

The one response: unchange, content;
As if the omen were itself

Its own denial, and the man
Who watches in the night were all—
Protector, danger, oracle.

(77)

Cassity has a knack for the laconic *bon mot*, but a poem like “Watchboy, What of the Night?” shows that he can do more. The man who watches in the night resembles the cynical philosopher Diogenes, a reluctant visionary illuminated by his own skepticism. The diction of the last strophe—“Protector, danger, oracle”—alludes to the final section of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” I don’t want to overstate the case for a romantic reading of Cassity, but I think we can count reluctant visionaries like Byron among his forerunners. Cassity’s work is, and always has been, a mass of contradictions: exotically formalist, passionately skeptical, dedicatedly agnostic. Is he committed to a definite itinerary, or is he an opportunist? Is his bible tradition or is he an innovator? A merely competent volume of selected poems furnishes an effective introduction to new readers; a good one casts the old work in an unfamiliar light. I have lived with this book for six months and I am beginning to feel like an old hand. There is a wisdom in its choices. In the title, Cassity quotes Stein’s advice on saving oneself from drowning in the event of an accident at sea from *Lord Jim*: “The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.” Think of poetry as a life preserver.

ROBERT HUDDLESTON

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Nathaniel Tarn. *Scandals in the House of Birds: Shamans and Priests on Lake Atitlán*. Marsilio, 1997.

The full title of Nathaniel Tarn’s new book reveals much. Lake Atitlán lies in the central highlands of Guatemala, surrounded by volcanoes and hills. The Maya have been living here for centuries. The shamans in the subtitle are *aj’kuna*, or medicine men, of the Maya, in charge—among other things—of the spiritual lives of the people, kept through a variety of ritualistic, healing, and sometimes trickster-like activities (whoring and drinking seem popular). The priests in this tale are Catholic priests. The House of Birds is the place-name for where these Maya live. The “scandals” of the title involve all of these elements—: one of the chief objects of worship for these

Maya is a two-and-a-half-foot-tall idol called the Maximón. The use of this idol is hilariously recorded in a *Time* article from 1951:

The raw-boned Tzutujil Indians of mountain-bound Santiago Atitlán... have a religion of their own, a mixture of undigested bits of Roman Catholicism and queer survivals of paganism. Their favorite deity is a raffish, four foot idol named Maximón, who smokes cigars, wears four hats and a leer. Smoking is the least of Maximón's vices. With gleeful perversity, the Indians assign to him an uninhibited libido and a rollicking disregard for the Ten Commandments. (2)

The Maximón was kept outside the local Catholic church, Santa Cruz, in “a bundle above the roof trellis” (1), so that anyone entering the church would pass underneath the Maximón. During Holy Week, 1950, Father Godofredo Recinos came from across Lake Atitlán to perform services in the church. He was horrified by what he saw. Six weeks later, he returned, and beheaded the Maximón. *Scandals in the House of Birds* is the epic re-telling of this event, along with the subsequent theft of the Maximón, in which, more than anyone else, poet and anthropologist Nathaniel Tarn is the central figure.

There is really no one quite like Tarn in American letters, even in the ranks of experimental American poets. Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock seem to come closest, in terms of range and varieties of interest. But neither of them has Tarn's pedigree. Born in Paris, raised in England, schooled in France, Tarn wrote first in French, by his own admission “twenty-fifth rate versions of his idol Apollinaire.” He studied anthropology in Paris with Lévi-Strauss, then came to the University of Chicago, where he obtained a degree with Robert Redfield. In 1952, he went to Lake Atitlán. After that, to Burma. Finally, he was back in England, writing poetry. By now it was 1962. He was connected with a group of poets called—as far as I can tell, unironically—“The Group.” In 1967, he gave up the pursuit of academic anthropology altogether. At this point, he became the editor of one of the more enduringly interesting publishing ventures of the time: Tom Raworth's experimental Goliard Press teamed with the more staid Jonathan Cape publishers to produce Cape Editions, a series of small, handsome paperbacks of a rich variety of subjects, themes, and writers for the times: from the poetry of Neruda, to Olson's *Mayan Letters*, to Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, to Malcom Lowry, to Francis Ponge, to Trakl, to Fidel Castro, to Adalbert Stifter. Imagine nowadays Sun & Moon given a kind of carte blanche by Random House to publish a series of whatever they want and you get something of the picture. And this is all before Tarn was really even known for anything. His first major sequence, *The Beautiful Contradic-*

tions, wouldn't appear until 1969.

What else? Most people—even those who follow the experimental poetry scene—know Tarn as a translator, principally as the translator of Pablo Neruda. The effects of this fact are interestingly elaborated in his somewhat polemical essay “Translation/Antitranlation/Culture/Multiculture: Some Contradictions?” which appeared in the *Disembodied Poetics* anthology of the Naropa Institute. It's sad to say that too few know Tarn for his own prodigious poetic output. I rank him with Michael Heller as one of our best elegists. Take a look at *The Beautiful Contradictions*; at *Lyrics for the Bride of God* (1975), in which the voice of an American Rilke considers Kabbalism and the Shekinah; or best of all look at his wonderful *Seeing America First* (1989), made up of prose-poem observations highlighted by resounding, choral odes to American myth, landscape, and weather. It is a book far too good to be so underappreciated.

If, however, someone has scratched below the surface of Tarn the translator, then this reader knows Tarn not for any of the poetry mentioned above, but for his next most conspicuous poetic involvement as one of the key figures in the ethnopoetics movement, which lasted from the late 1960s through 1980. Ethnopoetics was a brand of American surrealism that combined poetry with anthropology by incorporating the belief that the poet, either through vocal effects that echo those of the proto-poetic shaman, or verbal and visual effects that are the latter-day remnants of those vocal effects, can retrieve or restore something of sacred reality through his or her poetry. And while Rothenberg is unquestionably the organizing principle of ethnopoetics (as its mover, shaker, and primary theoretician); and while Tedlock may have produced, even by Tarn's own assessment, in his translation of the *Popol Vuh* (which is the Mayan book of creation) the major effort of ethnopoetics on a single text; Tarn in my mind is the one true ethnopoet. Like Rothenberg, he spent his early years in various avant-garde circles refining his craft, and is a major proponent of the experimental poetics and poetics that dominated the middle of the century, namely Black Mountain poetry and projective verse. Like Tedlock, he was trained as an ethnologist, and is familiar then with all the trials and tribulations of that discipline, in a way more deeply than poets who look into another culture for poetic material. What I am suggesting is that in Tarn we find both the archetypal ethnopoet and then his anti-type. I say this because Tarn *was* an ethnopoet; it would be wrong to call him an ethnopoet still. The reasons why he detached himself from that practice are generally addressed in his essay, “Child as Father to Man in the American Uni-verse,” which is one of the most keenly enjoyable poetic/spiritual autobiographies I've read. In this essay he figures the anthropologist as Dr. Jekyll and the poet as Mr. Hyde.

The split personality is intentional and unassimilable. Tarn's point is that one person cannot be both of these. He gave up anthropology for poetry and found himself the principle player in the game of ethnopoetics, which he effectively legitimized because he had been an anthropologist. The technical reasons for his disappointment with the possibilities of ethnopoetics are detailed in his essay "The Heraldic Vision: Some Cognitive Models for Comparative Aesthetics," which originally appeared in Rothenberg and Tedlock's journal of ethnopoetics, *Alcheringa*. His point in this essay is that ethnopoetics suffers the same exclusionary, voyeuristic properties of classification that anthropology tends to impose on a people or culture it studies. This exclusion results in a poetry tending toward an empty bricolage. All this said, Tarn was no rebel angel of ethnopoetics. His contributions to ethnopoetics are foundational; he is forthright about the significance of his involvement in that movement and of the movement itself. Indeed, because he is such a thoughtful writer, he reads as one of the most insightful participants in the movement. He is, as well, one of its sharpest critics. In my mind, *Scandals in the House of Birds* directly engages more than anything else Tarn's involvement with ethnopoetics. How so?

Some of the technicalities of *Scandals* advise us to its value in thinking about it in terms of ethnopoetics: it is effectively thirty years in the making, beginning at the time Tarn began to contribute to the nascent ethnopoetics, all the way to the present. *Scandals* is made up of a series of journal entries, observations, and quotations, all carefully dated by the year. Tarn's own journal entries in *Scandals* date from the time of his arrival at Lake Atitlán. One of the very first ethnopoetic productions was a work of Tarn's that appeared in the inaugural issue of *Alcheringa*, a piece called "Fragments from the Prayers Made on Behalf of N.T. by the Zutuhil-Maya Priest N.C. of Tziquinaha, The House of Birds, Guatemala, 1953 & 1969." "N.C." is Nicolas Chiviliu, an *aj'kun*, who was both Tarn's informant when he was studying the Maya as an anthropologist and Tarn's master when he undertook the steps toward becoming a shaman himself. (Remember: these were the days of Carlos Casteneda.) In a footnote to this poem, Tarn describes how it is effectively the record of the very last thing he engaged in as an apprentice before renouncing that role for the role of inspired poet. *Scandals* revisits this scene, in effect, because now Tarn is a poet who has come back to the moment in which he went from being an anthropologist to being an informant, but not because he had "gone native" and become a Mayan shaman, but because he turned that experience into a highly-charged litanical poetry, and himself into a latter-day shaman-poet. One of the things that is striking about *Scandals* to either a reader of Tarn or a reader of ethnopoetics is how the book, despite its subject, completely resists an ethnopoetic clas-

sification: it reads more like a post-modern journalism fused with mythical and anthropological insight.

The book is written, as I've mentioned, as a series of observations and records from a cast of principle characters, who are listed in the back of the book, like a fantasy novel, along with a glossary of Maya and Spanish terms. In addition to Tarn and Nicolas Chiviliu, there are also reports from Weep Wizard, Loincloth, Red Banana, and Martin Prechtel, who like Tarn served as an apprentice for Nicolas Chiviliu. Combined with the reports from the Cataquistas, the offended Catholics, these descriptions from the cast of characters make for a hybrid narrative that plays out something like Akutagawa's *Rashomon*, or Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. It's a very compelling way to tell the story, one that consistently undermines any certainty about the events or the meaning of those events. This is most especially clear when it comes to the Maximón, who is almost always called "the Mam" by the Mayans involved. Interspersed with the history of the theft of this sacred object is the mythical story of the Mam told by different *aj'kuna*. The Mam is a holy trickster figure, not unlike Chiviliu, whose own story we get in the serial "Portrait of an Aj'kun" that also weaves into the other stories in the book. The Mam is also the reason why Chiviliu became a shaman: as a young man, Chiviliu had been called to that vocation, but refused to comply. One night, the Mam crept up behind him and sodomized him, causing him to go crazy. The only way to relieve his insanity was to confront the Mam. This is what Chiviliu learned from an elder *aj'kun*. Chiviliu reports:

The *aj'kun*, however, insists that I present myself before the Mam because the Mam is my Lord and has gotten ahold of me... The *aj'kun* is going to take out the *kii*, the poison: there is something bad lodged in each part of my body. But, in the head: that's the hardest part, only Jesuchristo can take that out... So he grabs my hand and takes me off to that part of town called *cantón* Pachichaj... We get to Santa Cruz. He just sits and waits for the other *aj'kuna* to get done with their own *costumbres* and we drink a few more *giraffes*. I am told that I am going to have lots of dreams. I am not even forty years old yet. (89, 90)

Thus begins Chiviliu's initiation, of which the Mam is mythical instigator. Later, Tarn reflects on the possible meanings of this role of the Mam in the broader context of who the Mam is: like Ogun the Pale Fox of Dogon mythology, or Coyote of various Native American myths, the Mam is an original figure who brings trouble into the world. The Mam's disobedience ties him with Lucifer, we are told by Tarn; also with Judas. Tarn goes on:

It will also be possible to offer reasons why we might take the Mam as a

future Christ: that is, on the continuum, he is both Christ and Judas. We can ascertain that when we understand that both the Christ and Judas are Suns...and that, for the Maya, there is not just one Sun in this world but several successive ones according to their notion of the progress of aeons. Ultimately, in the Maya system, the normal is only X; the supranormal or paranormal is always both X and Not-X, both a thing and its opposite. This appears to be the way in which the Maya conceive of absolute power and, in this, they were not all that different from many other archaic peoples. (107)

I submit that Tarn's book is the representation of himself as both Tarn and Not-Tarn. Through the book, he refers to himself as "Tarn"; he lets other voices, recorded by the astute ethnologist, tell his story for him; he gives us an incredible portrait of the life of Chiviliu, the shaman in whose footsteps he very nearly followed; and he consistently undermines his own understanding of the story he is telling by retelling it and reinterpreting it. For instance, one of the more interesting portions of the book is a chapter called "The Mam and the Martín in the 1950s" (the Martín is a mysterious natural, religious force, symbolized by a "bundle" kept in a box on the altar in Santa Cruz), which is followed by a chapter called "Understanding the Mam and the Martín in 1979," which begins: "This chapter deals with a deepening of Tarn's and Prechtel's understanding of the two great icons in 1979, as a result of which Tarn's interpretation in 1952-3 now appears shallow" (276). The book ends, not with anthropological ruminations or summations, but with a chilling account of the military brutalization of Santiago Atitlán during the decade of the Reagan Administration. A cabal of military forces, including the CIA, the Guatemalan Army, and other repressive forces operated to eliminate any rebel or revolutionary activities in the area for a decade. The last chapter of *Scandals* is entitled "The Terror and a Memorial to the Dead of Atitlán." The last ten pages of the book are a chilling roster of the dead, many of them familiar to us by now as members of the cast of principle characters. In the end, it is the Mam who is Lord of these dead.

I guess all of this goes to say that what is interesting about *Scandals in the House of Birds* is that it is not a book of ethnopoetics. It should be, but it consistently isn't. It is, more properly, a book of Tarn's. And it is Tarn, in an important way, who is its principle subject. Who is this Tarn who would write such a book? I argued before that he is a poet who is difficult to classify. None of his contemporaries comes quickly to mind. Instead, I propose we think of Tarn, now in his seventies, with the great latter-day modernists who preceeded him just slightly. I'm thinking of Kenneth Rexroth, whose easy, uninhibited style and expressive erudition Tarn shares; and of Octavio Paz, who, like Tarn, wrote keenly on Asian and Buddhist subjects,

found his roots in European surrealism, but who took America as his topic and theme. But one other literary figure seems, at last, closest cousin: Thomas Merton, born in France, raised in England, come of age in America, and completely dedicated to the connections between spirituality and poetry. *Scandals in the House of Birds* may have less to do with poetry than any other of Tarn's books; but its topic is the multi-faceted relationship of a people to the object of its spirituality, and even more so, the depth of feeling that Tarn the poet has for that same object and the people he learned from.

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Paul Hoover. *Viridian*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997.

As "postmodern" poetry resolves into focus, much of it seems characterized by a self-conscious deployment of awkwardness, absurdity, and a certain range of humor. Charles Bernstein, for instance, has presented himself as a champion of what's awkward and "wrong" in poetry (while often ignoring the specific conventions such a "poetry of awkwardness" inevitably develops). All of which is to say that eloquence and elegance are fairly absent—and even thought suspect, as authoritative modes of rhetorical persuasion—in most verse which addresses the "postmodern condition." Yet in *Viridian*, Paul Hoover has written an eloquent and even elegant book which reflects both traditional forms of craft and a range of experimental techniques, and addresses itself to pressing concerns of our culture.

Hoover takes seriously the category of postmodernism, as his editorship of the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern Poetry* bears witness. Many of his contemporaries engage postmodernism as a set of stylistic conventions, or a way of writing, without establishing any convincing link between their textual practice and vague talk of "global capitalism." *Viridian*, on the other hand, remains grounded in an experiential and emotional response to contemporary culture. Take, for instance, the beginning of the first poem in the volume, "In a Shadow Gate":

Because it has rained and the TV
is on, the world is not itself.
No setting, no plot, no stable

sense of others, yet the vaguest
scent of events absorbs or rather
emits the earthly smell of light.