

PETER WHIGHAM

1925 – 1987

Peter Whigham was likely to turn up anywhere. The word “peripatetic” with its classical Greek allusiveness seems to me to have been coined with him in mind.

I first met Peter in Berkeley in 1970 or '71 at Moe's Bookstore, where I was serving a self-imposed apprenticeship toward my entry into the rare-book trade. Moe's, just down the street from the U.C. Berkeley campus, was known as a likely source for out-of-print books in all disciplines.

One evening a bearded, imposing presence stood before me, dressed in a red lumberjack shirt with pink silk tie, baggy khaki trousers, and a fitted tweed jacket with belted back. This imperious-looking, formally courteous Viking chieftain introduced himself in Oxbridgian tones as Peter Whigham and announced the purpose of his visit. He was looking for specific titles (and specific editions) by such currently neglected authors as Norman Douglas, Martial, George Borrow, Meleager, G.K. Chesterton, Pierre de Ronsard, and Walter Savage Landor.

As it happened I located several books for him. I like to think that my undisguised pleasure in his esoteric interests pleased Peter. He began to stop in, usually just before the 11pm closing time, and we would talk books and drink beer. Then he stopped coming in and soon thereafter I left Moe's for good.

About five years later Peter turned up in our Santa Barbara offices where, after the briefest of how are yous, he proceeded in medias res to pick up where we had left off – asking me to locate for him some of the books he was currently seeking. Our relationship had been redefined in a trice.

Now located in Santa Barbara, he held two jobs. By day he sold flowers from a street-stand, and at night he lectured on the classical literature he loved to an adult education class. Peter's erudite talks were more suited to an audience of graduate students, but it is to his everlasting credit that he never once talked down to the blue-haired Montecito matrons and hippie carpenters whose tabula rasa sensibilities he filled with Poundian subtleties or his own approach to the translation of Provencal poetry.

Apart from his breadwinning labors, Peter was working on a translation of “The Divine Comedy.” “Life's path half past, / I

came to in a dark forest, / the road ahead – lost.” So it began. It was apparent to me from samples that the finished work would surpass in its integrated beauty even his Penguin Catullus, widely considered the finest of modern translations of the Roman poet.

I got used to the following daily routine: Peter’s tentative knock on the door, followed by some briskly polite inquiries of what I was up to. Having ascertained that our photocopier was not presently in use, he would commandeer the machine and run off the latest draft of a canto. These copies he would then send in samizdat style to his circle of friends for criticism.

By now Peter was working the 6am to 2pm bartending shift at Don’s John, a blue collar bar whose gritty presence belied Santa Barbara’s upscale image. Peter assured me that even at that unlikely opening there were myriad souls in desperate search of conviviality. The bartender’s own conviviality was never in question to anyone who knew him. This was a glass lifter as epic in performance as the classical heroes he admired. But Peter never let John Barleycorn (nor anything else) dissuade him too long from his labors. He did his work.

The number of drafts he would produce for a line whose music seemed not quite faithful to his fastidious ear was awesome. Awesome too was his command of poetics, his knowledge of Eastern and Western classical history, his recall of literary arcana of all kinds. In my Whigham file are one dozen versions of his translation of Verlaine’s poem, “Colloque Sentimental.” The typographical and cursive disarray of the drafts graphically illustrates his meticulous manner of composition. The last draft is neatly typed except for Peter’s proud holograph inscription at having completed the poem to his satisfaction: “For Carol & Ralph Sipper / --40 years / Caught in a day!”

Who wouldn’t have felt good about helping this truest of artists find books, to astonishedly observe his single-minded pursuit of them. When the bookbuying fever came over Peter, he could quickly accumulate a wall of volumes in utter contradiction of a continual state of poverty. But no sooner had the shelves been filled, the books would vanish as in a fairy tale.

“They had to go,” he would announce cheerily, never resenting the modest sums he realized for books purchased at full market price. The financial crisis abated, he would immediately resume his Sisyphian collecting, never complaining. Peter was a most sophisticated man. He understood how the world worked. It

happened not to be his way, but he accepted that unalterable fact with the equanimity of a Zen master.

It wasn't all so poignant. There was play – relaxed, vinous dinners at our home. There was work that seemed like play. Carol printed on her letterpress, using Harry Reese's handmade paper, a 50-copy edition of a section of Peter's version of the usurers canto (XVII). The Dante project was in full swing. Then Peter took off once again.

From time to time we would hear about him through mutual friends, or occasional letters would arrive. The last one came from rural Humboldt County, less than three weeks before his death. "I am not a wilderness buff," he wrote, "preferring cows and apple orchards – a peopled landscape – so it is a relief to receive signals every so often that one's friends from a former life are still genially at it."

The next news of Peter was delivered to us by his best friend, the baritone Michael Ingham, an energizing supporter who collaborated with him on several artistic projects. Peter had run the pickup truck that was carrying him and his recent bride, Margaret, off a mountain road at midnight. Margaret thinks he died instantaneously. They were on their way back to Santa Barbara.

Had Peter made it back, just about the first thing he would have done is check on the well-being of the books that Michael was storing for him. That would be typical. In my heart though, I knew the day would inevitably have come when these books too had to go.

But why did Peter have to?

Joseph the Provider / Books, 1987