

To Robert, on Sunday night, October 11th, 2015.

*Today the gorgeous autumn light called back
The mellow fruitfulness of your first poem
When you dreamt of sun-drenched being
Of sounds as of fruit lush-ripe dropping from tree,
Although you felt the lash of thwarted love,
The aching pain of mocking footfalls
That turned the young lover
Rocked on a tide of young delight
Into shrewd reader of Donne's sad-sweet change.
Your heart and brain so long untouched,
In age went on dreaming of sun-drenched youth
Still welcoming the day as a new dawn
When birds sing in every vein,
Although aware as an intimation
Of dawn-like splendour of another world.
Even the pain that invades nerves and brain
Granted you your last wish,
In the fullness of self-denying love, and last endearing smiles,
For what the Prince of essayists called
"A death all mine".*

*Weaving in and out your poems and your prose
These past two weeks was like
The blissful days reborn when I listened*

*To earthly beauty upgrading high
Through Spenser's Hymns, till on tiptoe
I dared approach to share in your concern
For time and death and self
Caught in the tangled tragic mesh,
Going my own ways with your kind help.
While forever you looked your still unchanging self,
Though intent, forever prospecting, on the watch
For the least fleeting change in self-awareness
In Montaigne, or in Donne, in Herbert, or Shakespeare,
Charting out their venture into modernity.
Year after year, and still so recently,
Barely a few weeks past,
Defeating age, and the pain of sickness,
Unswervingly,
You did rewrite from French into English
Your Montaigne et Shakespeare,
Still intent on the emergence
Of modern self-consciousness,
Your latest conclusion still a renewed approach
To their seizing alike
The newly discovered instability of the self
Against the discovery of continuity.
Yet a poem could have silenced the ostinato voice,
So long ago,
Now ends eternity unborn,
Telling the threat of inner betrayal,*

When your own self, you felt, was threatening

To shrink to nothingness

If ever the light of consciousness withdrew,

Absence within and emptiness without

Found out a double nothing makes up man.

Yet negative capability was at work

To deny the devastating sense of waste,

Bridging the gap from Eliot back to Donne.

Back to this grammar of the unsettled self

When negation meant assertion

Without ever being assertive,

For the sole self ends not

Nor ends the passionless soul's passion

Though hope unfuelled die.

Montaigne had worded it and you made it your own,

The twofold self in one, through sense or intellect,

Through sense and intellect together bound,

Sensing the difference

Between the I and me: the self is not

unless I make its being actual

whose essence else were mere opacity.

Reading you is learning again in mellowed memory

How much you cared for what you never showed,

From the waste land a voice arose

A poet spoke from the poem,

In Herbert-like simplicity:

“The knot I tied with bloody hand,

Hand tied upon the knotted tree,

Tie not in curious knots of sand,

The maze of old philosophy.

Upon thy self no longer pore,

For none is I but Me.

Act still. Who acts but I? No more

Desire to know, but be.

The unselfish I would prevail

In the reflexive yielding to a faith

That meant feeling it through his own senses.

You anticipated by so many years

This morning's yielding --

Death opens many doors, turning upon dark hinges

Of dullness, pain and sharp anxiety,

Yet letting in the light untellable

And dawn-like splendour of another world.

Now could I wish for what the Prince of essayists called

“A death all mine”, cradled in perfect harmony.

Gisèle Venet