The Ancient World

LATE ANTIQUITY:
REBELS AND BRIGANDS

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Much gratified by colleagues' reactions to the poems with brief commentaries that I published as "Homage to Cavafy: Some Poems in Ancient Settings", *Ancient World* 32 (2001) 217-231, I offer here some more examples. The poems below were written in the period of April 2001 through February 2003. I have tinkered with the wording of some of them at the time of putting this collection together for publication, but they are presented largely as written, with dates of composition indicated. Those dates are sometimes significant. One poem, for example, was prompted by the first anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. That horrific event and the subsequent initiatives and attitudes of the second Bush administration supply the background for several of the poems.

I write this introduction and comments at a time when the American-British invasion of Iraq seems to have succeeded (as I never doubted it would) in its military objectives. But in the poems prompted by the impending war (February 27, 2003 is the composition date of the latest poem below) and by the disaster of "9/11" (e.g., a poem of October 1, 2001 and the above-mentioned one of September 11, 2002), I am less interested in the short-term prospects of victory or defeat and more interested in a long view of the situation of a world subject both to anti-American terrorism and to unapologetically assertive and preemptive American uses of power. Although I include a few short poems that are intended to provide a light-hearted change of pace, in general I believe that a historically-oriented poem, like a work of narrative history, should aspire to be not just short-term entertainment, but a *ktema es aiei*.

Two Meditations on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

**DEATHLESS GIFT**

I swam, luxuriating, exhilarated
by the boon that my most recent swim
had given me, a consequence
of the kindness of the spouse
- may Ishtar bless her! - of Utnapishtim.
Beside my glowingly renewed garments
on the bank of the pool lay the
prickly leaves that were my consolation
for the months and years I'd spent
in seeking *Atrahasis*, the Exceeding Wise.
Enkidu, my love, my brother
being dragged down to Irkalla,
I had thought of naught but death,
and of how one man of old,
from Shuruppak, the stories told,
had cheated it, through Ea's ark
and Enlil's final pronouncement:
That he and his should dwell in Dilmun,
at the mouth of the Rivers, forever.

And then I saw the snake.
As the earth-lion approached my clothes
and the inestimable, hard-won plant,
I swam with frantic strokes, and cries,
for shore. Too late! He bit into
the prickly leaves (he seemed to wince,
although his tearless eye gave little sign),
and instantly his brownish-grayish skin
was sloughed, and he was new
and golden-green, and swiftly sidling away.
Emerging from the pool, I grabbed at him,
unmindful of his probably-poisoned fangs,
but all I clutched was his dead skin.
The stripling snake was gone,
and with him all my hopes.

Urshanabi, the boatman, had not got
far away, when I approached him all in tears,
my clothes disheveled now, for all their newness.
In kindness he agreed to be my companion
on the sad, defeated trek I must make back
to Uruk. Yet on that journey, as we conversed,
the words of the wise ale-wife Siduri
re-entered my heart - the heart that had,
when she was giving me her good advice,
been too determined, bent too entirely
toward my unattainable objective.

As we approached my glorious city
and I espied its gleaming walls, I realized
again - as I had known before the sudden fall
of Enkidu had clouded all my understanding -
that mortals gain their everlastingness
only through their accomplishments.
"Observe the wall of Uruk, Urshanabi. Go up,
walk on it. Is it not burnt brick, and good?
Did not the Seven Sages lay its foundation?"
DEATH, WAR, WHIMSY: MORE POEMS ON ANCIENT THEMES

I entered joyously my city, and my first stop
was at the temple of my goddess mother, Ninsun,
to thank her for the wisdom that
my fruitless quest had given me.

November 3, 2001

ALTERNATIVE UNENDING

The earth-lion was surprised at my sudden,
noisy splashing from the pool. By the time
I grabbed for him, he had only eaten half
the wondrous plant - thanks be to all the gods for
its prickles, that slowed him. He regained his youth,
and left his shed skin in my hand, but I retained
some hope yet, in the remaining prickly leaves.

"Old man becomes young again", the plant
was called, I had been told by Utanapishtim.
The serpent had showed me that the magic worked,
but the small remaining clutch of leaves was far
too precious for experimenting - either on
some aged citizen of my town or on myself -
at least while I still had some youthful vigor.

Therefore, once I had reached Uruk, I hid it away,
telling no one of its existence, saving it for my old age.
Maybe then, my youth and strength renewed,
I could even set out on another journey,
maybe find again the precious plant, and painfully
pluck another sprig of it beneath the waters.

Years passed, then decades, the plant sealed up
in water, in a jar hidden within the inmost secret
reaches of the temple of my mother Ninsun.
My people came to love their aging king - a thing
that my behavior in my youth had made quite difficult.
Now I came to be known for justice and fair dealing,
far and wide. Kings of all the earth sent gifts.
JACK CARGILL

Yet meanwhile everyone around me took the path that Enkidu had trod - my wives, my courtiers, even many of my children. Although I had never touched the prickly plant, I attained without its help a rare old age. No doubt the great serenity I felt, the product of awareness that the plant was there when needed, contributed to my happiness and health. No doubt the wisdom of Siduri also aided me, as now I savored every day and moment.

At length, age finally was having its way with me, and the doctors had confined me to my bed. So now I summoned one of my granddaughters, my special favorite, to entrust her with the vital task of retrieving for me the jar containing the wondrous plant from the recesses of the temple of her ancestress. As the maiden entered my bed-chamber, I spoke.

"For you, my child, I have a mission", I said to the attentive maiden, solicitous of her frail grandfather, but to myself I said: "Soon, my dear, I will be younger than you are. We will then grow old together". Yet at the same time I was aware that immortality is the portion of the gods. My father, Lugalbanda, had given me his mortal nature, and already I had outlived almost everyone around me. If I repeat the process - and especially if I go through the quest again, and gain another cutting of the prickly plant - will not even memory of this lifetime fade? Will even Enkidu and our adventures be forgotten?

Speaking aloud again, I addressed the child: "Go to my mother Ninsun with this message. Tell her that Gilgamesh sends his love, and his farewell. Nothing more".

November 3, 2001
Three Whimsical Ancient Haiku

Ichor is liquor
to vampires - ye gods it's so
intoxicating!

1/26/02

We heard these doctrines
at Anaxagoras' house,
a.k.a. Chez Nous.

12/30/01

Oholibah, our
daughter, give joys and pleasures,
O holy Ba'al!

04/30/01

Playful but Thoughtful

NOT PEACE

Sam and Jesse
Nazirite and Nazarene
scourge of Philistines
and of philistine
money-chargers

Frank and Jesse
Cole Younger
Sam the younger
long riders all
bringers of the sword

Blessed are the peacemakers
Delilah, Judas, Bob Ford

May 11, 2001
JACK CARGILL

THE LAST

Aristeides,
Simon,
James.
Just guys!
Geez, brother,
why ostracize
'em?
Sick o' hearin'
'em
so called.

May 8, 2002

Four Ancient Angles on Modern War

LIKE THE ASSYRIANS?
OR LIKE THE JEWS?

Militarily, politically, and economically, the forces of Ashur dominated the world for a couple of centuries, imposing unequal sovereignty treaties on allies they coerced into vassalage. Those who rebelled were battered back into the Stone Age.

Grandiose pretense reigned in Judaea, too, where zealots talked of toppling Rome, and saving Messiahs were anticipated every day. Then would all nations bow to Yahweh, and accept the domination of the chosen people, for all time.

Nineveh fell and was destroyed. So was Jerusalem. Of mighty Assyria scarce a memory remained; writers among the Greeks had barely heard of it. From the Temple’s destruction, however, arose the Mishnah, then the Talmuds;
DEATH, WAR, WHIMSY: MORE POEMS ON ANCIENT THEMES

the Jews went underground, and lived.

Now we see our Mammon’s temples
topped, destroyed as thoroughly as those
of Ashur or of Yahweh. Which fate awaits
our self-proclaimed God-chosen empire?
Will we fight mightily all comers
to assert our power, while a passive
onlooking world anticipates our fall?

Or will we rally round our essence,
preserve what’s fundamental, things more
vital than power’s trappings and pretense?
Accept we dwell within a world where
others count, who must be brought along
if we are even to survive? And think
in centuries, not in quick fixes?

October 1, 2001

STATE OF WAR

Early Archaic Sparta,
home of prosperity, industry, and the arts.
Exquisite Laconian ceramic ware,
the lovely choral poetry of Alcman,
written feelingly from the
female persona he affected.

Then the Messenians’ river valley
was invaded, their regime was changed,
they were taken over,
made unwilling, fractious serfs.
Slowly, also in Laconia’s river valley,
everything began to change.
Security became the main thing,
the only thing.
Fear of sudden unexpected attack.
Decades, centuries on orange alert,
when not on red.
Meanwhile the red-cloaked Spartans worked their imperial will externally, everywhere they could. They mouthed platitudes of liberation, but favored narrow oligarchies and often supported, even imposed, tyrannies.

And Spartan culture?
It ended. Just stopped.
No time or resources for nonessentials.
Some martial verses from Tyrtaeus, then no more even of those.
No Spartan ever wrote a Spartan history.
No drama, no philosophy.
No architecture, no sculpture.

But worth it, they insisted.
No one could beat them in war, the real arena of manhood.
They outlasted artsy-fartsy Athens, brushed those effeminate wimps aside in barely twenty-seven years of fighting, thus proving their superiority.

Then one serious defeat at Leuctra and it all was over.
No further martial glory.
Once-mighty Sparta became a mere theme-park, a reservation to amuse the gawking Roman tourists.

Well, at least there was a revival of Laconian culture, art, literature?
No.
When a nation kills those, they stay dead.

February 11, 2003
POSSESSION FOR ALL TIME

(*ktema es aiei*)

Once a great democracy
- the greatest in the world -
was attacked on its home soil,
its finest edifices burned down,
by submissive followers of a
despotic alien lord.

With help from many allies
- some as despotic as the hated foe -
the reeling democracy recovered
and struck back, crushing the enemy
with ships of war,
sending its vessels in pursuit
to his own territory far away.

The recovery, the courageous
strong reaction, enlarged
the democracy’s self-esteem and pride.
But when allies grew recalcitrant,
it demanded and coerced obedience.
An alliance formed for mutual defense
became a device for waging
unprovoked aggressive war.

As allies protested
and enemies hardened in their hatred,
the imperial democracy fought on,
increasingly oblivious to opposition
from without and even from within.
A struggle lasting decades
began a self-destructive spiral
and left the world
without democracy for millenia.

September 11, 2002
When the Indo-European
-speakers came to Mesopotamia
to conquer and take over
the ancient Semitic civilization there,
their emperor proclaimed himself
a liberator, divinely designated.
The Babylonian ruler he displaced
had been committed to Sin,
allegedly to the detriment of
the true religion of the country.

The conqueror's propaganda,
given all the resources available
to him for its dissemination,
was widely accepted. A poet
from the people of Jerusalem
called him the Lord's Messiah.
Greek tradition saw him as a
father-figure, superior in character
to his imperial successors.

The Babylonian Chronicle,
however, showed that surrender
was not so willing, not so clearly
prompted by expectations of
liberation. It referred to a bloodbath
administered by the conqueror's army
at nearby Opis (on the Tigris,
close to modern Baghdad),
that had terrorized the capital
into its "joyful" capitulation.

And Babylonia remained
a troublesome, fractious satrapy,
repeatedly rebellious, often
devastated by later emperors.
Babylon opened again its gates
to the conqueror who ended
the empire that that Messiah
had created many years before.
DEATH, WAR, WHIMSY: MORE POEMS ON ANCIENT THEMES

Will the next Iskander speak Chinese?

February 27, 2003

Epitaph with Greek Themes

THANATOS POIETOU

"Death of a poet", that means.
The death of anyone is sad, be it
tragic, heroic, horrific, or even
(in the best cases) blessed relief.
But dying is not what poets are about,
however eloquently they have written of it.
Theodore Roethke's elegy for his student Jane
was perfect in equal measure with his
several meditations on his own
accelerating journey to that far field
toward which his cancer led him.

But the Greek poiein is
"to make", "to create", in other words
to bring to life, not death.
Amais m'epoiese - "Amais made me" -
"speaks" the Attic drinking-cup,
nor is it ever silenced by slow time.
So also "speak" Greek statues.
And poets - poietai - boast that they alone
bestow athanasios bios - undying life -
on those they love and honor.

So let it be with him we here
commemorate tonight. Let our words,
and his own, continue giving him
both life and speech. None of us knows
for certain when the pen we've wielded
goes forever dry. But let the marks
its ink has made live on,
and imprint minds yet unborn.
Poets leave the finest epitaphs!

October 31, 2001

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Commentaries

The poems on Gilgamesh were written, one immediately after the other, on the same morning, prompted by re-reading the epic for a class in which I assigned it as a text. The first is just a re-phrasing of developments presented in the epic itself, whereas the second is a "what if" meditation that treats the implications of a change (imposed by me) in the story line. The Maureen Kovacs translation (Stanford) largely underlies my phrasing, but the poems were spewed out without access to any text, just working from memory, so the "quoted" words addressed to Urshanabi in the first poem do not exactly reflect either Kovacs' translation or any of the several others I have read.

My three whimsical haiku do not pretend to follow all the principles of the genre, only to have lines of five, seven, and five syllables (assuming that the reader will grant me leave to count "our" as one syllable and "Ba' al as two). The first should be self-explanatory. The second employs rather desperate French-Greek word-play in connection with Anaxagoras' nickname of "Mind", or "the Brain". The third is prompted by the "allegorical history of Jerusalem and Samaria" (editorial subtitle in New Jerusalem Bible translation) in Ezekiel 23, where Oholibah is the name of the younger sister, Jerusalem. I am obviously taking a non-Ezekiel line, however.

The short poems I call "Playful but Thoughtful" tinker with word-associations to jump back and forth between biblical, classical, and modern individuals and situations. In "Not Peace" (implying "but a Sword", as the end of the second stanza makes explicit), Sam and Jesse are Samson and Jesus, as lines 2-5 make clear. Frank and Jesse, conversely, are the notorious James brothers, coupled with their outlaw companion, Cole Younger - all featured in the movie "The Long Riders". Mention of Cole Younger, however, makes me think of Sam the younger, i.e. the prophet Samuel, who butchers Agag, king of the Amalekites, at 1 Samuel 15:33. If Jesus and these other bringers of the sword (see Jesus' statement in Matthew 10:34) cause such destruction, should not those who brought about their deaths be regarded as peacemakers and be, accordingly, blessed (Matthew 5:9)?

"The Last" evokes Andre Schwarz-Bart's title, The Last of the Just, to comment on three men each called "the Just": Aristeides the Athenian (Plutarch, Aristeides 7), the High Priest Simon (Josephus, Antiquities 12.43), and James the brother of Jesus (Eusebius, Church History 2.1). The colloquial lines toward the end refer, of course, to the motive of the illiterate Athenian who asked Aristeides (without recognizing him) to write his own name on an ostrakon, when the statesman was being voted into temporary exile.

Of my "Four Ancient Angles on Modern War", the first (from late 2001) is a reaction to "9/11", the others (of late 2002 and early 2003) to the impending American action in Iraq. All show trepidation, all take a long view. As for Nineveh's being forgotten, although Herodotus (Book 1 passim) refers to it as Ninos, Xenophon (Anabasis 3.4) seems to call its ruins "Mespila".

"State of War" is less about war per se than about the Warfare State, and the perceptible diminution in support (financial and otherwise) for education and the arts in an America where government revenues fall (by design, through tax policies) while military expense soar. The somewhat awkward references to the southern Peloponnesus' two river valleys are meant to
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evoke the valley of the two rivers, Mesopotamia, i.e., Iraq. Other phrases as well (regime change, orange alert, etc.) emphasize the modern, as well as the ancient, implications of hostility or indifference to high culture.

Turning from Sparta to Athens, I borrow the famous phrase from Thucydides 1.22 that describes the historian’s account of his native city’s hubristic self-undoing, in a poem written on the one-year anniversary of the World Trade Center’s destruction for my Classical Greece class, and first publicly read there.

"Cyrus and Successors" moves from Greece to Mesopotamia and from Afghanistan to...Mesopotamia (Iraq)! Sin (capitalized) was the moon-god worshipped especially by Nabonidus, leading to neglect of the traditional cult of Marduk, according to the "Cyrus Cylinder" (see Pritchard, Ancient Near East, vol. 1, 206-208). Cyrus is called "Messiah" by "Second Isaiah" (Isaiah 45:1) and contrasted favorably with Cambyses and Darius I at Herodotus 3.89. The seventeenth-year passage from a Babylonian Chronicle (ABC no. 7) describes a massacre at Opis. Although Pritchard’s translated text (ANE 1, 204) perversely says "he (Nabonidus) massacred the confused inhabitants", the translation and interpretation in Kuhrt, Ancient Near East 659 more plausibly see the perpetrator as Cyrus. I employ "Issander" instead of Alexander both because I prefer it for the syllable count and because that is a name applied to him not by his own Hellenic adherents but by the conquered.

It seems appropriate to conclude with an epitaph, one I wrote to present at a memorial service for a local poet I knew only very slightly, which explains why the poem is far more general than specific, and full of classical and literary references. The Far Field (1964) is the title of a posthumously-published collection of Roethke’s poems; his "Elegy for Jane" is (I believe) from an earlier collection. The made-up fictional "quote" converts the descriptive phrase "the Amasis painter" into a personal name, then borrows wording from Keats’ "Ode on a Grecian Urn", where the vase is called "foster-child of Silence and slow Time". For the concept of poet-bestowed immortality (though not the precise phrasing here), see Theognis, Elegies 237-254 (Lattimore, Greek Lyrics 29).

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