thy gate’. Hippolytus greets her too, but far off, being chaste. And thus, Hippolytus fate is sealed. Cypris, accustomed to centuries of zealous prayer – she is Love –, feels the insult and claims vengeance for his proud refusal of desire. Is this not absolute chastity itself a kind of death? She was to dedicate the book to Mr Symons, but now to Vernon Lee, too. ‘Now we have met we are safe’, Lee writes lovingly, forcefully, stitching words to her heart.

Pheadra, Theseus wife, is infatuated with the son of the Amazon. Under a veil shrouding her golden hair, Pheadra lies sick in the house, pining for Hippolytus, her step-son. How her fiery soul feels the sickness, ‘the worst!’ She wishes in vain to gain the victory of self-control. The married veil is just too heavy as she dreams of being Artemis, hunting Hippolytus with her darts in the woods. For the landscape she has in his mind using Warwickshire, for she realised its hayfield looked like the virginal meadow in Hippolytus after seeing a painting by her sister done during their last holidays there. Pheadra’s loving but interfering nurse thinks Pheadra’s madness can only have one solution: sinning will extinguish the fire of temptation; and the nurse corners a horrified Hippolytus, who is loud in his pride and will not hush such horrors in his ears. ‘Forgive me’, the nurse desperately tries, ‘it is human, son, to sin.’ Robinson feels Pheadra’s passion as her own as she summons Vernon Lee, the proud Hippolytus. Or perhaps Lee is Pheadra and she Hippolytus. Lizzie Sharp’s words trouble but please. Lee writes she wishes Lizzi’s stupid joke were a reality, that she were a man and I her wife and that as a wife she could bend me to her will and force me to finish *Hippolytus*. Fearing her husband, Pheadra kills herself. She is found

hanged by her own act; on her, poisonous words accusing her step-son of violating her body. Her translation starts to bleed.

‘I cannot make up my mind about my book’, she tells Symonds. ‘Everyone wants me to publish poems with the play, but Mr. Kegan Paul agrees with me that Hippolytus is best alone.’ ‘The Red Clove’, ‘During Music’, ‘Wild Cherry Branches’ may be veiled under the dress of translation. The modern spirit wins and Hippolytus is published with other poems. And thus the fate of the book is sealed, reverted by critics to a small-minded view of some theory of translation. *Raffinirun* the reviews go on and on. It is a book for the delighted reading of a scholar, willing to ponder at leisure, to make his way surely, and understand! What is the prerogative of the poetic protest, Robinson wonders? Justice goes blindfold.

With a concentration of all her finer literary gift the crownless poet wonders two lifetimes later, if she can arrest, for others, also certain clauses of experience as the imaginative memory presented them to herself. Writing went on. The escapes into landscape, into fiction, into history, into philosophy, into biography, into writing for the sake of writing; into writing for the need of money. People coming to her house to hear how *Marius the Epicurean* had been received by the literary world for the Paters and the Robinsons are now neighbours, two curious Eighteenth century houses, where both families live following the caprice of their fantasies. The Paters invent families; the Robinsons are the materialised relatives. She remembers a Christmas, late at night. She was sent downstairs to the kitchen to get some water for the punch. The cockroaches, the sound of their swarming, made her go unconscious and she is found lying on the floor. Only Pater takes pity on her. ‘I understand Mary’s fright’ – she still remembers his curious explanation– ‘It is the horror of numbers that multiply. The

horror of the multiplication of numbers to infinity, that at times I resented in contemplating the swarming stars in the Milky Way.’

She recognises in herself Pater’s sentiment, his formalism. He would attach so much value to the nuance of stuff, of one flower, to the form of an object. She remembers him once walking into his house with a radiant air because he had experienced the ecstasy of beauty. He explained that at the slope of Headington Hill he had seen a field of onion flowers on his right. ‘Everyday they are beautiful, these pale and globular flowers, but there a happy accident had thrown up delphinium seedlings in the midst of these plants, which burst forth here and there, dull blue, pale blue, mauve blue, red and white, a sea of milky green onions, as a light breeze stirred all these flowers’. He was that great child, the boy to whom the view of a single hawthorn plunged him into ecstasy. Did she see with jealousy the growing friendship between Vernon and Pater? In truth, Pater was as amiable to her sister and to her self for he enjoyed the society of young women. She can still hear his ‘no doubt’ encouragements, the ‘really’ dubitatives he attached onto their beautiful stories; yet at times his tales were far more extravagant.

She lived her future. ‘Today’s critics’, Robinson would sharply observe in the twentieth century, ‘examine masterpieces with a patience equal to that with a psychopathologist uses to analyse the day-dreams of a sick man. Do not the tales we tell one another, like our precious day-dreams, furnish them with symptoms of our hidden torments? Although the novel *Marius* is replete with music and beauty, it is not what interests us particularly: it is the author’s soul.’ The bisexual Robinson of the twentieth century would read *Imaginary Portraits*, *Marius*, *Gaston*, *Plato and Platonism* for how these imaginary accounts helped Pater understand dialectically his very own struggles and existence. ‘Marius in Rome’, she writes, ‘understands the

inmost barrenness and the heavy melancholy which oppressed Pater in his college at Oxford.’ ‘Pater saw Simeon Solomon fall, in one day, from the height of his glory, a fallen angel who should have seen the sky. The anxious feelings with which Pater guarded his insecurity, his apprehension about the vicious element hidden deep in his heart, possibly recalled the other origin of a similar catastrophe.’ *This* Robinson prefers the ‘virile’ *Plato and Platonism*, ‘the most beautiful book he has ever written’. That book, and the second chapter of *Marius*, ‘White Nights’. No more unhappy heroes, she notes, no more miserable aesthetes: it was thus that Pater returned to Oxford, to the fold.

She also took refuge in metaphysics, in Plato. Her first husband, James Darmester, will write of her idealism, of her Platonism when reviewing her new book of poems, that *Italian Garden* that he read in India in 1886. His golden utterance, ‘That which the historian finds in the archive, the poet has found in the movement of her heart’, really touching the core of her renewed aesthetic after some difficult time, the *Hippolytus* of course, but also *The New Arcadia* [is realism only for the materialists?]. In the Italian book, the vestiges of her verses are recovered by way of an imaginary reinvention of past European poetic forms. The lyre sings powerfully to tunes with stirring echoes of Sappho, of Shelley, of Baudelaire, but the tunes are new and they shine like fire-flies as they reveal a new personality, a new thought. The jealous verses of ‘Tuscan Cypress’, *the Rispetti*, are neither masculine nor feminine, is Symonds’ curious complaint. She wants the liquid melody of its sounds to feel like an improvised Renaissance. Her imaginary poems have the architecture of an Italian Garden, the metal framework of its wrought iron gate is the entrance to a temple of garlands. Round about the doors of it hang her folletas, her riofioritas, her posies, for the roses of the Past, gathered thus once, keep even when dried their form to remain

always sweet. She thus freed the very perfume of the flowers. To create, to live, art and life, the occult pleasures of the Venetian night, are the echoes of her song we can barely hear in our London night. For, her crown veiled, Robinson would remain always of the poetic temper and would partly live, as it were, by system, much in reminiscence. The swan was flying and rising higher, rising and flying away and the burning life of her aestheticism drifted with her.

*Tell me a story, dear that is not true,
Strange as a vision, full of splendid things;
Here will I lie and dream that it is not you,
And dream it is a mocking bird that sings:*

*'For art comes to us proposing frankly
To give but the highest quality
To our moments as they pass
And simply for those moments' sake.'*

AIPV

A note on the text:

These pages are not even and may be a little rough to the eye and the ear for as the curious reader familiarly versed in the period might have observed with great desolation the veiled stones for this mosaic work have been cut and put together using the following texts:

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