

A Fantasy Rapanui--Two poems of the early 20th Century

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At the turn of the century, sometime between 1898 and 1906, the Rector of Drummondville, a small town southwest of Quebec, penned the following poem (Smith 1960:91):

There lies a lone isle in the tropic seas,
A mountain isle, with beaches shining white,
Where soft stars smile upon its sleep by night,
And every noonday fans it with a breeze.
Here on a cliff, carved upward from the knees,
Three uncouth statues of gigantic height,
Upon whose brows the circling sea birds light,
Stare out to ocean over the tall trees.

For ever gaze they at the sea and sky,
For ever hear the thunder of the main,
For ever watch the ages die away;
And ever round them ring the phantom cry
Of some lost race that died in human pain,
Looking towards heaven, yet seeing no more than
they.

Frederick George Scott (b. Montreal 1861; d. Quebec 1944) called his poem simply *Easter Island*. In his own notes he explains: "Written on a hand car [presumably a pony and trap; he often refers to a 'hand-car' as his means of transport when he is visiting his dispersed parishioners] near Drummondville. I had been reading an account of that mysterious island about two thousand miles from Chile, and of the huge statues there, the only expression of the religion of an unknown race who perished long ago and left no other trace of its existence. The paths of the blind groping to truth in a dead race impressed me." (Scott 1910).

The poem was included in his first collection published in 1910 when he was already Canon (later to be Archdeacon) of Quebec cathedral. He was known as the 'poet of the Laurentians' and his poems generally sounded a note of religious pessimism that does not reflect his very positive--often anti-establishment view of life--evidenced by his poem in the name of the Indians on the Queen's jubilee in 1887 which was very much a rebuke: "we perish with the pine-tree and the bird", and by his theological stand that was so 'High Church' that he had to come to England to be ordained. As an army chaplain during the First World War he showed notable courage and continued to support the veterans after the end of hostilities (Tonge 1983).

It is most probable that, judging by the reference to 'three uncouth statues', his vision of Rapanui was derived from a picture he had seen, in a journal perhaps, of some of the statues on Rano Raraku since he has them gazing at the sea, though the 'sea-birds' and 'tall trees' and 'beaches shining white' are more problematic: one wonders what publication he had been reading?

Some twenty years later in 1923, a young man who had just

finished his studies with a Doctorate in Arts, published his first book of poems, *Archipel*, that included a cycle entitled *Rapanui*, before joining a ship bound for Indonesia and the Far East. He was Jan Slauerhoff, the most gifted of the Dutch poets between the wars. He followed in the steps of the French 'poètes maudits', so it is no surprise to find that the three poems that make up his Rapanui cycle present an even gloomier picture than Scott's verses. He loved the South Seas and traveled around them for most of his short life--he died racked with tropical malaria, though it was pneumonia that carried him off in 1936, aged only 38.

The following is an attempt at a prose translation of Slauerhoff's three 'atmospheric' poems (Slauerhoff 1990:70-73). There is only one footnote in the original, it is the longitude 109.28 and latitude 27.8 of the island with the note: 'The last summit of a sunken continent.'

Rapanui I

Towards the middle of the widest sea
Lost, drifting,
Estranged and equally distant
From all three continents,
Only once does a landfall succeed
At the Isle far off--
The waves that break against it
Touch no other coasts.
Are nourished from afar,
By plumed or floating seeds
Washed ashore by currents strong,
Or fallen from the passing flight
Of petrels or stiff winds,

This Isle is avoided,
Circumnavigated
Currents stream past in a wide arc,
It is unvisited by drifting seeds, ocean currents, ship.

No rank late-blooming flowers,
No budding leaves on graves,
No remnants of a dying race,
Antiquity alone has gnawed the only rock of faith
In the past.

II

Age-long still surviving grey black ash,
It brings a heavy charge against forlornness,
For all the power
Of the celestial light that comes smiling from the
South Seas,
Between deep wave-green and high cloud-blue,
Over lands sunken out of sight.
At the three corners stand pollarded towers
Volcanoes averted from the scattered mounds inland
Internally quenched,

As signs immediately known
To any of those lost souls
Who under sail or on the wing might veer towards it.

Gone are those buried deep in ash,
Slowly the tuff and the lava wear away
The Isle reaches down to its ancient depth
When the last of those who were born too late,
Returned from his wanderings, goes in through the
final entrance.

III

Only after inflicting shipwreck does it allow a
landing.
It staves off anchorage with cliffs along the beaches;
From time immemorial it has burned their boats--a
landing
To which fate has driven them, so far that further
They can not, for here their lives will never float again
Who from birth stare at the lava statues of the caves of
bones.

The paths into the Island wind and turn through
twisted bushes,
Sharpened with shards from broken vessels.
Sometimes the ground caves in over buried hatches.
But on the hillsides where grey grasses
Split the stones, ferns grow from the clefts,
Statues stand, their faces to the sea, on mighty
terraces,
Lintels to vanished temples.

Longing for the past makes centuries melt
Like quick-falling flakes of snow along the path.
Fiery lava covers the mountain slopes,
The volcanoes smash open undamaged ground
The falling rocks hit the statue blocks
Smash to pieces the wavering swaying giants

Who, delving into the rocks as they fall into glowing
crater
In the midst of disaster carve statues of themselves,
Dumb faces, burdened only with the knowledge
That they existed, seen throughout the ages.

The old places are crushed, sunk in the depths,
The deep sea has absorbed their half-carbonized
flanks
And slowly they reach the layers without waves, like
wrecks.
But above the annihilated race there are
Hundreds of statues; beacons for people lost in time.
They overlook the sea under which the violation
Of the old took place, withholding their immeasurable
contempt
Monstrously, for no realm ever became more
majestically
So gloomy in the overpowering force of death.

But through them the Past calls to later people who if
need be
Fade away only to return again, as It expects.

Slauerhoff is in some ways even more speculative than
Scott. The geology and chronology are vague, to say the least
of it. Potsherds and lintels are the stuff of conventional
archaeology so he imagines them on Rapanui too. Once again
it is the statues on the side of Rano Raraku that he *might* later
have seen in reality but certainly not before he wrote his
poem. In fact there is no positive evidence that he ever made
landfall on the Island. On the other hand, in the University
Library of Leiden there is a small picture album about
Slauerhoff which reproduces page 240 of a publication *De
Aarde en haar Volken (The World and its Peoples)*. This page
gives two images of Rapanui, one of Rano Raraku's statues
looking out to sea (*van binnen*) and the other entitled *De
pakeopa Opulu* showing two statues with large 'hats' (*ha'u*)
covered in petroglyphs in the foreground, and a number of
other statues, also covered in petroglyphs, ranged behind.
They are both reproduced in the work of Stephen Chauvet
(1945, Figs. 36 and 43) and noted as drawings by A. de Bar
based on sketches by Alphonse Pinart which he made when
he landed from the *Seignelay* on Easter Sunday 1877
(Horebeek 1979:70-71). The drawing of Opulu is noted as
a 'reconstruction' by Pinart as to how the *ahu (pakeopa)*
would have looked before the statues had been toppled over!
(Chauvet 1945:304). The page has Slauerhoff's signature at
the bottom and the date of 6 July 1913--[born September 15,
1898 he was not yet 15 years old and already fascinated by
distant lands.]

Slauerhoff's descriptions are not all imaginary. There are a
number of accurate points corresponding to the *realia* of
Rapanui: the three volcanoes at the three corners, the 'caves
of bones', the 'grey grass' the *mauku*, the humpy ground
inland. As regards the obscure reference to collapsing ground
over hidden hatches, this might be an allusion to collapsing
houses of the Orongo type or to covered *pae* or *paenga*. He is
obviously aware also of the difficulties of landing given that
there is no natural harbor. So that we must conclude that the
description he read in the *Aarde en haar Volken* must have
been fairly detailed, possibly based on Pinart's report to the
Société de Géographie de Paris, 1878, or more likely
Pinart's *Tour du Monde*, 1878 (Horebeek 1979:70-71). □

References

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