Though still the late trains clashed below
our faces coursed with blood, alight,
and music wove us in its loom. 1

1 an historic villa in Florence used for music recitals

RAIN IN THE AFTERNOON
Fit Subject for a Fugue

(“I have loved truth...where can I find it?”

Le Rouge et le Noir)

Tamarisk, your fine dark winter webs
are waving softly against a cold grey sky;
idly the large wet drops are flicking down
roughly pasting concrete flags with carmine leaves.
Across the dumbly waiting lines of scrub
ragged shadows of drenching showers march
in; darkening the boughs and boles and bowing
the over-burdened shrubbery to homage.

In gathering evening of early winter
the hearth fire intrudes the coil of thoughts
as arching canes of glory vine suspend their
red papery leaves against palings dark with rain.

Across the attitudinising shuffle of years,
taken back to the sap-strong struggle of youth,
I remember us standing with heaving lungs,
reclaiming the spent air lost as we cycled hard;

and into our eyes the sweat ran with the rain;
red clay clogged our sodden boots where we stood—
the great fire-charred trunk of a tree, chosen
in haste to shelter from that all-quenching shower.

Air, fire, earth and water then
injured us not in our juvescent days;
tired but insatiate we always found the strength
returning; mounted our machines and rode away.

In the glow of light which the window throws
acalypha leaves edged with fire are hanging
trembling at the impact of assaulting rain; and
resistless mind is showered with memory’s grains.

Tenuously the images come sidling back:
rabbit-trapping in the drenching valley mists.
In yellow glow of the lamplight swinging,
a row of rabbits, silent now, dripping their dark blood.

Across a valley of sparsely granulated rooftops
in the foggy spring of nineteen forty five,
receiving the longed-for news of pricey peace,
the wet red roofs and darkwood walls steamed in the sun.
Remember that schoolday? Running amok
in only partly comprehended paean of joy
a schoolmate banged the air-raid siren ’til it stuck.
Tolling of churchbells mingled with shrieks of trains.

Incessant roar of the dark river—rising where
the liquidambar disassembling its florid cone
reared autumnal branches over racing waters;
and we stood in the rain to watch the logs float down.

That river, it slowly sank in late summer,
into the receiving sand banks between washed stones;
retracing those dwindling waters, we sought elusive sound,
a whip-bird, cracking melodious lashes all the day.

Thinking of the peaceful circle of the evening meal
interrupted by a frightened fugitive from the next street
and see again annoyed distaste showing in all of us at
red blood matting already her long black hair.

Injuries we suffered in such ways as these
regretting the interruption of our measured ways,
alone in no-mans-land that distraught girl.
Too late for shame at our pubescent jibes?

Rhus that sweats its fronds of scarlet tears reminds
a rainless time there was. For then great sheets of flame
interred the paddocks in black ash of burning grass,
tipped the still burning boughs of trees at night with coals.
Taking a timber mill in its indifferent path
a fire will still the triumph song of spinning saws,
raise to the memory of the forests burning on the pyre
idle chimney tombstones of another sacrifice.

Assembled in the righteous path of peace
the conscripts served the nation’s gallant old men;
red glow of cigarette-ends gleaming through the rain.
In the verse-inscribed sentry box I yawned my hour away.

Recalling the propaganda films they showed
to prove the world at war’s a glorious sight;
although, those shots of charred arm-bones worked,
I went outside trying to retch away those wounds.

Red flame: a hibiscus flower gleams
through its dark leaves and softly slanting rain;
insight as suddenly illumines the dusky cave
and shows new shapes on memory’s shadowed walls:

rending of dreams where swart enemy pursued
as I twisted and turned in helpless flight,
the great and glaring flashes of the guns became
ictic blossoming of towering fission clouds.
I walked out in the dusk as a motorcycle passed—
ruby brake-lights clustered in the dark ahead. I
tried to hold him as he twitched and cried
and asked his fruitless ‘whys’ on impassive stones.

Indifference is not an easy stance to hold,
as waiting in Casualty for the one you missed,
receiving him with the unfamiliar blood not dried,
taking him out again into uncomplaining night.

The dark scratching claws of rain
ripping at shaking windows in nights of storms;
always our world is lit again: its darker places
into fresh scarlet wounds will blossom once more.

Returning like inevitable lines of showers,
insufficient in their first advance to drown,
taking me unawares, proving me weakly human,
are multitudinous memories bleeding in the brain.

1972

1 The first fugue subject is set by the initial letters of the title (happening also to spell out my wife’s name) and each stanza introduces another variation, or ‘subject’. An additional leitmotiv is derived from Stendhal’s novel.