

ISAIAH BERLIN'S ONLY POEM

This unpublished manuscript item, the only poem by Isaiah Berlin known to me, has come to light among his papers. In 1951 Berlin added the following note: 'Written in 1928 by the author aged 19. Intended for 'transition' to see if they were as bogus as they seemed to be.' The journal transition, which began life in Paris in 1927, so styled itself, without an initial capital. In summer 1928 a subtitle was added: 'an international quarterly for creative experiment'. The contents included poems in a style here parodied by Berlin, who, it seems, did not submit his poem for publication. 'Monsieur un rien', Heine tells us in his memoirs, was one of the distortions of his name – 'since the French change everything in the world to suit themselves' – employed by his French contemporaries.

H.H.

M. Henri Heine
(Un rien, vous êtes Monsieur un rien!)

When the enemy wynds and the big lewis guns will have blasted
the last snigger off the face of the last spengling, declining, tarred
mannikin, then only aristotles will be left alive on the face of our
planet.

Eons on eons climb sliming into pain
I nature's natural with midriff salted hugely
(Will the Plumber's plumber never down and rain?)
my bowels tear in aquinatic strife
(they strove, with none, midwived by jealous life)
White cressed with black; the prickly pear hangs dead
dead and dumb unpregnant acataractic, agony
pillars are deepstuck desertislanded in mine own Flux,
my little crumb what struck thee then
Space smacked me, sir, time cracked me then
So we lie in sliming flux, warm slime your
soft mother flux that's dead before and after
I groaning hotly groaning grating in sour untransfiguring
ferment to no end groaning
to change unskinned with Herakleit and rend and rend. . . .

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