



The Metamorphoses of Titus

David Pollard

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Contents

Introitus	1
Introductory	2
The Fall	21
Akhetaten	26
Akhetaten	27

Introitus

Everyman I will be with thee and be thy guide, in thy most need go by thy side.

Oratio

Muse of all the muses, sweet my lord, do not forsake me now. I yearn to die yet have to go on living and, in the meantime, as I voyage across the surface of this my world, send me the powers to write down what I have known, what the Lord who has pressed me into all these troubles has set me to learn: of a young king who had visions and built a city; of the prophet who followed his one god out into the deserts; of the other king who destroyed a temple sending a people into exile and so made possible another faith; of the rabbis and saints and cathedral builders; of so many murders; of the god who turned away his face while his people were murdered; of the attempts to return and to understand. So many words, so many pages. Grant that I may sing my song while the great world circles and then I pray thee, finally and in thine own good time, grant me rest.

Introductory

Listen Titus. We are at the beginning of all things. Incipit-terre. Also at their end. Finnis-terre, a contradiction only to those who cannot understand. We lift the first page. The dark sun lowers behind invisible dunes. A silhouette of birds flies west. Silence.

Out of a sea of deepest mauve, so dark it has almost lost its colour entirely, pushed, sucked back and pushed again, is a pile of rags tied together at its centre by a piece of string or perhaps a rotten belt. After a long while or no time at all (we are speaking of an event before clocks) the sea falls back a little and then a little more to leave this bundle on the margin rocking. It is you, Titus. You have somehow reached this place and crawled or been washed from the sea like the rubbish on either side or like the first thing that drew breath in the beginning. Your back rises and falls with the rise and fall of the sea.

In this unholy landscape the flotsam of the past lies everywhere, cast up and left to rot along the shoreline and then sucked back as each wave lapses. No sound carries. A half drowned soul, you have dragged yourself or been pitched by chance out of the rolling sea and onto the beach to lie there soaked and gasping. You lie with your cheek against the hard round pebbles, your arm twisted under your side and a leg askew like a knuckle of mandrake twisted by its

journey.

Here Titus the waters come together as on that first shore, perhaps later, perhaps that very day, floating on distant currents from the corners of other worlds, earlier imperfect worlds made and destroyed, bitter roots cast up alive yet fossilised, torn like skewered wood and tangled, sculpted by tides and whirlpools into a kind of soaked root contorted by its journey, rococo knotted, knurled into shapes hardly created yet that find themselves cast up on this shore's strident singularity which circles all and watches as the waves swell, swell and break only towards its only heart that, granting time, credo in unum, to its soul self, can make solely its own appropriate heaven and hell washed up by uncreated fathoms and laid out as an alluvium in their lineage to turn and face the land and wait. To all of these this beach is host and you Titus, are here among them bringing with you, perhaps, secrets from before the flood. At the end. At the beginning.

How come you are here at this division between the waters and the land drawn by the swell of the last tide to this empty beachhead filled with pebbles and the weight of too much air? Maybe you came back from the gallows after they had pulled at your feet, hard, hard to save you suffering as the crowd cheered and the priest chanted. Or from the heat of battle cut down by a Turkish scythe still hearing, if only just, the enemy yell of, la ilaha ila Allah, ringing in your ears. Or from the hospital in Altendorf, sweating in the last ravages of plague, spitting blood and

coughing phlegm. Or on the holy hill cut down at the gate of your temple. Or the spirit screaming as the fire licks at your feet. Or garrotted in a hole within earshot of another cheering crowd with your family already dead and a thousand leagues away. Or suffocated in a truck on a railway siding while children laugh and throw mud. There are these and countless other deaths and other resurrections, from the world of the klippoth that had fallen. All of these arrive at the frozen lake of blood and guilt before returning, a messenger to mankind to tell them of his other world. There are circles and circles within circles.

There are others with you here on this beach but they take no notice of the new arrival for there are always new arrivals. They are a part of the flotsam or soon become a part of it. They are half starved and, what is worse, although surrounded by water, have an unquenchable thirst. In the core of their throats. For some future. They come.

Time rolls its anthem. You open your eyes to the darkness and the sounds of an ancient world. The pebbles are rough against your cheek and hard against your ribs and against the sodden skin of a body that seems not yours but far away. The waves are warm and stroke your legs like a half forgotten memory of other skin. Your long lank hair falls, wet, over your eyes but you have no strength to brush it aside. Like the sea, the air is warm, even humid. But it is air against the gills that need it and you sense the lightness of its aura against the infinite weight of past waters. First on the lips and the tender edges of the tongue, then further

back in the dryness of the throat, then where it is needed most. You shudder with the touch of it and move. Your first real move free of the oceans and the past – and you begin to take in that sacred air, at first unsure, then with more confidence, then with great gulps. You feel once again or for the first time, alive. As a sudden wave among the falling tide threatens to engulf your body and deny you the breath of new freedom, you drag yourself in pain a little further up onto the pebbles. For now there is desperation in your movements, the desperation of renewed life and deep down, deeper even than the ocean floor way behind, is the kind of hope that lies behind all our futures.

And then, from behind the shadows on the beachhead where all the monsters of the dark can hide, from somewhere under or beyond the swelling earth and the beating seas, out of the past that is yet to come, appears a maiden glimmer of light which brings a trace of colour to the darkness; first mauve, then blood, then cobalt, then the colour of sweat on skin, then ultramarine, then beyond blue to gold and then to life itself, separating the dark from the darkness, rising a glimmer beyond the hills as a disk that hurts the eyes and drinks the world into the lightland of the sky. Creating the heavens and the earth. And it was morning. And time.

Titus lay silent on his belly, his arm still useless under him. Numb. But the light brought with it warmth and strength. It had divided the waters from the land. Slowly the life grew in him and the numbness of the sea faded. As the sun rose

higher in the heavens, the sea retreated backwards, from his neck, from his breast, from his loins and finally from his legs and feet leaving him stranded between the wet and the dry. He craned his neck to look ahead and knew now that the sun's bright disk was too strong. From high above it hurt his eyes and began to burn his back, covered as it was in a multitude of scratches and clinging weeds. The dark rose and fell and rose again and each day it seemed to him to be hotter and higher in the sky. It was indeed a powerful god. He placed his good arm in front of him and began, slowly and in some pain, to drag himself upward towards the dunes with their scattering of rough grasses and the occasional small flower. Breathing was difficult as he had been used to the struggling gasps among the waves but it came by degrees easier as his lungs got used to the blue air with its taste of worlds and warmth. At first his other arm was useless and had to be dragged along and up with the rest of his body but, little by little, the sun and the movement had their effect and he began to regain sensation first higher up and then downwards until there was a tingling in the hand and fingers and he could feel the pebbles and the roughness of the scree. The journey from sea to land was endless. Its slowness penetrated the centuries. There were still no signs in the dark heavens, only the lone moon howling. The sun rose and fell in its courses, its strength in all the colours of the rainbow. The blood rose and the flood fell back.

And it was morning. The whole beach rose and fell and rose again full of the multiple changes of millennia. The seas fell back and the land appeared divided from the waters. Below him the ocean sucked and pulled but high on the dunes he was safe. He could feel his legs and feet grow blood and muscle and the power in them drove him to press his hands upon the soil for the last time and he rose upon his hind quarters and found that he could walk and from his new height saw his dominions and strode from the rolling land into the light and into the darkness.

In the stillness and dark of his footsteps, he glanced at the night sky, at the lesser light. The dark world of the old moon rose from its bed below the treeless plains, cradled in a slim crescent of pale gold and all around it signs appeared. The moon howled in the sign of the dog and comets flew down towards his future. This way he directed his steps towards the greater light that, falling, had vanished from the sky but later would rise again. He was given life by the death and birth of this wonder that circled the heavens.

The light fell and the light rose and his footsteps took him to the widest places on the earth to where the light is highest in its heavens, to where there is land and no land shimmers amongst it. Where the trees grow in water and are refracted also, where the very air hovers alongside itself below the hum of the heavens. Don't go there, Titus, for it is a sign of the devil and the very sand will drown you in its waters.

But O the beauty of this oasis after so much dryness and sand, after so much scavenging among the hard grasses and

drinking of brackish slime. There even the air was changed. There were seed-bearing plants and fruit trees bearing fruit. And the place was teeming with living creatures that came from out of nowhere; birds flying above the earth and cattle upon it. There were reptiles and every kind of wild beast. And he felt secure among all creation.

And in his sleeping he dreamt of a woman who would be the wonder of creation. He dreamt of her olive skin and her black eyes and hair, of the way she would move and of her smile which would entice without lust and her lips, and he awoke with a start and found her by his side. Berenice, your skin is as pale as the summer clouds, the colour of young olives, to the touch as the softest peach, your eyes as full of colours and unlikely movement as the butterfly, your mouth made from the reddest petals opening in our garden.

And there they lived under the sun, the eye and soul of this great world, creator, crossing the moon and circle of fixed stars called from the void of darkness to make a man and a woman and to make them happy.

* * *

Yet we are as we are in our very being. And that being, with swift wings, resting on a pyramid of fire, crossed the gates of hell in solitary flight, soared over the broad and beaten wild expanses of the deep, flying to lands it never

thought to visit yet must. To arrive where he already was, he flew across the night until he could approach the broad and glimmering dawn; the Aten he could ride with easier wings and, climbing on its chariot, followed it up through the morning mists and on into the broader heavens from whence he could see the pendant earth floating in a garden beneath. Again he spread his wings and took himself down landing on the welcoming lawns as the dew lifted, as a dull butterfly of lost colours comes to rest on dung.

And he was called first deceiver, rebel against the heaven and creation who, placing his nose on the ground and his eyes amid the greenery and the still waters at the margins of the oasis, he sought a beast he might enslave with power and deceit. An eel, a wily one, climbing out of the water on his small legs into the lowest herbs of the oasis garden. Seeking, like all, to rise above himself and view the further horizon. The evil one rustled the leaves around him to draw the attention of his slimy ally and the eel turned and saw him, another beast of the wetness and the forest, seeking him out for his own salvation.

The eel knew Berenice and was shaped thus for his purpose. He knew her from the depths of the ice. From a great distance he saw her on the grass and desired her. He came, sidelong, askew, careful, and erect, his eyes like carbuncles, his head of burnished gold and held aloft. A human voice, with human tones and subtle tongue that moved as it spoke. Rustling the leaves to turn her head who heard it, fawning, glad to have her eye, speaking. Thus and thus, be not

surprised I speak man's language with a brute's tongue. Thy beauty calls it forth and Titus cannot see beings, like you, as I can as a shadow of angels among his kind.

The closer he got the more lovely she became. And her beauty made him cunning also. And handed her the fruit that, once in her hand and close, it claimed her senses. Its smell and juices were more than fennel or ewe's milk and those flavours that were before taste touched her tongue like a new language. But she dared not for it was forbidden. And the poison eel again, Are you not lords of all the air, you and your husband. Why should you not eat of this tree which gives life to knowledge and will grant knowledge to your lives and cannot kill? I have eaten of it and live and have been granted voice to praise the heavens and speak to you. When he stood by her, sleek and knowing and subtle, how could she not succumb? How could she not want to? And she resolved to take it and eat. She plucked. She ate. Hunger and thirst of all the senses at once were satisfied. Earth felt the wound. Nature and all its works sighed and Berenice knew it. The eel slunk guiltily away.

And so he entered and spewed his venom into her womb so that she brought forth thoughts of vipers. And once deceived, cunning in her simplicity. She showed the fruit to Titus, placing it between her thighs and he saw it there and could not resist for this was as a new thing which would fracture the delicate tracery of her innocence and of his too and he took her and ate of the fruit where she had already been taken and he know at once that it was not as before.

That she had been changed. And, in taking her, he took also an exchange of fire and dominance and a sort of hatred and disgust. For now she was not like the garden or even like herself but as a thing doomed to die who was struggling for life even if only another life, his other life. His.

As Titus grew slowly out of the exquisite dream of his knowledge he understood that he would be as a wild beast and would climb up upon the belly of his being all the days of his life and that he would yearn for his woman increasingly and his respite would be but for a moment and a moment. And she also, as she lay beside him, understood that she would suffer the pains of bearing children and would yearn for her man as often as the sun turns and as often again. And she understood also that their children and their children's children would eat of thistles and brambles and would return to the soil from whence they came and that their return would be eternal.

And as this knowledge came to Titus, he saw her suddenly, her beauty translated, as the object of all objections in the world, as another, outside himself, always to be rejoined so as in the very act of union never again to be made whole, to be forced by his own will to be subjected and always to be desired again and again as the sun rises in its heavens by day only to fall. If this was revelation then so be it. He saw her then as a part of the other, her lips suddenly blooming, a yearning tulip like other opening lips calling to the insects they needed. The fruit, her body, outstretched towards him, calling, needing. And then the garden became rank with

weeds and he saw that she was on her knees, smelling around in its corners, leaving her mark here and there, panting in all the heat of her desire and the horror was that to him she was thus irresistible. Her smell overpowered his nostrils and entered into the subtle channels of his brain and from there through the branches of his nerves it reached down through all his other dungeons to the pit of his loins and death in generation. And a snake arose in his loins and coiled across his belly and spoke those terrible words, You have done this to yourselves. Very nature had been changed by you, being what you are, mortal crying has been changed by you.

And she, knowing the change, sensing her degradation from the butterfly to the dung, losing sight of the sun between the branches and its shimmering pattern on the grass, began to howl and her howling was heard throughout all creation and all time. Titus heard it and shrank away and the eel heard it and cowered as he had not cowered before and it echoed through the tree of the knowledge they had granted each other and the tree shrivelled and never properly grew again and the sound rippled on through the ether where none could here it until it came to the edge of the heavens and angels shuddered and then to the ear of the archangel Gabriel who knew what he had to do. He flew down to the gate which was at the east of their oasis and drew his mighty sword with its flaming blade and waited.

He came to grant a lesson to our ever tumescent, ever dying moment. He stood at the gate of our once beautiful oasis

with a burning sword in one hand while the other pointed out towards the east. And they went hand in hand under the flame, ahead of them the white sun under its white sky welcoming them into their new prison.

As they passed beneath the arc of the great archangel's sword who stood astride the eastern gate. As they set out they before them all the turning world, and all the curses out of the mouth of the archangel came to pass, May you know that all your sins will be with you; painted into your skin and hair as a film that no rain will wash away. May you know perpetual lust and feel its sinfulness after every satisfaction May you know that this luxurious circle kills first the eye of the mind so that nothing can be seen in the truth of its being. May you live in the world as in a dungeon from which the only escape is into an incognito as terrifying as desired May you come to desire like lust what you most fear and may it be denied you, may you float forever on the sea of your sins and blessings until another angel comes to the gate of your prison to release you. And a scribe came out of the angel's vestments and set all this down in a scroll which he deposited on the dry earth.

They stood, the pair, at the gates of their oasis, behind them green and the sound of rippling water, ahead the dust. And Titus turned to Berenice, What there is, I know not but it is our destiny to seek. This cannot be the end of the world. Beyond these sands lie other oases and beyond those, maybe other waters and beyond those, greater seas, who knows what lies in the open yonder. Surely this small

patch of green is not the only thing created. Perhaps there are other valleys and rocks and trees and beasts where plants may be gathered for our nourishment. We should not be so despondent as to die here without having made the round of this, our prison. Berenice, we are the first pilgrims that go out from Eden to seek our fortunes in the wide spaces of creation. We are the only pilgrims so to do and our loss will be hidden in the consummation of our bodies down the generations. The way may be long but we are young and must essay it. She answered, I see only our small horizon and am afraid. And Titus answered, why did the creator make me desire so much if there is no fulfilling of desires? Let us go forward in hope for out there, somewhere in that great cosmos, I sense that there is someone waiting for me that I must seek. And she asked, Who, for there is no one but ourselves. And he answered, I, myself. And Titus took the scroll up from the dust where the angelic scribe had left it and placed it next his heart and took the hand of Berenice his wife in his and they directed their steps to where the raised hand pointed. And they set out from Eden hand in hand.

* * *

Titus knew Berenice and she conceived and bore a child and called him Cain and he took her again as the desire came upon him and she conceived a second time and gave birth to another son and called him Abel. These two

stepped out across the wide flatness of the plains beyond the gates of Eden; Cain went out further and built a plough and tilled the soil and brought forth crops, Abel kept closer and became a shepherd of flocks.

Abel made sacrifice of pure white and first born perfection. he made it in fresh blood at the Tel of Arabith where he returned to graze his herds at the start of each year and God accepted it. But the smoke from Cain's offering, although smelling of the perfumes of his bread, was dispelled by the lower winds as they blew across the lands he had cared for all year. And Cain became jealous of his brother who had sat on the hillside all summer long and dreamt slow dreams while he had ploughed and sown and reaped and bound into sheaves and threshed and winnowed and ground and kneaded and baked to bring his produce to the sacrifice. Why should the winds of heaven blow it back again around his head?

So was Cain angry and downcast and Abel said to him at the side of the altar they had built, If you are ill disposed, is not sin waiting like a crouching beast hungering for blood? So Cain took the sickle from his plough, the sickle which had cut the earth and had cut the corn and, avoiding the eyes of his brother, smote him about the heart and his brother fell at his feet with a sigh.

And Titus fell and fell again and again. He suffered many deaths and many deaths and more again that are hidden. Face down with a bullet through his skull on a small redoubt, the cannons still echoing in his ears, his friends

falling around him. Mud and more mud. And little glory. Thrown from his horse in the battle for the eastern capital under a flaming scythe by the hosts of Allah. Surprised by an arrow atop a wall at Joppa. These for glory and the fatherland. And others unchosen, dismal. The child collapsed from overwork and hunger, his stomach extended and resignation in his eyes. The young man sitting in the garrotting chair in rags and the crowd around him not knowing why. Hung by the neck until dead. Shot. Starved. Murdered by the state or for the state or for the fatherland or for god. Worked to death in all the silent frozen gulags and camps of all the centuries. And all of these who might have but for fate or the will of god or his own undoing.

And Cain yelled into the wide mouth of the angel and his yell contained all the deaths of all the worlds by all the cunning means yet to be devised, and the sound slid between the angel's gleaming teeth, over its smooth tongue and down its gaping throat. AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER? And the angel swallowed this in a gulp and, holding it in his wrenching gizzard, flew up to the most high and spewed it up at his feet and the most high smelt its stench and at this time knew not the answer.

Thus, out of the still point at the centre of the whirlwind, He shall be a fugitive and a wanderer over the earth and a mark shall be placed upon his forehead to prevent whoever might come across him from slaying him so that even the relief of death be denied. And Cain returned the body of his brother to the earth and set off east of Eden travelling

on the byways and unknown paths of the world and the sun set upon his journey every day for ever.

His sheep were scattered and eaten by wolves and he moved further off from Eden. And the oasis became a part of the structure of his dreams and daydreams and of the dreams of his generations. No longer looking back with longing over his shoulder for a mirage but forward, scanning the high horizons for the walls of a new Zion that he knew would never come.

The inner voice they had known before their wandering footsteps took them to new landscapes and was drowned out by the demands of their new lives. The old that would never be replaced by the new, like some pitiful primeval dream of swimming from a safe shore where the sea looked calm and welcoming into dangerous currents, dark with the risk of loss, with the certainty of loss. Little by little desperately trying to find the right way, they discovered against their will that they were giving up past regret for future hopes as they moved on eastwards towards Babylon and, as they scattered over the face of the earth, their speaking became confused so that they no longer understood one another. The old words atrophied on tongues which could no longer pronounce them. They sounded strange even as they were spoken. The new one still ringing in the ear like the wind cutting loose round the corner of the tent, still carrying deep-seated fear. So they lived among words that no longer understood, could no longer speak love nor doubt nor desire to one another. The thread of before had been

cut away leaving the living trunk to dwell among dead branches so, as they assimilated new words in their new places the dreams of their oasis slowly vanished into a dead mist and was lost entirely.

* * *

Exile. Thrown out of heaven like Satan, out of Eden like Titus, beyond good and evil like Cain the first exile, He who wandered over the earth, the last exile, beyond glory, beyond those green trees and transparent water. To have known Eden is to lose it, to live with its loss for ever at the base of one's heart and to wait forlorn for its restoration. The exile lives in the subtle absences of such a special loss. Outside, beyond, apart, there is only loss not obvious, not visible, not an absence of the senses but a hidden thunder welling up ready to strike down at each beat of the pulse. And this comes not from afar, one is not afraid of it, is not looking about like some alert falcon for fear of spotting it and averting harm. It is always already with us at the centre of what we are. The harder we run from it, the more likely is it to appear ahead. Thus do we try to ignore it and carry on in each day to day keeping busy, sowing, weeding, guarding our flocks, anything to keep busy and to lay it to rest, avoid the thought of it. And yet we still meet the death we flee and to dust returneth. Our being is mortality; is what we are. The proof is in our fleeing for we cannot flee something we know not of. It is this alone that is the

knowledge of good and evil that the fruit gave in the very scent of its skin. What we wanted and feared and had to possess. And thus is he revenged on that first theft. What they had not understood was that the fruit would give only the knowledge of absence; of the lack of knowledge, for we could never know the time of our ending or its form, could never see into the future and thus had to live it all the more intensely. Ignorance attracts us like nothing else. If only. It was. Paradoxically it was just this that made the fruit so tasty; not knowing what knowledge we might have attained to. Shame is only the smallest part of it. More powerful was the sudden certainty that the future was mere absence and that absence is so powerful that it took over our days and destroyed them. If only. And thus we live in need and poverty and pain. Not because we are afraid of what lies after death but because of the 'if only', because of what might just be, because of hope.

Thus they made their way from the safety of that parent of creation to be parents of their own creation, from one kind of protection to another made to live in tents carried on their backs from place to place seeking to lie down by those cool, limpid waters so that slowly but with deadly inevitability it becomes another dream, the same dream they know not whether past or future, in that Eden they hardly remember or that heaven they hardly dare perceive. Responsibility for all creation. Impossibility. And that oasis in its half forgotten wonder, its impossible waters too limpid to be true would so easily become another and future, its very distance to become its being. All dreams,

hopes, expectations, loves projected into it leaving these new parents bereft of them, an oasis now unreachable. But certainly not now, not here. Thus alienated from the possible, the uncertain, the impossible ideal, they wander the earth for ever.

The Fall

Titus' wandering now takes on a new and larger life. The ocean heaves a great sigh and its swells press from its depths to greater exertions, to a different degree of danger. And the shadow of the flaming sword seems to hover over him again and over her, as they take another step away from that place where they had lived before. And, as the distance between their future and their past increased, it lights hovered higher and then vanished into lowering clouds.

And so to fall from paradise and find yourself a wanderer on the face of the new planet beyond the gates of pearl and ivory, beyond the flaming sword; a planet unthought of before, stretching away in all directions in other colours than those they had known, full of just enough wonders to remind them of their loss and that their time was no longer their own but the property of another who would call and expect to be answered. For once thus fallen, what hope remains? From this time forth, after this first couple, those born on earth could only fall to earth, a fall of no great distance. Those who fall from paradise, having known it in all its wonder, those who have already been saved, who need no salvation, can fall no further and even after can feel the breath of aether in their hair and on their faces. They hope against hope for salvation at the hands of a merciful

universe that could understand small failures and forgive them. Thus these, now fallen, could keep their dreams and hopes. These might have avoided sin; their

will infinite as the distance from there to here. They would never fly again and knew it in their bones, would feel nothing more than the faint itch of incipient wings. These have only the earth and must find what they can on its surface of weeds and dust and months and years seeking for that which cannot be found and hoping only to rest at the end of time.

For at this time the gods were many and close at hand. Every beast had his heart abstracted into fears, every plant his spirit brought to life in its branches, every rock its hardness. The trees moved weirdly in the lightest of breezes, the lightning crackled with unearthly sparks and the mountains blew fire. The seas knew sudden turmoil and the skies also. Spirits drifted in the very air, each one a danger and a hope. Each had its prayer and curse. They hovered about the air in multitudes. They cowered in the hardest elements. They flew across the night sky as greater or lesser lights. They appeared in the sacraments of earth's crust.

All these must be propitiated, prayers to the fishes' ghosts and to those of the great beasts of the sea before the axe dared fall and a bowing down to the ox and the stag and to the winged creatures of the air. For their spirits might remain as a danger to the tribe. And sacrifice for the greater gods of the volcanoes and the depths of the sea and the

violence of the heavens. All these placated.

And his mind worked in images as mirrors of himself and the beasts of the field and of the air that he knew and his fears came home to him in his most sacred places and he knew his gods as images of himself and his women and they had faces like to himself and herself and the bodies of animals or they had the bodies of animals and the faces of his tribe. And he gave them names, these gods for his mind's eye, for his imagination, for this thoughts. And so he made Thoth, protector of the art of writing, measuring and wisdom and his wife Seshat and Ka who allowed the will to do its work. And Hathor, an ox with the sun disc between his horns and Ama the sheep god and Innana of the date palm. Anubis, the jackal-headed and Wepwawet, the wolf-god who, from the beginning, was a god of war, but became a god of the dead. Min, the ithyphallic fertility god and Nit, the goddess of hunting and warfare. And the creator god Ptah who also showed himself as the Apis-bull and the funerary god Sokar and had reclaimed the land from the waters

And these were defeated by Ammon the god of the kings of Thebes, who grew in strength and became king of all the gods as they conquered the lands of his rivals and spread their power and made their city a capital for all their lands. A powerful deity conquers the other dwellers in the vault of heaven and scatters their power to the corner of the byway and the hearth and the hearts of little men. He builds temples and has his statue placed in the great places and he

is taller and stronger than his rivals

But then came a new god that wrenched his neighbours from their perches and the brains of man and dragged them with a gravity unknown into an orbit they could not escape. He sucked them into himself as he strove across the planet in glory. Needing then only one master to look up to, one slave to know his master and the sprites in their millions began to vanish of the face of the earth in their new service to a terrible thing of fear of wonder.

From then on everything seemed like an absence, a hidden tension sucking the life out of all things as if what mattered was behind or beyond existence rather than in it. Although at rare moments and to the select, almost audible, nonetheless apart, distant, impossibly unavailable. Safety, the glory, the aim of life and the actions it demanded had become a hidden power that called forth actions, that drew the will towards it like a magnet but was always and for ever not here, apart, somewhere that drew towards it the traces of the heart and mind but remained invisible. This was a kind of damnation, yet another loss of paradise that was a presence among all things as loss and hopelessness. And here Ahasueras wandered like Cain had for a time, looking from left to right at his neighbours who knew not Eden and could thus imagine it, who had never lost it and thus had hopes of finding it, whose uncertainties gave their lives a shape, a finitude, a destiny and which also gave their wills meaning.

These he wandered among as a lost soul, flitting among so

many certainties and hopes that they drowned his own and left him bereft. Half dead, he lived among the half alive, he in knowledge of his past, they in some kind of knowledge of their futures; they looking forward in terror, he in hope; their minds full of memories which they treasured, his full of ones he spent his life trying to forget.

The future is a powerful devil which drives the feeble bodies of the faithful to hide themselves in the day-to-day. He wanders among their small concerns noting them in his book of small laughters. He it is who could write the novel for which the world has been waiting but he cared not to do it for it would be pointless helping neither he that wrote it nor those who would be unable to read it. There it sits on the shelves of the library of paradise, its empty pages never to be opened while he continues to observe the minutiae which he will never put in its pages. The book of lives, the book of his life, which will fall from its place and collapse into dust when the ship which drives him over the waters of all the world's oceans finally meets its fate on the rocks of finnis-terre.

Thus a new god set in the deep blue of all his angels throws his first beams into the depths that end the night which is also the night of the soul. His radiance blasts the older gods into the shadows of their own existence so as they are seen less clearly. This is a god that will not be denied, that demands obedience and singularity. No god but me.

Akhetaten

Akhetaten

It is written, In the fifth year, on the thirteenth day of the eighth month of the reign of Amenophis IV - Akhenaten, the pharaoh, went with his queen, Neferatiti, to the banks of the great river, in the region near Hermopolis, the city of Thoth, the god of thought. Here, in the fifteenth nome of Upper Egypt, that of the lower sycamore and viper, at a point where the Arabic Chain curls round itself into a huge semi-circle, he dedicated his city of Akhetaten - the horizon of the globe. At the boundaries he placed fourteen majestic stele all hewn out of the solid rock; eleven of them on the right bank and three against the numulithic limestone of the mountains to the west. On these the king declared in stone that he would never travel beyond this place, neither to the north nor to the south, neither to the rising nor to the setting sun, and that nowhere could be found a more promising or more holy place to venerate the new lord of the world.

On one of these stele is inscribed, The Aten desires that there be made for him a great city as a monument with an eternal and everlasting name. Now, it is the Aten, my father, who advised me concerning it, so that it might be made for Him. Behold, it is Pharaoh who has discovered it. In this place I shall make the House of the Aten. I shall make the Mansion of the Aten. I shall make the Sun Temple

of the Great King's Wife, Neferatiti. I shall make the House of Rejoicing for the Aten, my father, in the Island of the Aten, Distinguished in Jubilees. And I shall make for myself the apartments of Pharaoh and of the Great King's Wife. In Akhetaten, in this place, I shall do all these things. I shall make here a great city to live and pray in.

Here was a project for an imperium; for an imperial and messianic builder of new truths, a maker of new religions. This in a time of certainties handed down through the generations, for a ruler who could look to the four corners of the world and see no end to his dominions and his power and who was wealthy beyond knowing.

An army was prepared, an army of slaves with their weapons of many skills to strike against a valley of dead sands, manoeuvres carefully planned to trick that intransigent enemy. Planned by a vizier appointed to supervise and chiefs of work and skilled assistants and those trained to give orders and obey in their turn. All of these were set to work and nothing was spared.

And a new form of art was ordained to do away with the old in which the figures were drawn to a formula learned from books in the schools at Thebes and the figures shown as ideal with bodies that were perfect. And it would do away with the old writing also of old praises handed down unchanged for generations. Bek, the master sculptor of the city always told those who asked that he had been taught by the pharaoh himself and that his task was to portray only the truth illuminated by the Aten and nothing more

and, if possible, nothing less. Pharaoh spoke and in his speaking demanded honesty of the sculpture of his city and his lands, sometimes, indeed, to much honesty. Thus were the images sometimes too close to the real, no longer perfect but included all faults and imperfections. so unlike those of Amun that the pilgrim was used to that he would never forget them. This was a new kind of imaging: naturalistic and drawn from the life. The pharaoh was presented like a giant but all of his features, his thin, effeminate body, present to the life. There were his thin limbs and his swollen thighs, his immaculate small hands and his weak chest. Above all, his long, thin face, high above, with its large dark eyes with their thick brows, high cheekbones and sunken cheeks below them the thin lips with their subtle smile, his feminine curves, heavy thighs and belly, half-closed eyes, full lips, and a long face and neck. And so it was ordered.

And down the great river from the old city came ship after ship low in the water, loaded with the riches of the old city; gold and silver and bronze and linens and all else needful. Also men, architects and overseers, masons and carpenters, weavers and metal-workers. Even priests and members of the old court with their sly smiles, they who saw which way the future might lie. The place was cleared of its drovers and cattle men who were given new land nearby across the river and pharaoh went here and there with his stick and marked out the plan of his new city; a palace here, a temple there; here a great house for one of his princes, there a store for grain; here a highway, there a quay and warehouses. The rich were given their houses and the poor theirs also.

No time to be lost. A town for the workers first. Made in plan like a barracks even thought there were to be no barracks in a city of the new god. It was a place of narrow streets planned like a military outpost or a hive of bees; long rows running one behind the other each with another row facing it across a narrow street. Each house the same as all its brothers with a reed roof and mud walls, each with a room for living and a room for sleeping. From afar it looked like any other place housing the poor but it was well proportioned and had spaces for relaxation and places to eat; thus the workers that were needful to the great pharaoh's project were well housed and fed. The smell of braziers cooking broth and sometimes fish along with the burning of cheap oil. It soon attracted a horde of hangers-on; the loose woman and men who satisfied the needs of the tired for a pittance. Around the edge of the place, taverns loud with the sound of music and ribaldry. Men walking the narrow lanes selling weak beer with pieces of broken grain swimming on its surface and others with pots of even weaker teas. But at midnight the noise ended as the guard came to close the taverns and clear away the traders from the streets and thus it was possible to sleep in the dark hours before another day under the relentless sun of this new ruler.

A decision made to use hard stone only for a few of the inscribed monuments. For the other facades and altars and headstones small sandstone blocks could be easily cut and made ready. For the palaces there would be decoration in coloured tiles and images cut into limestone wash would

suffice. For the rest and for the speed of it just mud taken straight from the earth with a little and straw and lime and placed to dry under that same sun for whose glory it was made; brick, unbaked, ready for use. Wooden columns would support the roofs of simple tiles.

And so the city rose; first the great highway of the king that ran from north to south and cut the site in two, a royal street is paved with stone that ran between trees for some forty thousand cubits. To the south and west of it rose royal palaces; the House of Rejoicing consisting of an open court surrounded by a colonnade of colossal statues of the king. An upper opening, the Window of Appearances, was built into one side of a bridge connecting the Great Palace to the King's House, a smaller palace with a courtyard and magazines, on the opposite side of the road. This window opened onto a public square also paved and arranged so that great sheets of linen could be held aloft to protect the crowds. From here the royal family could appear in state and offer gifts of gold collars and other precious objects to their followers below.

Central to the plan were the two temples to Aten. To the south of the palace, on the eastern side of the road, was the small temple called the 'Mansion of the Aten in Akhetaten', a mortuary temple for the king as it contained a sanctuary which is oriented in line with the royal wadi.

To the north of this was the Gam-Aten, The House of the Aten, the Great Aten Temple. Its approach was an avenue of statues of the pharaoh in the new style. The temple

itself was enclosed by huge walls, extending from to west away from the road for around two thousand cubits. The surrounding walls were quite unlike the fortifications of the temple of Amun that kept the pilgrim from entering. Here, between each pillar was an opening inviting entrance. Instead of the hidden dark corners of the priests of Amarna, here was a temple open to the sky that let in the light of the living sun as it crossed the heavens. There you could stand and see the god as he passed and offer prayers and see, on the northern wall an image carved in marble of the pharaoh kneeling beneath the golden disc from which rays shone down each one ending in a hand of benediction. To either side of this passage, in the halls and beyond were one thousand eight hundred offering tables. Nine hundred on each side representing Upper and Lower Egypt. These were kept loaded with gifts so the Aten might see them as he passed overhead. To these were brought every kind of sacrifice; all the produce of the valley: grain and green, the fowl of the air and the beast of the earth, bread, beer, long-horned and short-horned cattle, calves, fowl, wine, fruits, incense, all kinds of fresh green plants, and everything good gathered by an army dedicated to this and nothing else.

After the sun had fallen to earth these offerings were distributed among the priests and populace of the city. Within the precinct of the Great Temple there was also a holy stone to receive the first rays of the raising sun. On this were shown the king and queen in prostration before the Aten.

And then there was the North City where he has built a large fortified villa, the North Riverside Palace. This was the site of the main royal residence of the king. Surrounded by high walls which encompass magnificent apartments around a sunken garden of geometric design. Here was the throne room of the pharaoh with a courtyard for many beasts and aviaries with nesting niches, and friezes of spectacular paintings of birds flying and diving among marsh plants. Again, all in a new and naturalistic style, with a zoological garden where the king could keep animals and birds and satisfy his love of the natural world. Some of the animals bred here and the rarer plants from the gardens were carried in ceremonial processions to the sacrificial tables in the temple. Included is a warren of offices and smaller apartments for the many who run the empire during this time.

To the north of the city is a palace built for Neferatiti. This was constructed on the same plan as the palace of the king with the throne room almost as grand and the gardens and rooms in the same style.

The southern suburb of Akhetaten was a place of villas and smaller palaces belonging to high officials of the city. Each villa with its accompanying granaries and gardens. There was the villa of Panehesy and those the king's sculptor Djutmose, his vizier Nakht and his General Ramose.

And magnificent gardens watered from the great river. They brought to the centre of the city a canal which connected to the lake of Tiye on the city's eastern edge.

This was three thousand seven hundred cubits long and seven hundred cubits wide. The lake was built behind dams which were broken when the river was in flood and then closed off again leaving a lake in the midst of the desert. Here the pharaoh and his wife sailed on the barge Splendour of Aten

Looking down over the Amarna plain from the tombs dug into the high cliffs of the bay, Akhenaten and his queen could see their city nearing completion, the highway of the king cutting through it like a knife, palaces, storehouses, villas, great houses and lesser houses. Ready for the reception of foreign tribute during the great celebrations of year 12.

And there on that hill they built also a tomb of which the records are silent; the tomb of 13 steps which lead down into a chamber deep in the broken crust of earth where two of the mountains had split against each other in the distant past. There they hollowed out place of burial, a sarcophagus of stone waiting for its inhabitant and beyond it on the far wall they painted the image of the pharaoh seated and his queen beside him.

Thus, according to his own prayer did his city rise in the ring of mountains in the sandy wilderness and was complete in three years by the time of the death of his father. The gardens bloomed with myriad petals; pomegranate and cactus, orange and yellow citrus. In the pools and calm water swam golden fish and their surfaces were covered in lotus blossom and **. Temples and palaces, gardens and

pools sprang from the floor of the desert. Wide streets lined with palms and in the palaces a smell of perfumes and the spices of sacrifice. The bodies of these men and women stank of it. They bathed in it. They prayed with it. It settled in all their orifices so that, even when they were out in the fields or the marketplace they smelt it. It had insinuated itself into their very senses. Behind their robes, behind their eyes. They walked in beauty like their days surrounded by creation plumed and feathered hardly perceiving any difference between the painted tiles and the peacock in all its glory strutting, strutting. Like them in their gold and blue. The vulture circled high but came not near for they were used rather to the cries of death and battle and the constant prayers kept them away.

In the midst of this building was the destroying of men's lives and skills, of the desert sands loved by the eye of the sun, of its loneliness and its colours and the creatures which sculled among its rifts and gulleys. All this vanished under the weight of the new god and his pharaoh and his megalomaniac dreams, a king who treated his workers as hands and shoulders for the project he had ordained. More than many were dead in their teens and were not buried in tombs of glory and sarcophagi for eternity. This was the price paid on the desert floor for the obsession of pharaoh with his new city. Thus the ants dedicated their lives of labour. Here, the dust lifted by their feet from the floor of this new paradise eddies and dies and what is not dust is heat that enters into all the folds of the skin. Around these many insects the new city rears itself like a threat and a

promise to the north and the south.

He thought they built for love; for the love of him and for the love of his god. But his servants knew better and out of his sight brought forth his new city with whips and scourges and did not count the deaths that came about because of it. He lived apart in a world of dreams and saw not what they did. And likewise he told the generals of his armies that he would rule with only the strength of his god and none other was needful and he forbade them to go into battle and commit murder for the glory of his throne for he would rule without it. yet his men of war, those away from the court where they could pretend to be deaf to his voice of his couriers set out to battle but had not the gold or authority to do it well. And he told the men of ships to curtail their voyages where dangers might be met but the bravest of them set forth nonetheless. And so away from his gilded cage at Akhetaten, his kingdom faltered for lack of protection and lack of trade and the men of Thebes looked on and smiled.

A pharaoh of creation who was also a pharaoh of destruction who built the new and destroyed the old, who sent to temples around the empire to destroy images of the rites of Amun and the other gods, who scratched out their eyes and broke their noses so that their faces would be lost and their images stand only as huge dead bodies in memory of lost rites.

Here, in the rocky floor of Egypt and of all the ages, appeared the sudden slither of a crack that would open

along a gulley crossing the two kingdoms to reveal an earthquake too large to be bonded over, hidden, scratched out, although they would try. Such cracks become chiasms, open for all to fall into. Here was an eruption from out of the depths of the earth; sudden, strange, molten, alchemical, mad startling with all the colours of a new god as it rose in those distant skies.