

FOREWORD

Nathaniel Tarn: Through the Gates of Atlantis

JOSEPH DONAHUE

On those vast shady hills between America & Albion's shore;
Now barr'd out by the Atlantic sea: call'd Atlantean hills . . .

—WILLIAM BLAKE

I

Nathaniel Tarn's *Atlantis, an Autoanthropology* is a far-ranging testimonial to the life and times of a fictional character. Our protagonist, who's been everywhere, met everybody, done more in one lifetime than might most in multiple reincarnations, is also the most prescient poet of our time. Fictional, but not. This Atlantis is not fiction but is the history of a fiction, an imagined identity made actual of a pseudonymous poet, Nathaniel Tarn, taken up, lived to the extreme, by one who wished to locate his being out of an exhausting profession into a life in poetry. The tale told is nothing less than a meditation on modern identity, an adventure in self-understanding that lays bare the social, familial, historical, and personal forces making us who we are, making us not want to be who we are, then making us want to become another. Nathaniel Tarn has lived words famed in his natal tongue: *Je est un autre*. Our author and our self-created protagonist, "Nathaniel Tarn," named thus legally on becoming an American citizen, has had such a rich life

that his very pen name would seem to have its own ontology encoded within it, never to be quite revealed, despite the disarming candor of the following pages.

II

A well-credentialed, widely published Franco-British anthropologist, Dr. E. Michael Mendelson created Tarn, all those years ago, to save his creative life from the censure of his profession. Now Tarn returns the favor. (Borges, in eternity, will decide who the ultimate author of this book is.) Let's simply note that the signatory, Tarn, has devised an exceptional way to write his double life: the Throw. These Throws create an ever-absorbing mix of time, tone, place, and narrative, all the while acknowledging the author's pervasive philosophical concern and the source of his deepest terror, arbitrariness. Tarn draws the idea of the Throw from the practice of making pottery, so alerting us, as if we need a still more erudite prompting, to see what is so pervasive through the work: his affection for craft culture of all ages and all places. While utilizing to vivifying effect this formal innovation, *Atlantis, an Autoanthropology* is also haunted by the throw, by another sort of throw, the throw of the dice of our lives: the fate set in play for us, each and every day. Tarn is tantalized by the possibility of stable, permutable forms, within which contingency can be recognized and can even provoke delight. Each Throw of Tarn's prose takes us places, returns us to places, takes up ideas, celebrates friends, documents events, spins a tale, laments a loss, sings whatever is well made. Both in form and content this book is a continuous meditation on the interrelation of freedom and fate. We begin at the beginning: our individual's story, as told by Tarn. The opening Throws move through acutely rendered accounts of early years, gracefully weaving a dense social and cultural web. It's a world full of feeling, lightened of any lugubrious dwelling on what was. Tarn, writing with his twinned capacities, those of the poet and those of the anthropological observer, can, with a single well-turned detail, catch the intersections of multiple worlds: the natural world, the world of personal feeling, and the full social fact of being alive in a time and a place.

III

Imagine a child during the Battle of Britain, holed up in a hotel, Nazi bombs falling all round. Or a Jewish refugee life in England as the war rages. Or the indignities of the classroom. Or the pain of learning to be English but never being quite English enough. Throws divide the telling of a double life into serial renditions of fate, within which myths, mountains, fabrics, temples,

money, gossip, sex, family, and portraiture take on the impromptu gravitas of tarot cards. The Tarn-to-be finds his way, through the war, through school and college, through the cafés of Paris. He finds he's not alone: Claude Lévi-Strauss, André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and George Steiner are there. Many others whom history remembers pass through the Throws. So too, we meet and feel a fond regard for those the world has yet to hear of, but who are known to the poet, for insights, gifts, abilities, kindnesses, and in some cases, yes, slights. They all return here. Throws can tell you what a wonderful lunch on a certain day was like or can unfold brief, marvelous essays, philosophical asides worthy of Emil Cioran, Elias Canetti, or Roberto Calasso. The flow of the prose keeps us close. Museums, poetry, poetics, religious systems, love affairs, travel arrangements, the sublime, all are recurrent stations in a life lived in devotion to detecting the shapes that culture makes. At any moment in this textual Atlantis, this fieldwork from nowhere, Tarn might be finding his way to an abandoned temple, or sketching out cultural networks, or casting a cold eye on academic life, or delving into ecstasies, or sounding out despair. He might be evaluating a hallucinogen taken while driving or giving us the skinny about having been proclaimed a god.

IV

Before his birth, Tarn had two fields of expertise (the double, doubled!). He had lived two scholarly lifetimes of hands-on experience regarding two immensely complex subjects, Mayan culture and Burmese Buddhism. But then, the intrigue of identity begins at birth if not before, in 1928, in France, to a French-Romanian mother and a British-Lithuanian father. His family fled the continent of Europe for England as the war began. He-who-would-be-Tarn learned quickly how moving between cultures sharpens one's wits. Our narrator lived the discipline of anthropology long before he met Lévi-Strauss. He clearly sensed the double life ahead; he was already writing poetry in his native French, publishing poetry under yet another pseudonym. It becomes increasingly less clear who created whom in the legend of poetic vocation that this book spins out, where a French-born English poet finds in mid-century anthropology the truest singing school. In these pages, an apparently effortless lyricism arises from what in other hands would be simply the routines of fieldwork. (Fellow travelers such as Octavio Paz and Kamau Brathwaite offer equivalent examples of how a visionary poetry can draw so robustly on the intellectual disciplines of our age.) From the perspective of his immense and distinguished body of poetic work, his anthropological writings shine in a poetic light. Such works as *Scandals in the House of*

Birds or even, as Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership*, arise from a conviction that the totality of human life across time can be to a meaningful degree fathomed. They work out the logic of some of Tarn's most moving and luminous poems. (Consider his masterpiece, "Palenque.") Anthropology informs as well his landmark contribution to poetics, "The Heraldic Vision," gathered in *The Embattled Lyric*, where Blake and Victor Turner assist the poet in a critical rethinking of projective verse, ethnopoetics, and much else. His vast poetry embodies Robert Redfield's dream of fathoming different worldviews. Tarn makes cosmological empathy integral to the act of writing. Each Throw of his prose attests to a lifetime practice of notating, reflecting upon, collating, categorizing, and more, feeling the pain and delights of others. He models a deep and never-ending initiation into the human sciences, which shine with a restored heroism in his works.

V

The belief that origins and ends can be known, or at least imagined so fiercely and particularly that they can be understood to be "known," the proposal that culture at its most exalted is within reach of anyone willing to look hard for it, is embedded in the first word in the title. Atlantis gives the book its title but appears nowhere within it, which is in keeping with its nature. The science of man, and the individual life of practitioner of that science, lie on the far side of a grammatical equal sign, as if they derive from a place that never existed or certainly no longer exists. A watery abyss opens on the left-hand side of the comma. Is this the autoanthropology of a life lived in Atlantis, that most lavishly orchestrated absence in Western tradition, that place of first promise and last catastrophe? Are the rituals and daily practices of a life lived in oblivion about to be revealed? The title hints at an anthropological lineage that predates anthropology while claiming a literary historical one, where Atlantis has long been linked to America, the land where Nathaniel Tarn, who had longed for America as a wartime schoolboy, saluting a nearby stars-and-stripes flag, devouring a life of Lincoln, made a new life and career as a poet. The lost continent compels a further curiosity: Is Tarn's Atlantis not that of Plato or Bacon or Moore, or Donnelly or Guénon, but rather the last mountaintops of the sunken land located by William Blake between England and America? Did Tarn, on his way between continents, harbor in Atlantis? Lack of mention confirms the suspicion. Recall that in *America: A Prophecy* Blake can see, from the still-visible peaks of that lost land, Orc, an

initially terrifying figure of boundless creative and revolutionary fury, who, transmuted and set free to the winds, will blow from Blake's work all through the Tarn universe. *Atlantis, an Autoanthropology* shows a Tarn who shares with Blake outrage at inequity, delight in heretical religious thought, reverence for sexual love, and an acute grasp of the origins of social conflict. And more: like Blake, our narrator has a keen eye for artisanship. He can see eternity in the weave of a fabric, in the excellence of an everyday utensil, in the demeanor of a ritual mask, in any curio or icon or altarpiece. This is in keeping with the progressive political vision inherited from anthropology, from MacDiarmid, from Neruda, from his own conscience, and confirmed for him in his visit to Atlantis.

A commitment to a vision of a cosmos arising from the possibility of a just social order had already begun to delineate itself with *The Beautiful Contradictions*, written in the mountains of Wales, no doubt looking toward those bright summits from which, Blake says, we might pass into the Golden world. Atlantis is, for Tarn, the vantage from which the glories and tragedies and the still living hope of human cultures can be seen. It is also, within any culture, the point, possibly obscure, where access to the Golden world might present itself to the metaphysically driven sojourner. All of Tarn's writing, taken together, is a single initiation into what Blake would call the visionary forms dramatic, where mind, heart, eternal truths and historical contingencies contrive a life in transfigured time.

VI

The book at hand is the bright summit of a life of writing, a life that has passed though world after world, and continually finding itself reborn within a next. Passing, that is, again and again, into and out of, the gates of Atlantis, that land of forests and palaces, sometimes remembering them, sometimes not, sometimes imagining a glory beyond them where the soul reunites with the One, sometimes, and never so eloquently as in his recent poetry, despairing to ever taste transcendence, ever to feel ecstatically torn open to the cosmos. (Readers familiar with his immense poem *Lyrics for the Bride of God* will recall Tarn's long-standing interest in gnostic agonies.) Tarn's *Atlantis, an Autoanthropology* is an ode in prose, an intellectual hymn, a spiritual confession, a tall tale, a night of great talk, a warm welcome, a feast of thought, a lesson in how to look, how to think, how to endure, how to grasp the moments we ourselves enter and exit. Page after page brings worlds, some we know, some we dream about. It's a book bearing witness to a life lived, and suffered, and transformed into art.