

AASHISH KAUL

On reading Peter Boyle's Apocrypha

Peter Boyle, *Apocrypha: Texts Collected and Translated by William O'Shaunessy*
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*On grey days open the doors to the sky,
beat your carpets from the high walls.
The innumerable are returning.*

Apocrypha is a poem, a magic spell, a palimpsest, a leap into fantasy, a stab in the heart of Time, a lost treatise on forgotten tribes, a catalogue of incredible rites, a forest of unknown myths, an underground literary manifesto, a rejection of one in the face of many, a cry for unity in the midst of duality, a wish to exhaust language, a coming together of Being, a labour of love, a Book of Sand, a literary hoax.

The book comes to us in fragments – dating loosely from the Homeric age to the start of the second millennium in our time – by a certain "neglected classicist" and polyglot, William O'Shaunessy, retrieved after his death from the "chaos of his Wollstonecraft flat" by Peter Boyle to our great relief and profit. Boyle would like us to believe that his role is merely of editor and commentator, a device as old as writing itself (for modern scholarship openly discusses the place of Homeric poems in a preliterate oral tradition, making "Homer" nothing but an assumed name; some similarly argue about the Indian Epics and the teachings of Lao-Tzu) and one that has been used to good effect in the past century by writers like Nabokov, Pessoa, Cela, Eco, Bolaño, and – repeatedly and dazzlingly by – Borges.

Then again William O'Shaunessy is a curious name. "William" seems like a homage to Shakespeare for his felicity and visionary force but also because his fame has engendered several conspiracy theories, notably those that ascribe the composition of his works to Francis Bacon or Christopher Marlowe reducing the grandest name in English Letters to a hoax. Boyle himself mentions the Bard in his postscript (p. 257). "O'Shaunessy" appears to be an allusion to the heroin of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (spelt in the novel as: O'Shaughnessy), a model of cunning and falsity, who is not afraid to kill to claim for herself the jewel-encrusted mythic bird.

But enough of this. A name is just that: a name. A symbol of something, not that "thing". And the attempt of Boyle in *Apocrypha* is to use each and every trick of the language to show language itself to be a trick. The book is an appeal to go beyond language and processes determined by language (and power), foremost among them – History. In this, it is at once a salute to and a dig at Herodotus; not for nothing does the tone of the book imitates that of his *Histories*. In places it brings to mind Marco Polo's *Travels* too.

Here are peoples and tribes that "swallow secretively in tiny doses" crumbs of Pluto to "ward off sun-madness", those that swallow unlit fires and those that hunt for the "lost fire that dwells in the depths of ice", men that swallow the very possibilities of others, rolling "invisible fragments between their fingers", tribes "renowned for their addiction to every form of ownership and wealth", constantly narrowing the "portion of reality available to others" (mirroring our modern capitalist societies!), people who fear differences and wish for complete homogeneity, "adjusting their movements to the tremors of others' hands" as they eat the daily meal. There is the lost music of Parmenides – the fount of all human knowledge and wisdom – filling the city with a "profound odour of lilacs and wild honey", waiting to reappear on earth with the return of a true listener (one who can honour silence?). There is a sea that exists entirely above the earth; an enemy of twilight who perishes while proving its impossibility; the ancient languages of India, Greece, and Egypt: the first capable of expressing philosophical speculation matched to the "curved play of reality"; the second made for poetry, "fusing beauty, power, and human endurance"; and the last of magic, "speaking itself in dreams and in water, translating stars and rivers into birdsong". This is just Book-

One. I could go on. However, my intention is not to summarize (a futile activity; more so in the present case), only to generate interest.

These incredible accounts are interspersed with strange and bewitching poems of known and unknown antiquity by poets and exiles, both real and imaginary. Take, for instance, the following:

In the taverna
when all else is folded and put away,
when the city shuts like a leaden box –
the jewels all measured and assigned,
each with its name and date
dance
dance slowly
dance with a woman whose name you cannot say
in all her sadness and tiredness
she is stronger than death
hold her with infinite care –
in the soft of her back
rest your hand
steadier than the furthest star
let her arms guide you –
night is vanishing,
the gods are already entering the earth.

Now I am not aware whether the ancients suffered and composed thus. Aside from the word "taverna", the poem's idiom is very nearly that of our time. Yet what of it? Can one deny its charm and immediacy?

Boyle's difficulties grow where he "extends" poems of known poets like Catullus. In such cases, his technique is to serve small portions and cut the poems abruptly:

I hate you but I love you –
Why the fuck do I do this?
...
If you seek Catullus,
look for him far away
in the coiled smoke rising
from a pyre by the Ganges
...
This glittering, this lake polished by the wind
longing inscribed on the stem of a boat
too much death in the bones
I have done with smart-ass love poems . . .

Profound that he is, he looks to me a somewhat schizophrenic Catullus. Boyle, however, cleverly entitles these fragments “drafts and sketches” attesting to their provisional nature. Some of the poems of Irene Philologos and the exiled poet Omeros Eliseo (Walcott parodying Neruda?) either begin or end like a Japanese haiku (see, for instance: *“What lies below us, what lies above us, suddenly the one sky”*; and *“Jacarandas in Macabukro, almost spring”*), while the poetry of Erythemios is deeply spiritual. All this may be intentional – Boyle is reminding us that beneath all the grand names there is nothing. (Book-Seven ends with the words: *“Sitting by a river the Book yearns for its own vanishing.”* Or a little earlier: *“What happens to a book that claims to say everything? It breaks apart at the edges, like a space where the sky invades a building.”*)

Throughout the book the idiom moves fluidly from ancient to modern and back, but its subject is Epic, its sweep transcendental, brushing even the farthest stars. With a dash of drama in it, it doesn’t take much from us to surrender. I cannot recall a book I have read in recent years that has overwhelmed me with images of such astonishing richness and meaning giving me a vertigo more than once. Page upon page we encounter: Deeds of neglected emperors, scrolls of eastern kingdoms, secret libraries vanished forever, dead languages, lost books of Herodotus, Plato, and Pliny, the Elder, uncollected poems of Irene Philologos and

Catullus, echoes of the Upanishads and the Tao-te-Ching, of Buddhist lore and Bashō's poetry, vast palaces whose ceilings are covered with poems that induce stupor, a rare blue fish which when removed from its dwelling place in a snow-fed Himalayan river cries in Vedic – "I burn", calendars that teach ants how to avoid water, a poet who seeks "the mysterious number that undoes time", another whose subject is the Minotaur, yet another exiled on a mountain whose hand traces "the fineness of the sky and the longing of all men for freedom" and who leaves behind as his finest collection of poems five blank pages (a slimmer version of the Sufi's "Book of the Books"?). In it is Hippocrates conducting a regression therapy, melancholy men who feel the universe take a small but infinite step away from them, tribes that turn to trees at the sight of soldiers, alternative explanations to the Sirens' song, suitable defences for smaller kingdoms (among them: magnets to draw fierce sandstorms and the magic of becoming invisible), floating leprosariums, drifting marble cities, fragments of a Grecian urn that tell of the shores where Pharaohs gazed into stillness and wept "understanding too late how what is overlooked and despised alone blesses and saves", "the leaf-gatherer who returns to each leaf its dream of becoming fire", an old man bent above a blue lute threading time through his worn hands, the silent last days of Virgil, model cities that vanish from Africa and reappear in the same instant yet millennia away in the Balkans, the house for abandoned gods where they enjoy the cheerful commentary of seabirds and tempt Zeus with their simplicity and unmediated carelessness, all the great rivers of the world – the Bosphorus, the Nile, the Indus, the Ganges, and all its mountains and oceans, the beginnings of the Silk Route and the Spice Trade, a moonlake nestled in the Himalayas enroute to Tibet, all the errors of the world – from the bays of Troy to the Gulf of Persia, and all its poetry (even an ode to calm temporarily confused ghosts!). *Apocrypha* is a map of the lost kingdom placed over *this* one. In the tales of "Eusebius" and its neighbouring smaller dictatorships, we read the present day suffering of the two Americas. With its Manichean opposite "Ebtesum" buried (where else?) in the heart of Africa we see the prefigurement of Hegelian dialectics in a young world. Forces will clash and History will repeat itself ad infinitum because we never learn from our mistakes, because our greed and stupidity know no bounds. And "except in an

ideal world where all men have reached a calm moderation in judgement, democracy [will remain] the form of government that most favours war."

I am not unaware that in several places one may see a chilling parallel with the social ills that plague our world today: from imperialist conquests to industrialization to ecological imbalances to racism. It is here, if at all, that a flaw surfaces. For certain of these pieces, though never out of style or didactic in tone, are just too much of *this* world: they trouble the otherwise seamless mythic feel of the book. Yet Boyle recovers ground elsewhere. In the following lines, although the Muse is of the ancients, she sings for us as well:

Sand has been called the material of death. In reverencing sand we reverence the fate that has made us limited, acknowledging the right of every other being to replace us. After the collapse of Kitezah the art of building in water was lost. Sand became the favoured mode of construction as if to signify that henceforth man would make his home inside death. Sand is the marker of absence. Placed over the eyes of the dead, it prevents them seeing themselves in mirrors.

A work such as *Apocrypha* has many beginnings and influences. Boyle himself refers to, among others, Michaux, Cortazar, Pessoa, Swift, Joyce, and Borges. I will briefly discuss the last three. For the black humour and fantastic landscape that permeates the book, Swift is an obvious name that comes to mind. I am happy to also ascribe to him the prophetic tone of the writing. On the other hand, Borges's shadow fills the text – to me his half a dozen stories contain the germ of *Apocrypha*. They are *Tlön*, *Uqbar*, *Orbis*, *Tertius*, *The Immortal*, *The Ethnographer*, *The Book of Sand*, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, and *The Library of Babel*. I could list a score of poems as well. Drawing from the four corners of earth, creating fictitious works and authors, sinking in minute and at the same time infinite ideas is a typical Borgesian pastime. Take, for example, the following passage:

In the annals of Enobius it also states that true Emperors do not require their rule to last for prolonged epochs. The Emperor Wu Li's Kingdom covered the entire earth but lasted only the time it takes for a leaf to fall from an oak tree to the soil beneath. In those few moments his decree on the irreversibility of truth was recognised somewhere in the deep recesses of all stone and water.

To say so much in so few words and with such a light touch elevates writing (usually the lowest) to the highest art known to man. To me, these are among the best lines of the book. The influence of Borges is evident here. Even of Kafka.

However, of Joyce I am not so certain. My reason is this. Aside from names like "Eusebius", "Ebtsum", and "Qomqwakum" where one may wish to see the word-play of *Finnegans Wake*, a Beckettian (and Borgesian) distrust for language pervades the tone of *Apocrypha*. For early in the book, Boyle writes: "*speech beyond words had always been the true birthplace of humans.*" Also, for such a complex play of ideas, there is little Joycean insistence on word games. In the end, the book's message comes to us not because of the words, but in spite of them. One may, of course, borrow from Joyce the ability to crack open the minds of his characters in a single phrase. One may easily learn this from Henry James too.

A word on the *Postscript & Appendices*. The so called entries from O'Shaunessy's notebooks are conveniently inserted to grant us a peek into his life, and work well. They provide a justification for O'Shaunessy's lifework, showing him to be one of those heroic poets and men of letters who not finding acceptance in the society, trail along the margins attracting to themselves misfortune, pain, and suffering like a magnet. O'Shaunessy's stories read like those published each week by the *New Yorker*. The following lines from his poem could well have come from Erythemios:

So many years adding on,
marking the slow
encroachment of perfection
but living would be beautiful

drinking the still-standing water
in the tall glass
that mirrors the world.

Just like Enobius, the Emperor of Palmyran legions, who felt that "every true utterance slipped between the ghost future he sensed all around him and the physical future that would come", we fail to exhaust the possibilities that each moment brings us, forever watchful of the void about to open at our feet. To this, the Poet's cry rises up from the pages: Behold, the shining of inner worlds! And we are tempted to look. For a book – for any book – I know no higher praise.