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"And the People Love It": Peter Dale Scott's Terror

Peter Dale Scott, *Coming to Jakarta: A Poem about Terror*, McClelland and Stewart, 1988, 159 pp.

In the last section of this book-length poem, Peter Dale Scott quotes from the gnostic gospel of Thomas:

> If you bring forth
> what is within you
> it will save you
>
> if you do not bring forth
> what is within you
> it will destroy you

Much of *Coming to Jakarta* is an exploration of the frightening consequences of this self-examination. The poem is about the terror of politics, of personal history, and of the imagination's desperate desire to find some sense of balance in a world both gone mad and comfortable within its madness.

In order to bring forth what is within him, Scott follows a tripartite path delineated in the first few lines of the poem. He tells us there are three desks in his office — at one he reads of Virgil's "descent into the underworld," at another he tries to sort out "clippings of failed Swiss banks / or of slow killings on meat hooks / in a well-guarded Chicago garage," and at the third desk

> . . . this one
> is where the typewriter
> stares at me with only
> a sheet of white paper
> from which my blank mind
>
> is averted with an
> unmistakable almost
> diamagnetic force
>
> as the page blurs
> to the size of a movie screen
> watched by a captive amphitheatre

of all the letters there are
containing among them every poem
the mean vaults at the back of my head

would rather kill me than let go of

The book proceeds by following these three paths, sometimes one at a time, sometimes all simultaneously. The "underworld" into which Scott descends in this poem is that of organized political crimes — the crimes; of the CIA, the FBI, of high-ranking American and Southeast Asian politicians. In particular, the "1965 massacre / of Indonesians by Indonesians," is documented in gruesome detail. The "meat hooks" and "banks" of this poem are Montreal's Sun Life Assurance Company, Dow Chemical and a host of other companies and individuals blindly or willingly complicit in international crime.

The third path, that of the poem itself and the making of the poem, is implicit everywhere in *Coming to Jakarta*. The typewriter's "amphitheatre" of letters slowly, relentlessly, documents the scratching through memory and its lapses toward a recreation of history. Scott fashions out of innuendo and secrecy "the murmurations / of the spreading / killer wind." The reader is always conscious that there is *creation* going on here, but it is a strange sort of creation. The poem is not some synthetic assemblage — a fractured and partial world formed out of a seamless wealth of images. Somehow Scott is able to take half-truths, official lies, and fragments of memory, and put them together to form something much larger than the sum of the parts.

Scott tells us he is not just "recalling" these events, he is "telling" them. He builds a poem out of the multifarious sources of history, including Amnesty International documents, the *Bhagavad Gita*, U.S. government military intelligence reports, his own studies of the CIA's involvement in Vietnam and the killing of John F. Kennedy, among many others. The poem is also about the strength of the individual imagination to somehow begin to ask the right questions. One of the hidden terrors of this poem is letting someone else make history for you, rather than making it yourself. As Scott says, he is aware of a tunnel having been dug "through generations of suppressed memory." This poem documents the terror of suppressed memory as well as the terror of liberating that memory.

As the son of Marian Dale and F.R. Scott, Peter Dale Scott grew up in a privileged household, surrounded by talk of politics, art and poetry. *Coming to Jakarta* skips back and forth among childhood remembrances, the slow development of these remembrances in Scott's expanding sympathies, and the horror of present political atrocities. This skipping back and forth is evident from the opening pages of the poem, where he allows the reader inside the genesis of the poem. The first few sections describe the nebulous and faltering beginnings of the poem, telling us how he is in danger of losing hold "forever / of this thin bright / thread of my particular life / which hovers here in front / of me like an apparition." At the beginning of the poem he is simultaneously circling the world in an aircraft and descending into his memories and secrets, until he

is able to tell us that the poem, almost beyond his own intervention, begins to take shape: "I begin to discern how / to my relief this is to be / beyond the confines of my mind / a poem about terror."

Yet what does terror mean for Scott? Is it physical torture, psychological warfare, indoctrination, pure imagination, memory, history, the future "that cannot escape us," or all of these? Is terror a thing that we can describe, or is it something that can only be lived through and perhaps never articulated? Are we all victims and accomplices in the acts and results of terror? Throughout the poem Scott leads us through these and many more questions, often fanning the flames of inquiry but never giving us the definitive, comfortable answer. Although the poem is about terror, it is also about our embracing or at least acceptance of terror: "To have learnt from terror / to see oneself / as a part of the enemy / can be a reassurance."

By letting us inside his awakening sympathies and research interests Scott allows us to understand what he means when he speaks of terror. As a scholar during the Vietnam era he was producing "footnotes on Laos / in so-called non- / schismogenic investigation" while his best friends "were always saying *choose*" (43). Later, after he has attended an academic conference

I could think only of
an eleven-year-old
and four adults

canoeing among the
waterlily pads
of the upper Charles

hand trailing in the water
I was allowed to taste
their twenty-five-cent

California chianti
as the canoes nosed
deeper into the rushes

playing hide-and-seek
no suggestion yet
of the fall of the Kuomintang

the arms and narcotics traffic
unmarked planes out of T'ainan
Shig Katayama the Sumatrans

but only the inveterate
poet and connoisseur
Li Po

After the poem itself has decided that it is to be about terror, all the while leading Scott into an understanding of his own memory, it becomes simultaneously more documentary and more philosophic. The ambitious middle sections sometimes present long lists of names, figures and historical references. I use the word ambitious because these are the hardest parts of the poem to follow.

They require a knowledge of U.S. foreign policy, wartime and peacetime tactics, as well as a knowledge of the American anti-war movement, which the extensive bibliography can aid. At the least, these middle sections require an understanding of the battle for power between Sukarno, the president of Indonesia from 1945 to 1967, and Suharto, who took control in 1967. Sukarno's forces, backed by the Communists, were routed by the U.S.-backed Suharto in 1965. Estimates are that 500,000 Indonesians were killed. In his chronology of the events Scott notes that James Reston writing in the New York *Times* describes the "Indonesian massacre" as "A Gleam of Light in Asia" and that Richard Nixon apparently stated that the "Indonesian experience" showed how "we should handle our relationships on a wider basis . . . in the world."

The title *Coming to Jakarta* is an allusion to the phrase "Djakarta se acerca" ("Jakarta is approaching") which was written on small cards distributed by CIA agents in Chile in 1973. At the time, they were helping draft bogus documents alleging that Allende was planning to behead military commanders.

At times this middle section is numbingly journalistic, at other times Scott steps away from the story he is telling to present a personal anecdote. At one point he describes a small resistance to the Vietnam war that he and thirty other Berkeley faculty members put up in "the melancholy beauty / of a fog-calm morning / on the Sproul Hall steps." They were, says Scott, not very effective. They were merely "nudged to one side / in slow motion / the way a sure hand guides / crumbs off a table."

At other times in this middle section Scott steps back from the events he documents to talk of the terrible love that he has experienced:

> . . . I could never
> replicate on this machine
> What I am talking about
>
> *I lack*
> *therefore I am*
> however childish and
>
> imperfectly remembered
> is ontological
> has to do with the rare times
>
> one trembles in bed
> from terror
> out of love

At other times he addresses the reader, attempting to answer such questions as "How can one write about terror?" and "Isn't this only a gentle rendering, almost a lessening, of genuine, physical terror?":

> and to that reader
> who like myself has been plunged
> to the heart of once terrifying

now daily love
it will be clear why these words
cast no dark shadows

though there was once such a dawn
the word *love* itself decays
till it loses meaning

Yet despite what Scott says, these words do cast dark shadows, which gather and present ominous scenes in the final pages of the book. The poem builds to a crescendo of the earth's abuse of itself, of evil that seems omnipotent and officially sanctioned. The litany of destruction includes portentous passages from the book of Revelations and the *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as references to Jonestown, nuclear suicide, drought, deluge, Jack Ruby, phone tapping, "a biblical whirlwind," East Timor, Saigon opium, and Alamogordo. And lest we attempt to remove ourselves from guilt, or try to ignore our collective responsibility for the terror within these pages, Scott quotes from Jeremiah: *"small and great alike / all are given to gain / prophet and priest practice fraud / and the people love it."*

The litany of destruction (what he called at the beginning of the poem "the spreading / killer wind") includes Oppenheimer quoting the *Bhagavad Gita*: "the terrible beauty / of energy come forth / to destroy the worlds." Again, no easy answers from Scott, for terror simultaneously has elements of beauty and destruction. What we are left with at the end of the poem is that most simple of activities, breathing:

let there be the courage
not just to have seen

but to ease into the world
the unreal
breathing within us

Although "it is by imagination's failure / that we go on surviving," and although "we live by forgetting," the book becomes a purging of Scott's own memory and research, as well as a way to warn and frighten readers out of complacency. The book is from its opening moments a melding together of the microcosmic and individual with the macrocosmic and universal. What we are left with is a meditation on terror and its comforting, disrupting, terrifying consequences.