

Augustin Doing Life



Medallion of Augustin Robespierre, struck after the taking of Toulon in December 1793.

from Buffenoir, Hippolyte: Études sur le dix-huitième siècle. Les portraits de Robespierre. Étude iconographique et historique.

Souvenirs – documents – témoignages, Paris, 1910.

Like his better-known brother Maximilien, Augustin Robespierre was a prominent figure in the French Revolution. The brothers were guillotined on the same day, each having tried to kill himself in the hours beforehand. Augustin jumped from a window, but his fall seems only to have broken both his legs and possibly his skull. Where Maximilien had been fanatical and became dangerous to know, Augustin was a moderate. Later, on St Helena, Napoleon Bonaparte spoke of him with respect, even affection. This poem is dedicated to my dear friend, the late Mary Young, Augustin's biographer. She saw it as her life's work to bring Augustin out of obscurity. But for years unpublished, her work on him became her life's secret. Then, just months before she died in the Spring of 2012, her excellent biography on Augustin was printed privately in Turkey. It can now be found in libraries round the world. It can also be found online at <http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/historical-record/publications/>

The last two lines of this poem were composed by Adrian. He wrote them in a psychiatric in-patient unit, where he was being held under a section of the Mental Health Act. None of us really know the size of our own footprint, or what our inheritance will be.

I am a warehouse of faces
weary performances.

They torment me.
Each new mask

I pick from the store
shatters my mirror.

Who made that face ?
I ask. Whose voice was that

pouring forth just now
from lips surely not mine ?

I am a hole in a mountain.
I am a hidden hoard of gold

deep in a mountain.
I am a lost dream

doing life
under a mountain.

Augustin stands behind my ear, nibbling the lobe.

“Hey Augustin - owl now, is it ?

That ancient familiar. You glare, Augustin,

yet look fragile.” Augustin shits

dramatically down my back, then launches himself

into a sudden short silence, making it

a dangerous poem. Poem turns

into fox, fugitive with proud tail

roaming cities of between-lines.

That momentary half-starved fox-mask

hovering at my front door

is Augustin’s living face.

He could not die completely

on the scaffold, where they took him at last.

A life in shadow leaves everything still to come.

Augustin lived a hero’s life in shadow

and everything of Augustin is therefore still to come.

Augustin loves to lurk. It's his speciality.
Noone lurks as furtively as he.
He lurks in the spine of his biographer
and in her dreams at night.
He lurks in the forget-list
of the publishers
who turned her down.
He lurks in lost diaries
and in the dead mind
of Bonaparte. Augustin was kind,
the good leader swept off-stage
by times of tumult –
fear and malice on the one side
tidal carelessness on the other –
all requiring heads to roll
following the short roar of a blade.

Augustin left no child behind.
No midwives had crossed his threshold

issuing directives, demanding
water quickly boiled. So hauled, legs fractured,

to the scaffold, he had no fears
for what might happen to his flesh

after the blade roared. Augustin's world
was no less upside down than yours

but still, then, set to be eternal.
So what shapes should he borrow

when your new world
squalls and whimpers to its end ?

What masks
and scarecrow uniforms

will offer purchase
among the stars ?

May Augustin through eternity
continue to be praised.

For life is an art
and cannot be erased.

Rogan Wolf
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