

To Bernard Fairclough: the War having begun

Ray Watkinson

Well Bernard, now we hear the engine
thrown into gear, the grinding wheels revolve,
much as we heard them in imagination
when, eighteen months since, or two years, or longer,
we would predict (how calm in speculation!)
the ending of this world.

Jehovah's witness

knocked at my door last Sunday, told me simply,
'Armageddon is here.' I said politely,
'I am not interested. I have read your pamphlets,
and so, good morning.'

And so goodnight! The shutter
clicks, and a different angle on our retina
builds stereoscopic horrors out of idylls
we painted flatly, as 'pure decoration.'

We were not unprepared: we saw this coming,
and yet how little wisdom can console. Forewarned,
we were still not fore-armed. Though no evasion
or loophole offered, and we saw the distant
peaks toppled down in glaciers to the valley,
we have done nothing, made no get-away
(that was not for us) nor prepared defences
against the avalanche. What were we few
to build a barrier strong enough to girdle
and bind the crumbling of the entire range?
So with the rest we wait the imminent yawn
that swallows us: and hope that in the spring
when the floods melt and the denuded rocks
rub shoulders through the dingy swirl of water,
we may with Noah's raven find a foothold,
and like the great diluvian himself
commence our reconstruction with a fitting
sin-offering, oblation, sacrifice. Seeing the bow in heaven,
we'll hope with Noah for continuance
of divine mercy: but remembering
how he got drunk, and fell, let us keep sober.

We? Yes, three years ago I could say so. Since then
our ways have lain apart. It may well be
the pronoun is no longer so inclusive
as then it was: bracketting new acquaintance
with older friends, I may be straining friendship
over the gaps in time, in mind, in feeling.
We, may no longer bind, but separate,
and though together in the Cyclops cave
we were imprisoned, maybe your way out
differs from mine. I'm for destroying
outright, this Polyphemus: letting wander
out to destruction, all his bleating sheep.
Then, if his brothers come, and ask who did it,
'No man' shall not suffice. We will acknowledge
the bloodstain in our skin; then let them wonder
which way to turn, seeing their terror ended,
and the great race of Cyclops one by one
tumbled down headlong.

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