

Three Poems by Arthur Henry King*

Anthropomorphic But Not Mythical

With imminent night behind, a wall of thundercloud
— a vast ghost of Carrara marble
apparently as hard and smooth
and certainly as vacuous
as Thorvaldsen,
but swelling to fill an orient fifth of the twilit vault —
confronts at evening's occidental cavemouth
a watery afterlight blotched with sepia —
the aquarellist's or calligrapher's
tint for revelation or deception.

At the other end of the dark,
a candid cumulus by Palmer
— tumescent for vague Arcadians
in Shoreham's vicarious climax —
and a waned Isis framing the negative
of her full past
look back
on a band of subaqueous dawn
with its tinge of Mantegna madder
but barred with black.

It is all a ghostly show:
dark at the source of light and bright reflected,
as if the light were stronger where it rested
than whence it came.

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However – though Apollo-Polypheme
 with his red socket
 May fumble exhausted down to places west,
 and Phoebus reorientated and reoculate rise to
 provide T.V. in Plato's antre-theatre –
 I thank God
 (to say so begs the question
 of Pharisaical anti-Pharisaism
 like that of the Establishmentarian anti-Establishment
 or the bellicose pacifist –
 let alone that of Eliot's theological terminology
 in the Four Quartets –
 but what else can properly be said?)
 I thank God that I am as other men
 – sharing their prospect of salvation –
 and not, *exempli gratia*, the character
 taken over by World Literature
 when someone born of seven cities
 representing, perhaps, a consortium –
 nodded at an intellectual junk-sale;
 not, in short,
 that shady, myth-torn, god-thwarted, goddess-supported
 Achaian shroud of a Phoenician spirit
 who
 past fellows of a hopeless underworld
 eager only to sup unatonning blood,
 past fabulous rocks, volcanoes, islands and oxen,
 through winds, whirlpools, drugs and figmentary women
 struggled (Calypso?)
 unrecognized (Noman?)
 but for an old hound (twenty-one or more!) –
 struggled unrecognized, but for an old dog, home
 (a doubtful homer, cynics might rebark,
 (since *canis familiaris* may, according to occasion,
 be faithful or mordant) –
 home in transit to a hopeless underworld.
 And yet, from that inactive hopelessness,
 or Tennyson's indefinitely telescopic
 arch of experience
 – more accurately speaking, a tunnel of active despair
 ending in Dante's Atlantic hurricane –

or — more exactly still —
 from the sleepy lower-middle-class backwater
 of number seven, Eccles Street, Dublin,
 Christ died, and lives, to liberate Odysseus
 (as man self-spun to a chrysalis of "person",
 mummy embalmed in legend,
 or pupa swaddled in a maker's imagination)
 — if, like Lear or Hamlet, can accept Him —
 into his real imago. This kind may be but shadows;
 but for shadows there is a shadowy salvation,
 for spirits a spirited choice, for man a soul —
 spirit with body capable of shadow.

We have not emerged from a mother's womb
 to be haunters each of his own dusk-mouthed cavern
 where hucksters, treacherous clerics, and politicians
 manipulate our lowest common denominator
 on their phantasamal screen;
 but, whatever Galileo may covertly have muttered
 or that rather more steady Sir Fred Hoyle state
 — on grounds with no beginning, no middle, no end —
 about what moves about what in what, still moving about,
 still stays about the same,
 we stand restored
 at the moral centre
 — for its other planets are certainly uninhabited—
 at the moral centre of a solar system
 (its comparative position in the cosmos
 not being — yet — strictly our business),
 on a living, breathing, white and blue cloud-agate
 with a streak or two of cinnamon
 (no other planet looks remotely like it):
 Earth,
 spinning in a noon sun towards the Millennium.

And I, a solid body here in the middle
 — too, too solid, perhaps, in the middle,
 but not too much i' the son —
 am not, at least, a shadow: I cast one in God's image.

And I shall cast it sharper still
 – my mettle of incorporate god –
 at the moment of the trumpet
 call to shattering reunion
 through the bright Millennial morning
 on the Resurrection Day.

Is It the Tree?

This is the biggest tree in the soke. It stands
 on a bare ridge that makes the most of it,
 and so it can be seen for miles, especially
 on a June evening or a frosty morning
 from Coneyhurst (called Pitch) or Holmbury Hill.
 It looks, naturally, a typical oak;
 and it is, of course, marked in the larger Surveys –
 indeed, spot on the county boundary.
 But no pig's teeth were ever stuck in its bark,
 as at Howards End; no intertwined initials
 carved in a heart; and no slim animals
 nailed there to stiffen: it is itself alone.

It . . . it . . . Yes, what have I to do with it?
 Or rather, is the only thing that has to
 do with it I? Am I not man the namer?
 The things were there, so Adam gave them names;
 but then he had to go producing pronouns,
 which God will hardly have looked upon as proper.
 (Didn't the serpent actually insinuate
 the idea through Eve, to give her social status?
 Women do use their pronouns more than men.)
 How ever it was, nouns, Adam thought, can't be
 complete without their pronouns (thus projecting
 the patriarch's view of man and woman, and
 providing a convenient example
 for Levy-Strauss); and then, the thing was not
 'not he' without its it.

And once it had

'it', it had had it: *Ding an sich* no longer —
 sub-substantive . . . extrapolate . . . reduced
 to inessential. All very well for 'him',
 still better 'her' (Lawrence on Heathcliff: 'he
 calls her a thing'). But was it — Adam — right
 to impose on thing the mask of 'personal'?
 The game of tag, meaning attach or touch —
 isn't it usually 'it' or 'he'?
 Could Eve know 'she' would soon be the cat's mother?
 These pronouns do depersonalize.

Or do they?

The mask's ambiguous:— Which is the person?
 The 'man who suffers'? The 'artist who creates'?
 Does mask show you more you? Or would its absence?
 Like trying on a head to get a hat
 (now men — and women, too — adventure hatless),
 are the modes ranged for choice? Or grown concentric,
 like Peer Gynt's onion? Tree rings round what centre?

But tree's not personal or impersonal.
 Either might be an insult — 'rude' or 'cold' —
 arboreally wrong; and you can't jump
 on tree until sawn down; when wood, indifferent —
 now it's material it's of no matter —
 and rough enough, could rudely bark your shins,
 refuting Berkeley 'thus'.

And why insult?

Tree stands on neither own nor other's dignity.
 Seedling to shade by grace, condignly more,
 it grows the kind of beam in Father's eye —
 tree of prescriptive, not descriptive knowledge —
 to make the moot point between Him and me —
 a cross-rod — an atoning shaft of light
 transforming Yggdrasil to a tree of heaven.
 In short, a pronoun's not appropriate
 for tree: I must redo my thing without it.

And in that case, what do I do about
 nouns? Are they properly common? Was not each
 of Adam's names really a proper noun —
 one of the names of God?

Well, since the gift
of tongues is, we had better assume that language
must be, of God: it takes the word for deed,
der Tat in the beginning as the Verb,
the tree as act, not *dramatis persona*.
Only He That; and we, because like Him
also in His linguistic image — not
King Log.

They Seek a Country

There are the rivers:
prompted from the most high
to the lowest of the low,
governed through every seeming deviation
to find their rest by law,
but in the purview of the circling kite
a system of wrinkles
like Moses' face, running with invisible tears,
as on Mount Nebo, ultimate in Pisgah,
he traced them tacking down the Abarim
towards Jordan, the great salt lake, the promised land's
at this point hardly promising terrain.
Wordless, he noted it all.
Then, as the promise lifted into vision
(Gilead, Hermon, Carmel, the sea that turned
its back on Israel and their inland waters
to show a face elsewhere, Gaza, Kadesh
Barnea—sad reminder—Seir, Zoar . . .),
and there,
far from his fathers, hidden from his children,
keeping an eye still full of the odd question
upon the evening sky
his body slept its coveted earth sleep.

Watercourses may be channelled or polluted;
yet they drain the impartial rain into the sea
from which, as the salmon do, it returns in due season.

And there are the roads we have imposed:
 stricter, straighter,
 yet relenting to nobly gradual curves
 like the neo-Ciceronian, surface-for-essence,
 petrified folds disposed as the statue
 (tortoise-head extruded) of a rail-and-mill statesman—
 say Huskisson's in Chichester cathedral;
 who as a bright young man played parts in the French
 Revolution,
 but forty years later, tired and inadvertent
 (or like some Juggernaut fan impelled by self-immolation)
 fell an inaugural victim to a new tin deity
 spawned by the highway god yet now half-gobbled
 by him.

Indeed, our metalled thoroughfare
 sweeps over streams in such a swath
 that we take the route system for granted,
 exploiting it
 for traffic of stinking, overweight pseudo-necessities,
 and forgetting—till the floods come—
 the water that goes—and will go—its own way.
 Economics knits a network of urban compromise
 (What modified Brigham Young's town plan?),
 mathematics lays down an A-B-M grid,
 cybernetics mythologizes the way that,
 lurching through a confused abstraction of
 sheep, hill, cattle, dale, swine, beechwood, church,
 bog, cot, boulder and alehouse,
 the "rolling English drunkard made" the winding
 English lane;
 but everywhere abstract language whines along the
 concrete,
 whirrs across asphalt masking rubble
 till, at Danzig or Sarayevo,
 the diplomatic limousine screeches into a desperate
 crash.

Roads may reach the sea, but never enter;
 rivers thrust right in, or take the tide
 that brought the long-ship fleet, the needed invaders.

Can a rapid reading-course
 based on the highway code,
 teach us again to interpret the land
 by "streams of living water"
 welling up on the divide
 or struck out of the rock?
 What had Moses had to do with roads?

Nothing since Egypt;
 nor, for that matter, with rivers either as,
 accompanied by some half million
 disgruntled kinsmen—
 the rest may well have behaved—
 he wandered up and down wadis
 without a Nile to assimilate their spates,
 or followed a half-track
 sifted over with shifting sand
 and strewn with stones—
 at one crucial point
 with fragments of the primordial tables;
 but he willed a people
 reluctant to suffer a "sea change"
 through between wind and tide;
 and then,
 led by the vision of a shepherd-king tending his flock,
 forty years long he scanned the contours for them,
 as prophets duly continue to do.

Roads go to more of the same.
 Rivers have a different intention:
 though we seek it downstream,
 our pilgrimage is by water from another country.