

Christopher Middleton and *The Bare Bone of Creation*

Amour fou? What's this, then? Early 1960s in London and some of us have been drowning in the drumming ploughland for a couple of years, so eager for a pure English poetry uncorrupted by the tediously experimenting Europeans and—Lord, save us from them—obstreperous Americans that we don't even remark that the hawk in the rain fell right out of the windhover's nest, that while Europe advances England is bent on going backwards; there are some among us who can't stand the muttering retreats of the metropolis, don't want to know about the old bitch gone in the teeth, and recycle themselves to the countryside, tweed jacket unbuttoned to the bracing English wind, grey worsted trousers neatly held at the ankles by cycle-clips, and pedal away from village to village, stopping at one church and then another, remaining, like good country folk, bored and uninformed, a condition nationally applauded as admirable. So what's this *Amour fou*, then? There's that respectable old man, Robert Graves, real Englishman he is, bless him, giving us *More Poems* in '61 and *New Poems* in '62, regular as a school-boy Annual with its predictable contents, everyone adores him, even the *New Statesman* and *The Observer* print dozens of his poems, it's enough to make you want to sing *Rule, Britannia* all weekend long, and here's this Middleton bloke with his *Amour* bleedin' *fou*, what in Alfred Lord Tennyson's name is this foreign stuff, then?

Those Sunday mornings in London one opened *The Observer* while the brain was still cobwebbed with dreams and the kettle was boiling for one's first cup of coffee. A glance at the cricket scores showing England losing to Australia once again restored one to living reality, a couple of sips of Mocha Java cleared the brain, and one turned ritualistically to the book pages to read A. Alvarez's magisterial pronouncements on the state of poetry in the English language, which somehow seemed mostly American, and to see whose poem he had chosen to print in italics at the bottom of the page. And casting one's

brightening glance there on that Sunday morning in the early years of that famous swinging decade one saw that curious title, *Amour fou*, and did a double take, and then reading the poem felt that something was missing, as if a cyclist had forgotten to take the pump with him and coming out of another church had no means to fill his deflated tyres with air. And then read the poem again and began to suspect that it was the other way round, nothing was missing but something was there one had not seen in poems before, not immediately sure exactly what, but two or three readings left the brain murmuring to itself, for it kept hearing the music that the poem continued to secrete in some buried region of one's consciousness.

Early 1960s. T. S. Eliot still lived in Chelsea, though his residence in Carlyle Mansions might as well have been on Mt. Olympus; ten minutes walk from there, up on Sydney Street, met on Friday nights the young poets fancifully called The Group; just round the corner, in a pub on Fulham Road, one might find Patrick Kavanagh, an almost empty pint in hand, rehearsing his dance with Kitty Stobling; and pubs in Soho still remembered Dylan Thomas. Across the river, in a pub in Dulwich, Howard Sergeant held his monthly poetry readings and on some occasions the long room upstairs was so full there were people crowded at the door with some more behind them on the stairs. There was a serious audience for poetry in that London which seemed to have awakened from its postwar sleep in spite of the seductive sentimentality of Betjeman's bells summoning the nation back to bed. Provincial insularity was out. The British Commonwealth was superseded by the European Common Market. At the popular level, the Beatles and the new mod culture, with Mary Quant and Carnaby Street as two of its symbols, coinciding with the advent of the jet engine, changed the nation's manners, customs, speech and geography—the English Channel became irrelevant and America came closer: it was the beginning of the end of the high and low two-culture theory, and though we did not notice it at the time, the popular revolt against high culture had been launched and democracy's great dumbing-down crisis had commenced with capitalism seizing the opportunity to profit from the easily gratified majority. For the moment though, there was Better Books in Charing Cross Road, which lovingly wrapped new slim volumes of poetry in cellophane, where one bought a curiously titled book, *torse 3*; and

from this little temple to high culture one walked across the street to Partisan Café, the popular haunt of *New Society* liberals, and became engaged in Huxleyan discussions; there was, for the moment, the nice democratic illusion that the high and the low could coexist.

Christopher lived in Dulwich then, was to be seen sometimes at Howard Sergeant's readings and it's probably there that I first met him. I recall that time of revolutionary cultural changes in London because that is the context in which I first read him and began to hear that after-murmur that his poems release in my consciousness. He was the most European of the English poets at that time. Accustomed as we were to listening to the familiar and instantly intelligible Movement poems, Christopher's first appearance on his native scene was that of an outsider. Since he did not fit into any of the prevailing groups he was regarded as it were like a person on a soapbox in Hyde Park's Speakers' Corner who is listened to politely but not seriously by those who happen to stroll by, with the odd listener going hot under the collar on having his received ideas challenged and shouting back belligerent abuse at the speaker—no exaggeration this: some twenty years later, at the Harbourfront Festival in Toronto, I met a young English poet, whose pale flesh was heir to the Movement, who when I mentioned the name *Christopher Middleton* instantly reacted as though stung by a scorpion, his vituperative words barely short of being abusive, reminding me of the vilely dismissive words used by an older English poet, met a few years earlier in London, with whom I'd had a similar dialogue. I imagine there must still be some old survivors from that smoky time stuffing their pipes with Three Nuns and coughing out their distaste; and indeed, if you look today, *even today* (November 8th, 2003), as I've just done, at www.contemporary-writers.com put online by the officious and nationalistic British Council, and follow the instruction to 'Click on an author's name to go to that author', you'll be engaged in plenty of motion but will find no Middleton to click on. But that minority in the '60s who heard a new murmur in the brain on first seeing Christopher's poems was, like Eliot's idea of a poet's ideal audience, the discriminating few whose opinions later become the general standard.

It was a tiny minority, however, and too early in the poet's career to be considered a significant following, distracted as we all were by the ongoing literary wars, with Alvarez leading the American

division flying the Lowell-Berryman-Plath colours on a head-on advance against Robert Graves, the native pretender, while the people's army of foot soldiers, confused as ever, was too far behind to see what the fight was about and marched along occasionally chanting half-remembered lines from Kipling. And there was Oxford University electing Edmund Blunden in preference to Lowell to the august position of Professor of Poetry, warming patriotic hearts and affirming academia's enduring preference for mediocrity, originality being a threat to any establishment, it's best to honour the tried and the trite. No exaggeration this either: where is the university in the entire western world that teaches *Pataxanadu* by Christopher Middleton, indeed where is the professor of English literature who has even heard of it? Instead there must be hundreds of classrooms at this moment filled with students, like those poor kids in Pakistani *madrassas*, nodding their heads in the faithfuls' unquestioned acceptance and repeated repetition of lines from *North* or *Omeros*.

Christopher did well to leave that little England behind before the decade swung itself out of the calendar and move to Texas, where—like Hopkins in Ireland, in his 'third remove', lamenting that England would not hear him and thus found himself obliged to 'hoard unheard' the poems in his brain—he entered his long double exile: the English poet no longer in England, the Englishman in Texas not recognized as a poet. Christopher organized an annual poetry festival at the University of Texas in the early 1970s, to which he invited poets from Europe and Latin America as well as a select group of Americans, or he arranged readings for visiting poets—Joseph Brodsky, Michel Deguy, Czeslaw Milosz, Haroldo de Campos, Gary Snyder... , an impressive parade of the world's poets passed through Austin, Texas, presented by an English poet whom the Texans knew primarily as a professor of German.

When in 1992 I was invited to serve on the jury of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature and on accepting was asked to name my candidate, I nominated Christopher Middleton without a moment's hesitation. My fellow jurors included writers who were familiar with Christopher's name as the translator of German literature and some of them were surprised to know that the extraordinary poems and essays they had just read were by the same person. I informed them that future historians of English poetry, when they

cast their objective eye on the poets of England of the twentieth century, would consign Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes to a minor role, with Larkin receiving little more than an extended footnote and an expression of astonishment that he was once taken seriously, while a major status would be accorded to Basil Bunting and Christopher Middleton. Then there was Middleton the essayist whose 'The Pursuit of the Kingfisher' was, in my opinion, comparable in the quality of its thought to Valéry's 'Man and the Seashell'; indeed, I believed the three finest essayists of our time were Paul Valéry, Octavio Paz and Christopher Middleton.

In his essay 'Reflections on a Viking Prow' Christopher talks about how 'poetic reality' can be glimpsed through poems that do not contain an overt subjective content but poems that function as 'apertures on being', structures through which we experience 'revelations of being.' As a metaphor of his idea, he describes the prow of the Oseberg Viking Ship and shows in detail the figures carved there in low relief in 'curlings and weavings and interlacing, dragonlike designs.' The figuration, he observes, 'is not representational'. According to tradition, the dragons, 'whose claws invariably point outward to the sea, were meant to protect the oarsmen from evil spirits'. Christopher perceives them to be more than that, and remarks: 'The carver carved the protoforms of sea substance into the wood, because then... these protoforms, at home in the wood, know also how to deal with the sea, they being made of the sea, while sharing too the life of the wood.'

Christopher's description of the Viking prow provides us with a poetic insight into the method of his own poetry, especially when he sums up the oceanic metaphor thus: 'The ship was protected and guided by marine protoforms carved—into symbols—out of the wood whose axe-edge shape cut through the salty matter of the sea. The substitute, as symbol, participates communicatively in the brute life, sea, from which it is extracted. Because of that communicative participation, because it knows its double origin, the dragon wood knows how to grip the sea, cope with it, deflect its onslaughts, and how not to be smashed.'

The poet is like the carver of the wood who takes from existence a material that he transforms into a protecting, healing symbol that invisibly surrounds the ship on its journey through turbulent

space. Furthermore, says Christopher, 'the carving is a model of order, good energy in good order.' And by its action, this model makes 'sense of the hazardous sea.'

Christopher's is a poetry not so much about so-called 'human experience' as it is experience itself or an instant of revelation when a fragment of experience is comprehended by the imagination receptive to specially constructed nuances of language. He is not interested in the poetry of synoptic visions but in what he calls the 'poetry of witnesses'. The witnessed truth becomes the carved object, the poem puts us 'in perceptual contact with being'. For him, a poem branches out 'into the unknown, ramifying toward or out of the unsayable'.

But, of course, to say that Christopher's poetry is 'experience itself', etc., is to put a label on his work, a form of silliness favoured by academic critics. There is little in common between the poems of *Pataxanadu*, say, and those in *The Word Pavilion*; and no single formal device asserts itself as a common denominator in the 48 poems of the latter in which a poem like 'Nietzsche's Hands' might prove difficult for some readers who ten pages later will delight in the easy charm of 'Tin Flag and Magpie' with its epigrammatic ending composed as a couplet with a strong iambic beat—

Our objects, humble, they aspire;
Learn we our ashes by their fire.

Indeed, reciting that couplet aloud, one is reminded that though much of Christopher's work can best be appreciated only by readers familiar with European modernism, many of his poems are quite simple and direct, with sometimes a strong narrative line as well as a touch of humour—a good example of this is 'Hotel Asia Minor' which is both an amusing as well as an affectionate description of a seedy hotel:

But now and then the water's hot,
So praise the bathroom you have got.

The same poem contains a significant declaration which could be addressed to all readers of all of his work:

Innocent reader, persevere,

There is no spiritual crisis here,
No opera of the intellect.

Well, perhaps that's being modest. There's always a complicated intellectual scenery behind the simplest of his lyrics, but it remains true that even when the idea might remain inaccessible the poem can still be experienced—and intuitive apprehension sometimes is the deepest understanding. Just read it.

D. H. Lawrence's poem 'Snake' used to be in many an English school anthology, and perhaps still is; Christopher has a poem, 'Coral Snake', which makes an implied reference to the Lawrence poem and which is far superior. It begins simply, directly:

I had been planting the sliced seed potatoes
When the snake started up from underfoot
And slithered across the gravel I stood on.

The poet describes the snake's black, red, and yellow rings, 'more regular far... / Than wedding bands on a jeweller's ringstick', an image both precise and brilliant. Then there are simple but powerful lines, like 'He had come out of nowhere like evil' or later, when the poet is determined to kill the creature, 'For there was more snake now in me than him'. His dilemma is that he does not want to kill the snake but knows that he must, he must destroy the snake even as he observes 'The glory of his form' that makes the poet witness 'the bare bone of creation'. The poem's narrative clarity is absolute, its human drama vivid and intense; it has a straightforward story for a young reader and is packed with ideas (to do with ecology, disappearing species, the nature of evil, etc.) for more curious readers; its images have archetypal force and a universal appeal. By contrast, the Lawrence poem, despite its flaunting of passion and symbols, leaves one with the ridiculous image of a man in his pajamas going berserk under the hot Sicilian sun.

'Coral Snake' can also be read as a metaphor for the emergence in the poet's field of vision of a beautiful image that both fascinates and terrifies: it has the potential to be transformed into that work of beauty which is a joy forever that all poets dream of, or it is an image that remains inaccessible, not emerging from the mind but foment-

ing within the poet as a spreading poison, and when it is finally forced to appear, it is in some inelegant, deformed form. Read again the lines,

It shot through me quicker than his poison would:
The glory of his form, delicate organism,
Not small any more, but raw now, and cleaving,
Right there, to the bare bone of creation.

Observe that when the object's form ceases to be *small*, it becomes not its opposite, *large*, but, startlingly, *raw*. It's a visionary moment, a sudden unexpected revelation of truth when the imagination of the creator, shocked by his material's spontaneous transfiguration, glimpses the very essence of the thing, *the bare bone*, the poem itself.

Not too long ago, right at the end of the twentieth century, some forty years after those overcast churchgoing days, a British editor wrote to me about an anthology she was putting together; I suggested she include 'Coral Snake' in it. She had not heard of its author. I've learned since to leave the British—and the Americans, too—to their ignorance and to celebrate in a silent sort of communion with those scattered souls, each in its own little luminous corner somewhere on the planet, our common admiration of the poet.

The accidents of our separate lives—or it could be that some Borgesian Intelligence unknown to us directs us into labyrinths of time and space where, being born almost in different worlds, we continue to be surprised to find ourselves—have kept Christopher and me in Austin, Texas, the last 35 years. We dine together from time to time, usually drinking two or three bottles of his favourite Côte du Rhône, when I enjoy that rare pleasure, a literary conversation in which I have more to listen to than to say, with the person I listen to accessing from his copious memory references to and quotations from the literatures of different countries and ages, and I say to myself that Keats looking into Chapman's Homer was not privileged with so dazzling a vision as I am.

When he came to dinner last week, he brought me a new group of poems which he had typed himself, had copied and bound, and titled, *Tableaux I–XX*, inscribed with an affectionate dedication to me and my wife and dated October 31, 2003. This was a group of his

most recent poems. I read it the next day. Not only was I amazed how prolific Christopher continues to be but I was also greatly impressed by the assured, natural voice behind the controlled verse that makes each poem seem as though it emerged on the page in one continuous motion of the poet's hand. Listen to the opening lines of 'A Species of Limbo':

What might they have done with their long lives,
These old Turks who sit on the terrace,
Now summer has come and inside the rustic
Ramshackle tea house it is no cooler?

The tone is informal, colloquial, as simple as direct prose; but it's a voice driven, and restrained at the same time, by the versification. The way the thought flows as one natural expression looks and sounds just right. I was reminded of a remark of Virginia Woolf's in *A Room of One's Own* where she remembers Charles Lamb's remark about it being inconceivable that Milton had needed to alter a single word in 'Lycidas', and I thought, Christopher gives the same impression, the poem just seems to emerge with the same sort of impeccable fluency. Reading this and the other poems, I was struck by the facility with which Christopher takes an ordinary everyday event and converts it into a memorable poem—and I can attest to this from personal experience.

A couple of months ago, Christopher had come to dinner and we were sitting in the garden. I pointed to a datura plant with its white trumpet-shaped flowers in a pot on the patio and spoke about it. And now, turning the pages of this collection of new poems, *Tableaux I–XX*, I come to a poem called 'Datura' and find myself reading,

At the onset of twilight, Zulf says, you see
That white datura lily open on the patio...

and 14 more lines relating our conversation in the garden; in its descriptive surface, the poem perfectly captures the moment; however, the poet's imagistic representation of the banal circumstance of a person's talking about a flower involves the reader in an absorbing ontological speculation, so that the ordinary becomes mysterious, the

very predictability of nature's laws a thrilling surprise: the real moment undergoes a continuously repeated transfiguration, for I re-experience simultaneously the alternating states of now being there as myself in historical time and now being only a concept in a poem which is outside time, the enchantment of a beautiful evening with the datura opening its white flower as we sat sipping wine becoming timeless, for what endures is not reality but the conception of it when reinvented by art, when through the poet's recreated image the envisioned solidity of matter dissolves into abstraction, and it is I—friend, reader, another being on the planet—who become the nocturnal moth drawn by the flower's radiating whiteness to come and drink there, deeply.