Three Poems by Arthur Henry King

Arthur Henry King

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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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   at Brigham Young University.
However — though Apollo-Polypheme
with his red socket
May fumble exhausted down to places west,
and Phoebus reorientated and reculate 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 unatoning 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 rebank,
(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 politicos
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.
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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-rood — 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,
his 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:
strict, straighter,
yet relenting to nobly gradual curves
like the neo-Ciceronian, surface-for-essence,
petified 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 Sarajevo,
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,
fifty 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.