

HANG DOWN YOUR HEAD TOM DOOLEY

I SUSPECT THAT MANY American Catholics were secretly relieved last October at the demise of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu. The reports of their "Catholic Despotism" had threatened to get out of hand. It is one thing to spread the faith and have the Church prosper, and quite another to cause Buddhist monks to burn themselves and little school children to riot. American Catholics have come to understand well that a minority survives only through tolerance, and in a nation where Catholic politicians make it a point to show up at Bar Mitzvahs, it would be unnatural if they did not come to despise Diem for the sheer incompetence of his politics. Diem, it might have been reasoned, should not have had the Buddhists shot for carrying the flag of their Church, but rather he should have carried one himself and in the front line of every major procession.

But all this is excessively cynical. There is, of course, the moral dimension. Ngo Dinh Diem was after all the man who provided a sanctuary for millions of refugees, who worked with young Dr. Tom Dooley to give these people medical aid, and who helped them to new independence and dignity with the aid of Catholic Relief Agency funds. Was it not all this that the student body of Fordham University had in mind when it gave a standing ovation for the embattled Mme. Nhu? It is a tortured connection that these students must have had with Vietnam, for they very likely had been raised to hope that in that country at least the missionary program of the Church had an idealism that was modern and clean. And then one day they find that it too could be used to taunt them. It was good, then, to read Clare Boothe Luce in the *National Review* and find out that the bad things had never happened, or that, when they did, they were necessary and therefore not really bad.

This complex sense of guilt and achievement as regards Vietnam is nowhere better exhibited than in the

Jesuit weekly *America*. Casual readers of that publication may have thought it odd that its cover this past October 3, was a stark black background for the white heading "Marguerite Higgins on Vietnam." Miss Higgins, who had gone to bat for Diem in the last months of his regime, was now back to tell us about how bad things were in Saigon with her man, Diem, long gone.

This article was featured so prominently in *America* because over the years that magazine had bought deeply of the Ngo Dinh Diem myth and now, after the fall, it was out to recoup some of its losses.

Before his demise, *America* had referred to Diem as "the courageous little President of South Vietnam" and had answered his critics with the following: "If the government is

in some respects authoritarian, it is because the task it had in hand demanded authority. . . . It is significant that the opposition within Vietnam to Ngo Dinh Diem does not come from the grassroots. The peasantry has given the President its full support. The discontented are usually disappointed, would-be politicians."

This was written just before the fighting in the countryside began and it is now clear that Diem's estrangement from the peasantry is the key element in the continued success of the Viet Cong campaign. But how did *America* come to work itself into a position of such total wrongheadedness? The answer is that it

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had confused the needs and aspirations of the Catholic minority (less than 10%) among the peasantry with those of the non-Catholic majority. The distinction between the Catholic and non-Catholic population was continually blurred in much of the information provided by Catholic sources about Vietnam. And it is this that was to so confuse many American Catholics when, in the last years of his regime, Diem came to be exposed as an unpopular despot.

Let me at the outside pay my respects to the position advanced by Miss Higgins. I quite agree with her (and I think with Mrs. Luce) that the issue which toppled Diem – persecution of Buddhist rituals – was largely fabricated by Buddhist dissidents to embarrass the U. S. into undercutting Diem. I agree further that the evidence indicates that the chief Buddhist agitator Tri Quang and those closest to him were after much more basic political objectives. Miss Higgins quotes what she calls “a wise and experienced foreign observer in Saigon” who says: “. . . Tri Quang will sooner or later seek to undermine any stable anti-Communist government in Vietnam in the belief that anarchy will drive the United States to go home out of exasperation and bafflement. This would permit the emergence of a neutralist or, possibly, pro-Communist state . . .”

It would seem that the thousands of Buddhists who demonstrated in support of Tri Quang also had the objective of sending the Americans home and bringing about a neutralist or pro-Communist state. As Miss Higgins quite accurately notes, the recent demonstrations were pointedly anti-American. But this desire to rid the country of Americans seems to be fairly universal in Vietnam. It is because more enlightened observers from the *New York Times* and the State Dept. will not admit to this, that they are so vulnerable to the barbs of Miss Higgins and the right-wing press. And the right wing does have a refreshing honesty. Miss Higgins records, what everyone knows, that it was a faction in the U. S. Administration that dumped Diem. This is fitting, since it was another U. S. faction ten years before that had picked him to run the country.

It is at this point that Miss Higgins’ “realism” descends into what C. Wright Mills called “crackpot realism,” for its basic assumption is that the U. S. has the right and need to determine the political future of Vietnam. This is a position voiced also by moderates who claim that it would be irresponsible for the U. S. simply to withdraw. And yet it has been quite clear for some time that the majority of Vietnamese would prefer just that. Although she still refers to the “fabric of free Vietnam,” Miss Higgins implicitly accepts the unpopularity of the American position in Vietnam when she writes: “Maybe, if he is very lucky, Khanh can salvage the situation in Vietnam by being – let us say it loud and clear – a tough but fair military dictator who will brook no opposition to what is necessary to win the war.”

This is “crackpot realism” because the U. S. has neither a right nor a need to tell the Vietnamese what

type of political system they should have. It has been doing this ever since 1950 when it came to the aid of French colonialism on the assumption that Ho Chi Minh was making his revolution on orders from Moscow or China. But Ho Chi Minh, although clearly a Communist, was also a Vietnamese Nationalist, and the movement he headed satisfied a deepfelt need in Vietnamese society. But in 1954, when the French had lost at Dien Bien Phu, the U. S. was quite simply panicked by a fear of Communist expansion. It was then that our bipartisan foreign policy acquired a strong man of our own to stop Ho – and that man was, of course, Diem.

It was at this juncture of history that the Vietnamese Catholics became a pawn of American foreign policy.

CATHOLICISM FIRST CAME TO Vietnam as a by-product of Portuguese expansion. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the cause of the Christian missionaries had become hopelessly entangled with the designs of the newly arrived French colonialism. There is little doubt that Catholicism was much favored by French officialdom – but, despite this, many Vietnamese Catholics shared in the intense search for independence from the French that crested at the end of World War II.

It is an uncomfortable but by now generally conceded fact of history that Ho Chi Minh and the other known Communists closest to him, were the undisputed leaders of this very popular anti-colonial movement. In the earlier “united front” days, many individual Catholics joined in this movement while others (including Diem) remained outside, critical of both camps. But by 1950 the fighting had become fierce and the sides more clearly drawn. The French, purporting to represent the “free world” in a fight against “Godless Communism,” were able to pull over many Catholic leaders who had been distrustful of Ho.

In the two major Catholic provinces of Bui Chu and Phat Diem, the Bishops formed their own armies to fight alongside the French against the Viet Minh. After the French were forced, by military reverses, to sue for peace at Geneva in June of 1954, the Catholics who had fought with them on the losing side were in a difficult position. Aside from facing the natural antipathy of the Viet Minh’s ideological leadership, the Catholics were now distrusted by the majority of the population who had sided with the Viet Minh. The side of the Viet Minh which the Catholics had fought was an immensely popular one at that time. No less authority than President Eisenhower had written: “I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that, had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80 per cent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader. . . . The mass of the population supported the enemy.”

This fact, that the Catholic leadership’s hostility to Ho’s movement was not shared by the general population, is absolutely essential to an understanding of the history that follows.

After the Geneva accords had been signed, the Catholic community in the North was aided by two developments. The first is that the accords contained a provision permitting migration from one half of the country to the other within a period of 300 days following the date of signing. The other was the creation by the Americans of the Diem regime in the South. This last is important, for, if the South had offered little promise of security, it might not have drawn the refugees.

Diem had served in the French Colonial administration, but resigned when he found French rule too restrictive. He later sat out the war between the Viet Minh and the French in exile – first in Japan and then in the U. S.

Diem would have been merely another *émigré* politician had he not won the favor of an intensely loyal and influential group of Americans. When Diem assumed power in 1954, he was perhaps better known in the U. S. than in Vietnam. Not the least among his American followers was Cardinal Spellman. He had met Diem in 1950 through the intercession of Diem's brother, a Bishop of the Church in Vietnam. Diem was to live most of the three years he spent in exile in the U. S. (1950 to 1953) as a ward of Spellman's diocese, in the seminaries of the Maryknoll missionaries. It would be an error to attribute Diem's succession to power solely to Spellman's effort. It was a much more universal lobbying effort which put Diem over and he emerged as much a favorite of the liberals as of the American Catholic Church, but Spellman's commitment to Diem certified him as an important anti-Communist, and it certainly helped considerably to boost the "Little Mandarin" into power. Once this was accomplished, the Catholic minority in the North had a place of refuge, and the Bishops of Phat Diem and Bui Chu who had led their parish armies against the Viet Minh, now started a massive migration South.

Most of the refugees came from these two provinces, and the priests, by all accounts, did their bit to increase the flow. Slogans such as, "God and the Virgin have gone South, only the Devil remains in the North," proved very effective. They came to manufacture grisly atrocity stories about the fate of Catholics who fell into Communist hands, and in this they were aided by over-anxious American CIA agents.

The CIA was concerned, as it is paid to be, with a more narrowly political objective. The fact was, and even they knew it (there being better trained CIA agents in Vietnam than in Cuba), that Diem had only slight support in Vietnam. The Americans (M. S. U. professors, AID officials, Catholic welfare representatives and CIA agents) who were pouring into Vietnam, were for him, but few of the Vietnamese in the South had heard of Diem, let alone recognized him as the leader of *their* independence movement.

Elections had been scheduled, in the Geneva accords, for July of 1956 to choose a national government for all of Vietnam, and Diem's prospects against Ho were

laughable. If he was to hold the country and avoid holding the elections (another "free world" objective), he had to have some base of support that at least looked Vietnamese. This is where the Catholic refugees from the North come in.

The refugees also made good public relations copy for American consumption. It had become a bit sticky for the U. S. as the self-proclaimed leader of the "free world," to continue to justify its efforts in Vietnam to shore up a government that it proclaimed as the anti-Colonial, anti-Communist, Nationalist alternative. Too many reports from observers in Saigon had made it clear that most of the people favored the other side.

The "Flight to Freedom" of the refugees provided a way out.

The political effort of this "flight to freedom" could only be successfully exploited by making the refugees and their hostility to the Viet Minh appear typical of the population at large. This was achieved by alternately blurring the fact that the refugees were primarily Catholic and/or by implying that the rest of the population was also of that faith.

The master publicist of this view was Dr. Thomas Dooley in his book *Deliver Us From Evil*.

It is to be hoped that a modern American Catholic who attains Sainthood shall number among his accomplishments the skillful usage of prime TV time in the service of his Lord. The late Dr. Thomas Dooley is certainly to be taken as an important contender for such honor. His work as a Naval Medical officer in aiding the flight of the refugees was impressive enough. But his major achievement was to convince a goodly segment of the American public that the flight of the refugees represented a condemnation of the Viet Minh by the bulk of the Vietnamese population. It then followed that the U. S. must come to the aid of these people and to help them maintain their freedom under God and Diem.

But there is no doubting the sincerity with which Dooley shared the plight of the refugees. He wrote: ". . . recognizing us as friends and not as foes, they hoisted, on a broken spar their own drenched flag; a flag they had hidden for years . . . their symbol, their emblem, their heraldry . . . to the top of their highest mast they hauled the Papal banner, a yellow and gold flag displaying the Pope's tiara and the keys of Saint Peter." And a moving account it is. The difficulty with all this is that the symbolism of the Pope's tiara and the Keys of St. Peter would be meaningless to nine-tenths of the Vietnamese population, and to imply, as Dooley continually did, that the grievances of the Catholic minority were general to the population, was quite simply deceitful.

Dooley believed strongly that Ho Chi Minh and the other leaders of the Viet Minh movement, being Communists, were therefore "devils" in the medieval sense of that term. The seventeenth parallel, which divided the South from the North, was referred to quite literally as the "rim of hell."

The blurb on the pocket edition of *Deliver Us From Evil* cries out for the “diseased, mutilated Asians fleeing from the Godless cruelties of Communism . . . thousands of evacuees fleeing from Communist terror. What Dooley saw on this mission, he was never to forget. What he experienced there at the rim of hell was to determine the purpose and meaning of his whole life?”

This is one paperback that delivers on the claims of its jacket blurbs. As Dooley stated it, “justice demands that some of the atrocities we learned of in Haiphong be put on record.”

UNFORTUNATELY, DOOLEY learned only of Communist atrocities. Other observers have discovered atrocities committed, sporadically, by the French, the Vietnamese colonial troops, bandits and the Viet Minh as isolated instances of a brutal war. But, in Dooley’s world, atrocities must be the work of the Devil working through Godless Communism. Christian soldiers, be they in the French Foreign Legion or in Diem’s secret police, could never be consciously cruel. Dooley reiterated this theme in high schools, churches and television studios across America. Thousands of Catholic high school girls committed themselves to helping America stop “the demons of Communism stalking outside.” Dooley never lost an opportunity to warn of “the Godless cruelties of Communists” and “the poisons of Communist hatred.” These audiences were regaled to late hours with Communist horror stories. For example, according to Dooley’s rendering of history, when Ho Chi Minh began his war against the French in December, 1946, he “started it by disemboweling more than 1,000 native women in Hanoi because they had been working for, married to, or living with the French.” This image of Ho Chi Minh dripping with the blood of a thousand females is gripping enough, but it is a lie. It is an assertion unsupported by any available evidence. The most authoritative French historian of that period, Paul Mus, has written: “I am today in a position to state and to prove that four-fifths of the stories or reports of awful atrocities inflicted by the Vietnamese on our compatriots in Hanoi, December 19, 1946 are either made up or in error.”

Total French deaths at that time were 43, a not very impressive number when compared with the between six thousand and twenty thousand Vietnamese left dead as a result of the French bombardment of the city of Haiphong, a city at peace, a month earlier.

It seems that the priests with whom Dooley came into contact fed him a steady stream of atrocity stories (ears torn off, testicles beaten, nails driven into the head to make a crown of thorns) in order to elicit further American support for the refugees and Diem. Very often these atrocities were the result of bandit gangs (tearing an ear is their traditional mark), sporadic violence by guerrillas, or family feuds. There is simply no evidence to support the assertion that the Viet Minh had a policy of perpetrating atrocities or that they had any greater responsibility for them than

the other parties in that vicious war. Dooley holding to a simple “devil” theory of Communism was nicely set up to believe the worst, but it misses the point. If the Viet Minh had been as brutal as Dooley describes, they could never have elicited the popular devotion that was theirs. As President Eisenhower has written: “Again, the problem involved local public opinion. The enemy had much popular sympathy, and many civilians aided them by providing both shelter and information. The French still had sufficient forces to win if they could induce the regular Vietnamese soldiers to fight vigorously with them and the populace to support them. *But guerrilla warfare cannot work two ways; normally only one side can enjoy reliable citizen help.*” If terror alone could produce popular support, Diem would still be the ruler of Vietnam.

Dooley’s simple hostility to Communist “devilry” was matched by an equally simple respect for American goodness. The fact that the U. S. had made possible the French effort to crush the enormously popular revolution that Ho Chi Minh had led completely escaped him.

One gets the impression, from reading Dooley, that the American effort in Vietnam began, not with the two billion dollars that the U. S. spent between 1950 and 1954 in providing eighty per cent of the cost of the French war effort, but rather with Dooley’s humanitarian mission. As Dooley wrote, “We had come late to Vietnam, but we had come. And we brought not bombs and guns, but help and love.” Dooley shared the perception of most Americans during the Cold War that every action of the U. S. government abroad extended human freedom. It was his simple conviction that American institutions were the most desirable for all peoples at all times, and, of those institutions, Dooley seemed most addicted to the world of American advertising. “Rest assured, we continually explained to thousands of refugees, as individuals and in groups, that only in a country which permits companies to grow large could such fabulous charity be found. With every one of the thousands of capsules of terramycin and with every dose of vitamins on a baby’s tongue, these words were said: ‘Dai La My-Quoc Vien-Tro’ (This is American Aid).”

Dooley had been sold the line of total Communist evil, and he passed it on to the millions who read his books. To them Vietnam was half slave – half free – the diplomats with their Geneva accords had sold half the population into slavery, and if ordinary Americans didn’t follow Dooley’s lead and do something, the rest would go under soon. As it is put in *Deliver Us From Evil*: “There were still a couple of million behind the bamboo curtain who never had a chance. But we had done the best we could. And I hope the men who made the deal at that lovely Geneva lakeside are happy with the results.”

The lesson was clear: another attempt to deal with the Communists had led to the enslavement of free people. Dooley’s readers did not know that the Geneva

accords occurred only after the Viet Minh had overrun 80% of the country and were on the brink of total victory. Nor did they know that the victory was based on the support of the bulk of the population.

Dooley was joined in his attacks on "the deal" at Geneva by Cardinal Spellman. It seemed in 1954 and the beginning of 1955 that the Eisenhower Administration might permit the elections, called for in the Geneva accords, to be held in Vietnam. Diem would have lost the elections to Ho Chi Minh. It was at this point that Spellman weighed in heavily on the side of Diem, and against any such "appeasement."

In a widely covered speech before the American Legion Convention on August 1, 1954, Spellman stated: "If Geneva and what was agreed upon there means anything at all, it means . . . taps for the buried hopes of freedom in Southeast Asia! Taps for the newly betrayed millions of Indochinese who must now learn the awful facts of slavery from their eager Communist masters! Now the devilish techniques of brainwashing, forced confessions and rigged trials have a new locale for their exercise."

Spellman combined acceptance of the essential myths of the Administration's containment policy ("... Communism has a world plan and it has been following a carefully set up timetable for the achievement of that

plan") with the passion of a missionary raised against the scourge ("... the infamies and agonies inflicted upon the hapless victims of Red Russia's bestial tyranny.")

Spellman called for the destruction of Ho Chi Minh's revolution: "... else we shall risk bartering our liberties for lunacies, betraying the sacred trust of our forefathers, becoming serfs and slaves to Red rulers' Godless goons."

Now this sort of thing, while in keeping with the spirit of the Cold War, has a tendency to get out of hand. The State Department and the President knew full well that Ho Chi Minh and his cohorts were a good deal more than one of the "Red rulers' Godless goons." They also knew that negotiations with the Red rulers were at times possible, for they had just settled the Korean war with the "worst" Red rulers of them all — the Chinese Communists. Spellman's speech was an attack upon the U. S. State Department as well as on the Communists and an attempt to move the Administration to a harder position on Vietnam.

After congratulating the American Legion for its "deep concern lest subversive groups undermine our American Way of Life . . .", Spellman warned: "there is a vast number of our countrymen who live in complete indifference to the terrifying fact that communism will settle for nothing less than the domination of the whole world!" The danger lay in the illusion of peace with the Communists: "the Americans must not be lulled into sleep by indifference nor be beguiled by the prospect of peaceful co-existence with the Communists. How can there be peaceful coexistence between two parties, if one of them is continually clawing at the throat of the other . . ."

And then Spellman neatly tied up his various themes: "Do you peacefully coexist with men who thus would train the youth of their godless, Red world . . .?" And finally, in the event that the Administration did not respond to their call, the Cardinal asked the assembled Legionnaires to pray for God's intervention: "Be with us, Blessed Lord, lest we forget and surrender to those who have attacked us without cause, those who have repaid us with evil for good and hatred for love."

The Eisenhower Administration gave in to this type of pressure, and the Geneva accords were simply forgotten.

THE REFUGEES, in addition to being a good vehicle for winning public approval in the U.S. to a "hard" position on Vietnam, were important as the only popular base for Diem's regime. Diem consolidated his power by crushing the armies of the rival religious sects, by preventing opposition parties, and by purging suspected sympathizers of the Viet Minh.

But as much as they desired to, the CIA was not really equipped to organize the refugees into a stable social base for Diem's rule. It was much easier to encourage a poor and illiterate peasantry to flee their homeland by putting out horror stories than it was to reorganize them into new villages in the South. This

Cardinal Spellman



task could not have been performed without the aid of the Catholic Relief Services division of the Catholic Welfare Conference. This project was administered by Monsignor Harnett, who now runs that Agency's Far Eastern operation from their suite on the sixty-fifth floor of the Empire State Building.

In the three years that followed the refugee migrations, Harnett's Agency was responsible for the distribution of some \$35,000,000 in Catholic Relief Service aid. (Cardinal Spellman had personally delivered a check for the first one million.) Monsignor Harnett also administered a much larger amount of U. S. aid which the official U. S. agencies could not handle. This was all accomplished through an administrative structure, with the village priest as its base unit. The priests would report the needs of their village to Harnett, and the Catholic Relief Agency would then ship surplus American food directly to them in Agency trucks. This slipshod arrangement was probably necessary, but it has given rise to a continuous stream of incidents of graft and corruption.

After three years of such efforts, Bernard Fall, a Vietnam specialist, reported: "Obviously most of the refugees were then still living from handouts rather than from the fruits of their labor." It was basically a "Welfare" program, based on the U. S. providing enormous amounts of surplus food and clothing. Dollar aid to the refugees in the first three years, totalled \$89 per person, which is very large for a country with an annual per capita income of \$85.

It is now widely recognized in the U. S. that a very disproportionate share of the high military and government positions in Vietnam were held by Catholics. But it is not as greatly understood that they were used to coerce the non-Catholic rural population which favored the Viet Minh. The Catholic refugees arrived in South Vietnam penniless and without land; the Diem Government's "welfare" program was an obvious gain for them. But for the non-Catholic rural population that same Government was a disaster.

The Agrarian Reform program, which Diem and his American advisers introduced to the countryside, seemed, on paper, to be a step forward. It fixed rentals at a maximum of 15-25% and provided a system whereby the peasants could purchase land. But as compared to the program which the Viet Minh had already instituted, it was a step backwards for the peasant. It meant a return of the landlord, and its "enlightened" provisions were translated into the reality of peasants

now paying maximum rental and making installment purchases on land that the Viet Minh had already given them. It is for this reason that the Diem government never achieved any significant support from the non-Catholic majority of the countryside.

The non-Catholic peasantry did not share the refugees' fear of Communism. The agrarian program of the Diem government could not improve on that previously instituted by the Viet Minh. For these reasons, the Diem regime came to settle for a policy of controlling, rather than winning over the peasantry.

For the first months of its administration, the Diem regime undertook sweeping pacification campaigns throughout the countryside. These were designed to ferret out any opposition to the government. Children were given awards for testifying that their parents were sympathizers of the Viet Minh. Former members of the resistance were incarcerated in "re-education" centers, and those suspected of being active agents of the Viet Minh were jailed or simply shot. The Government agents who carried out this terror were largely Catholic refugees. The anti-Catholic riots of the past year are a reaction to this earlier coercion.

The refugees had come South in the pursuit of religious freedom and security. The Diem government and its American advisors then used these people for their own political ends. As a result, they came to be an alienated and despised minority in a country ripe for revolt. In 1955, Graham Greene warned: "Mr. Diem may well leave his tolerant country a legacy of anti-Catholicism."

On the American side, the use of the Catholic refugees for propaganda served to greatly confuse the American public on the true situation in Vietnam. It gave the delusion that we were helping a whole people along the path to *their* freedom when for better or worse they wanted to travel the other way. In order to stop them, we had had as a last resort to destroy their countryside and villages with Napalm bombs and chemical defoliates. The one indisputable fact of the Vietnam story is that the U.S. is on the unpopular side. It is time for the American public to criticize America's colonial adventure as much as we did those of the French. In order to do this we must rid ourselves of the Tom Dooley-Cardinal Spellman type of myth about the aspirations of the Vietnamese. After all, if the war continues, may it not one day be called Cardinal Spellman's final solution to the Vietnam question?



Songs from Hugo Wolf's *Italian Song Book*

Translated by James Schevill

(These songs are translated from the German of Paul Heyse, the novelist and playwright who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1910. Heyse, in turn adapted various Italian folk poems called Rispetto and Vclote, short, formal, lighthearted love poems written in ten or eleven syllable, end-stopped lines. My translations of Wolf's song cycle were commissioned by the singers, Margot Blum and James Schwabacher. I have read my translations and they have sung the songs in a simplified concert staging by Matthew Ferrugio of the San Francisco Opera Company in various cities throughout the country. — James Schevill.)

I

Such little things can give us pleasure,
Although their cost must thrift appall.
Think how much we women fancy pearls,
These stones that cost so much and are so small.
Just think how slight the olive's little fruit,
Yet how we suck it to its fragrant stone.
Think of the bursting rose, how small its grace,
And smells so sweet, to your sweet face.

II

You are the most beautiful star in space,
More lovely than the flowers of May,
A prouder stance than Orvieto's church,
Viterbo's fountains only light your way.