

If "Bartok in Udaipur" is indicative of Tarn's poetry of the Nineties, it promises new, exciting, multicultural journeys, both for the poet and for the reader.

Udaipur, in the Indian state of Rajasthan, is a city of XVII century marble palaces, gardens and bridges built on the islands of beautiful Lake Picbola. A distinguished young traveller, Mircea Eliade, saw it as an example of that idyllic India "where one could be happy just to rest and look around."¹

A perfect place, then, to exemplify Nathaniel Tarn's ideal journey. As he said in an article a few years ago, "Nothing comforts me more than a great site, a great exhibition, a great building. If it is distant, far, hard of access, so much the better."² For Tarn has successfully reversed his initial feeling of being divided among several cultures by becoming, in his words, "a compulsive traveller", an "international wandering mestizo."³ Udaipur is one of a thousand places Tarn has visited and lived in while serving his multiple apprenticeship. A Jew born in Paris of a French-Rumanian mother and a Lithuanian-English father, he went to school in Belgium, then in England for nine years. He was in Paris in the late Forties, where he frequented André Breton, wrote poetry in French, and studied anthropology with Marcel Griaule and Claude Lévi-Strauss. He later did graduate work in Chicago with Robert Redfield and studied Santería in Cuba before going to Guatemala to work on a Mayan site and to Japan to do research on Buddhism. After that, he lived and taught anthropology in London until 1967 when he became a full-time poet and, for two enthusiastic years, a publisher of Charles Olson and the San Francisco Renaissance. The United States came next: Buffalo, Princeton, New Hope, Rutgers University where he taught Comparative Literature, and Alaska where he

spent summers becoming acquainted with a Native American community. In 1970 he acquired American citizenship. In 1985 he went into early retirement and moved to New Mexico with his wife, poet Janet Rodney, so as to devote himself to poetry—and more travelling.

"Bartok in Udaipur" is a mature expression of Nathaniel Tarn's poetic quest. As poet-anthropologist (but also archaeologist, historian, geographer, ecologist), he is the "insider/outsider"⁴ who succeeds in merging the scientific desire for an objective (presumably) understanding of the Other, with the poetic desire to be the Other - a position which Tarn himself ironically sees as a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde split.⁵ This attitude perfectly represents that aspiration to the creation of a multicultural, syncretistic Weltliteratur which is the basis of the "ethnopoetic" discourse.⁶ We can follow its development from the first poems of Old Savage/Young City (1964), through Beautiful Contradictions (1969)⁷ to the last collection, Seeing America First (1989).

Tarn, the student of spirit possession, sees the shaman as a model for the poet as they both travel a symbolic journey to the underworld in search of past knowledge and wisdom. Only then do the Voices of the Other speak through the poet. Tarn calls his own highly experimental and syncretic rendering of this experience multi-voiced poetry;⁸ its most ambitious expression is to be found in the long poem Lyrics for the Bride of God (1975). This Ulysses-like journey in search of the female creative principle marks a farewell to Europe and the choice of a new motherland. Through the many "voices" of mythology, history, archaeology, geography, and contemporary society, in a dialogue between Eros and Logos, Tarn searches for a new poetry in a new American language.⁹

Alashka (1979), a poetic duet written with Janet Rodney, an androgynous fusion of male and female voices, signals the end of Tarn's experimental phase. His poetry of the Eighties is more accessible to the reader, but the themes remain constant (the quest for new sources of creativity through symbolic encounters with the archetypes of the journey to the underworld, incest with the Great Mother, and androgyny) as does the aspiration toward syncretism.

The poems of At the Western Gates (1985) travel to the land, the ocean, the animals, the vegetation and the mythology of Baia California, as well as to the Mayan ruins of Palenque, to Alaska and to Japan. Tarn chooses the whale as guiding symbol; the poetic journey to the underworld

and to the origins of creativity takes the form of an encounter with Leviathan, in the poem of the man swallowed by the whale-shaman: "he lay inside the whale / and wrote, in his death, terrible hymns / which no amount of pain / had ever torn from him."¹⁰

The "narrative poems" and the "rectangle poems" of Tarn's latest volume, *Seeing America First* (1989) address themselves to his now settled relation with America—a land where symbolic dimensions inhabit the commonplace, and Persephones may be seen treading on back-yard flowerbeds.¹¹

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¹ Mircea Eliade, *India* (Bucuresti, 1934; Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991) 55.

² Nathaniel Tarn, "Fresh Frozen Fenix: Random Notes on the Sublime, the Beautiful and the Ugly in the Postmodern Era," *New Literary History* 17 (1984-85): 148.

³ Nathaniel Tarn, "Child as Father to Man in the American Universe," *American Poetry* 2.2 (1984): 71, rpt. *Views from the Weaving Mountain. Selected Essays in Politics and Anthropology* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1991) 58.

⁴ Doris Sommer, "America as Desire(d): Nathaniel Tarn's Poetry of the Outsider as Insider," *American Poetry* 2.1 (1984): 13-35.

⁵ Nathaniel Tarn, "Dr. Jeckyll, the Anthropologist Emerges and Marches into the Notebook of Mr. Hyde, the Poet," *Conjunctions* 6 (1985): 266-81.

⁶ Nathaniel Tarn, "Dr. Jeckyll"; see also Fedora Giordano, *Etnopoetica* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1988).

⁷ Nathaniel Tarn, *Beautiful Contradictions*; in "One," Tarn maintains that poets have "no alternative to / taking the whole world as our mother." *Atitlan/Alashka* (Boulder: Brillig Works, 1979): 57, includes Tarn's selected poems and prose, as well as poems written by Tarn and Janet Rodney.

⁸ See the special issue of *Boundary 2* (1975) on Tarn.

⁹ For an analysis of *Lyrics for the Bride of God* (New York: New Directions, 1975) see Fedora Giordano, "Il mito come metalinguaggio nella poesia di Nathaniel Tarn," *Letterature d'America* 5.2 (1984): 95-126.

¹⁰ Nathaniel Tarn, "Journal of the Laguna de San Ignacio," in *At the Western Gates* (Santa Fe: Tooth of Time Books, 1985) 3.

¹¹ *Seeing America First* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1989).