

Roy Campbell, John Davidson, and "The Flaming Terrapin"

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IN MANY WAYS, John Davidson (1857-1909), a contributor to *The Yellow Book* and a member of the Rhymers' Club, was a typical late Victorian minor poet. Tennysonian and Pre-Raphaelite echoes abound in his collections of ballads, songs, and "Fleet Street" eclogues; continually his work is shot through with strains of Thomas Carlyle, Lord Byron, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde. Occasionally, however, he exhibited modernity in his use of language and choice of subject matter. Both T. S. Eliot and Hugh MacDiarmid acknowledged the influence upon them of this aspect of Davidson's poetry.¹ In his comments, MacDiarmid also indicated approvingly how a forceful individualism and a passionately exacting temperament led Davidson in the last phase of his career to produce a poetry that treated science within a framework of Nietzschean and materialist philosophy. Another admirer of Davidson was the South African poet Roy Campbell.² He too was especially struck by these last works of Davidson's, with results that are demonstrable in *The Flaming Terrapin*.

As a youth at Oxford in 1919, Roy Campbell had read Nietzsche eagerly and from then on was greatly affected by his ideas.³ One of the major results of Campbell's desire to convey Nietzsche's spirit and views in his own writing was his search for possible models expressive of Nietzsche in the work of other writers, principally Bernard Shaw and John Davidson. Shaw drew from Nietzsche in combining the doctrine of the superman with creative evolution and Davidson did so in linking heroic vitalism with materialism. Though Campbell was a great admirer of Shaw when he wrote *The Flaming Terrapin* (1922-24), it is Davidson's mixture of heroic vitalism and materialism that informs the

poem and establishes that for its philosophy Campbell was indebted more to Davidson than anyone else.

In 1925, following his return to South Africa, Campbell gave a public lecture in Durban entitled "Modern Poetry and Contemporary History."⁴ He was able to give it because of the international reputation he had gained from *The Flaming Terrapin*, his one major published poem at that point. On inspection it becomes apparent that, despite the generality of its title, this lecture was intended to act as an indirect but triumphal commentary on *The Flaming Terrapin*. What initially alerts one to this relationship is the amount of space it devotes to the ideas and example of Nietzsche.

What is more, most of the literary figures mentioned in the lecture are in some way linked with Nietzsche, particularly those receiving the fullest treatment (Wilfred Owen, Bernard Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, Marinetti, and the *Wheels* group, especially the Sitwell brothers). What is further arresting is the very positive and relatively full assessment of John Davidson, someone undoubtedly affected by Nietzsche and often regarded as a Nietzschean. It is through the connections made between Nietzsche and Shaw, and those implied between Nietzsche and Davidson and between Davidson and Shaw, that the relevance of the lecture to *The Flaming Terrapin* can first be discerned and the poem's relationship to English Nietzscheanism can be recognized.

When treating Davidson, Campbell begins by stressing his philosophic and "religious" message: "He set himself the task of Lucretius—or of the author of Job—to formulate from the vast material universe a spiritual guide: to create a dynamic religion from his own scientific knowledge of the earth . . ." (4: 175). After turning to Davidson's poetic achievement and influence, he reverts to emphasis on his scientism by saying in conclusion, "He was one of the few poets who grappled with the Darwinian idea of evolution, instead of taking refuge with the old religion" (4: 178).

In his summary of Nietzsche, Campbell likewise provides a judgement blending moral philosophy, religion, and evolutionism. In doing so, he goes some distance in order to accommodate Nietzsche's philosophy to that of creative evolution:

[Nietzsche] wanted new values, new morals, which would allow the human soul to realise its fullest powers. He specifies his own interpretation of the holy ghost as the will-to-power. The inborn life-force which exercises itself in intellectual strife against existing codes and morals gradually shaping them to its own use. . . . so he desired us to set sail with the fair wind of his grand individualistic philosophy—philosophy for the land which he thought he had discovered. His aim is towards the highest perfection. Though we may never reach this goal—the archetype of an ideal man—nevertheless it is to be our aim though it may still be far away in eternity. (4: 178)

Because of the popularity at the time of the philosophy of creative evolution and his own enthusiasm for Shaw as its main exponent in England, Campbell states shortly after this passage:

Recently there have been many poets with similar views. Walt Whitman and Bernard Shaw, Samuel Butler, the author of *Erewhon*. They are the creative evolutionists who have endeavoured to give a religious stimulation to the theory of evolution. (4: 179)

This rather strange coupling of “recent” poets with non-poets also occurs with respect to Davidson, except that this time Shaw alone is named: “John Davidson is not a popular poet, and he never will be; but as an inspirer of other poets he will live for ever. His influence on Shaw and other forerunners of the modern movement has been immense” (4: 175). *The Flaming Terrapin* and Campbell’s statements about it give grounds for thinking that he wished to be counted not only among those generally inspired by Nietzsche but also among those more particularly indebted to Davidson.

Nietzsche, though frequently poetic, had not used poetic form to express his doctrine of the Overman; neither had Shaw in presenting his superman. Interestingly, later in his lecture Campbell comments wistfully, “Bernard Shaw is to my mind the greatest philosopher of our times; it is very much to be regretted that he is not a poet” (4: 184). It might be surmised, then, that Campbell felt he had to be guided by John Davidson’s poems on evolution—his hymns to Matter—as the main models for his treatment of the theme in *The Flaming Terrapin*. Aspects of Davidson’s poems that Campbell would have found congenial, in addition to the combination of Nietzschean vitalism and voluntaristic evolutionism, would have been the abundance of geologi-

cal and biological imagery; the employment of a self-created myth uniquely incorporating Judeo-Christian and classical motifs; the original depictions of Hell; and a style capable of violently asserting struggle, pain, and triumph.

The only direct explanation that Campbell ever gave of his intentions in writing *The Flaming Terrapin* was in a letter to his parents. In it, he stated in part:

I have taken this more cheerful view, as I would much sooner feel that I was a Simian in a state of evolution into something higher, than a fallen angel in a state of decline. So, with the deluge as symbolizing the war and its subsequent hopelessness, I have represented in the Noah family, the survival of the fittest, and tried to describe the manner in which they won through the terrors of the storm and eventually colonised the earth. The Terrapin is the symbol for masculine energy. (qtd. in Smith 22-23)

Much of the passage is too ambiguous for certain meaning. It could suggest a purpose of celebrating the workings of the life force, of creative evolution, and even of the will-to-power striving for the superman. But, in this context, "survival of the fittest," the catchphrase of social Darwinism from Herbert Spencer, may be considered unfortunate, especially in conjunction with the imperialistic ring of "colonised" (the association of these ideas is particularly Davidsonian); in addition, the identification of the Terrapin as the symbol for masculine energy strikes one as lacking adequacy. However, the stated preference for being in a state of evolution into something higher, rather than a fallen angel in a state of decline, does emphasize a philosophic outlook in keeping with what Campbell had to say in his lecture about Davidson's and Nietzsche's desire to promote a kind of secular religion. Altogether, Campbell's letter establishes little more than that *The Flaming Terrapin* has an evolutionary framework, and also that it is a contemporary poem dealing with modern history. In it he clearly did not wish to show his hand entirely.

Near the opening of the poem these lines seem most evidently to body forth a purposive, if not a creative, evolutionary standpoint:

This sudden strength that catches up men's souls
And rears them up like giants in the sky,

Giving them fins where the dark ocean rolls,
 And wings of eagles when the whirlwinds fly,
 Stands visible to me in its true self. . . .
 I see him as a mighty Terrapin, . . .

a great machine,
 Thoughtless and fearless, governing the clean
 System of active things: the winds and currents
 Are his primeval thoughts: the raging torrents
 Are moods of his, and men who do great deeds
 Are but the germs his awful fancy breeds. (1: 34)

The sequence contains a mixture of the mechanistic and the vitalistic, the former being ascendant. The "men who do great deeds" are, however, "but the germs [the mighty Terrapin's] awful fancy breeds." The emphasis on strenuous action is linked with the notion of accompanying thought or imagination, as "fancy" suggests. But, at the same time, "the sudden strength" is visualized as "No spiritual essence" but "a great machine, / Thoughtless and fearless," which governs "the clean / System of active things." Despite being "thoughtless," however, the Terrapin does possess "primeval thoughts" and "moods," which in turn can reach the level of the "awful fancy" prompting men's mighty deeds. The dominant impression conveyed by the passage, consolidated by "governing," is one of determinism. The natural forces represented by the Terrapin control and direct men's actions—and even their inventive ways of surmounting nature itself through the development of technology, by "Giving them fins where the dark ocean rolls, / And wings of eagles when the whirlwinds fly." And yet the graduated progression from "Thoughtless" to "primeval thoughts" to "awful fancy" suggests a degree of dependence on men, at least on those who do great deeds (as "germs" may suggest), and hence allows for some human exercise of free will and imaginative intellectual initiative, perhaps most observable in technological advances. That is, those fittest for accomplishing great deeds and advances seemingly are the ones naturally selected. Thus the conception of the Terrapin is consistent with Davidson's definition of the nature and tendency of matter.

The account of Noah on "Mount Ararat" in the closing section of *The Flaming Terrapin* presents him as more than a triumphant

Dust thinks: and tired of spinning in the wind,
 Stands up to be a man and feel the strife
 Of brute-thoughts in the jungle of his mind. (CW I: 35-36)

These passages, like that introducing the Terrapin, are the ones that enunciate the poem's evolutionary theme most clearly and give grounds for investigating the degree to which Campbell did absorb and reflect Davidson's materialism in his poem.

In his lecture, Campbell states that Davidson's *Testament of a Man Forbid* and *The Testament of John Davidson* "reveal his powers at their height":

He used blank verse with a mastery that it had not known since the days of Keats's "Hyperion." He knocked all the Enoch Arden stuffing out of it, and taught it to roll like a giant turbine. (4: 175)

This judgement—incidentally one well before its time⁵—suggests that Campbell had a considerable familiarity with Davidson's work and that most likely he had read his important essay "On Poetry," the epilogue to *Holiday and Other Poems* (1909), which centres on Davidson's theorizing about blank verse. The core of this essay demonstrates the relatedness of his heroic vitalism, his imperialism, and his philosophy of Matter.

"Poetry is Matter become vocal," Davidson writes. In poetry is to be found

[t]he very voice of Matter; the vapours, earths and metals, the complexed properties of Matter of which man consists, become eloquent; it is the voice of rocks and ores, of patriotism, of art, of religion, of all unconquerable will; the triumph of the martyr at the stake; the "yea and amen" of that pure flame which our Universe was once and will be once more. (*Poems* 2: 533)

In referring in his lecture to Davidson's setting himself the task of Lucretius⁶ "to create a dynamic religion from his scientific knowledge of the earth," Campbell could have been basing his conclusion solely on one long expository passage in *The Testament of John Davidson* (*Poems* 2: 404-08)—a grand elaboration of the generalization in "On Poetry" that "Matter; that is to say, the earth, having cooled down and produced life in plants, *plus* consciousness in animals, *plus* self-consciousness, or what is called soul, in men . . . had found a voice at last" (*Poems* 2: 533). Elsewhere, however, Campbell gives grounds for concluding that

other writings by Davidson affected the conception and content of *The Flaming Terrapin*.

Crucial for Campbell, as for Davidson, was the need to assert a new beginning for humanity. In *The Flaming Terrapin*, Campbell re-invoked the Biblical story of the building of the Ark in the context of a renewed life in Africa following severe testing on stormy seas. Whether Campbell seriously meant, at the same time, to affirm Davidson's conviction that humanity's new beginning could result only from embracing the material as the sole reality, and rejecting the immaterial, depends on the weight one wishes to give not only to the statements in his poem, previously cited, which directly match Davidson's thinking, but also to a body of indirect evidence. A number of the more striking passages in Davidson's later writings, all related to his theme of Matter, find reflection in parts of Campbell's work.

In one other place besides "On Poetry" Davidson defined his sense of a new beginning for humanity consequent upon general acceptance of his philosophy, and did so in a far loftier and more memorable vein. This was the conclusion to the dedication of *The Testament of John Davidson*:

Man beholds himself not now as that fabulous monster, half-god, half-devil, of the Christian era, but as Man, the very form and substance of the universe, the material of eternity, eternity itself, become conscious and self-conscious. This is the greatest thing told since the world began. It means an end of the strangling past; an end of the conceptions of humanity and divinity, of our ideas of good and evil, of our religion, our literature, our art and polity; it means that which all men have desired in all ages, it means a new beginning, it means that the material forces of mind and imagination can now re-establish the world as if nothing had ever been thought or imagined before; it means that there is nothing greater than man anywhere; it means infinite terror, infinite greatness. (*Poems* 2: 544)

The two main conceptions presented here—that immortality resides in being part of eternal matter and not in being destined for heaven or hell (with all the moral and socio-cultural implications of belief in those alternatives), and that untrammelled man can now begin again, faced by "infinite terror, infinite greatness"—surely find a poetic equivalent in the ending of *The Flaming Terrapin*. The conclusion of the passage on Noah reads:

he stood

Facing alone the sky's vast solitude,
That space, which gods and demons fear to scan,
Smiled on the proud irreverence of Man. (1: 62)

Shortly thereafter follows the coda:

Though the weak arc of Heaven warps
Beneath the darkness that encumbers
The night beyond, though we believe the end
Is but the end. . . .

what is this

That makes us stamp upon the mountain-tops,
So fearless at the brink of the abyss [?] . . .
It is the silent chanting of the soul:
"Though times may change and stormy ages roll,
I am that ancient hunter of the plains
That raked the shaggy flitches of the Bison:
Pass, world: I am the dreamer that remains,
The Man, clear-cut against the last horizon!" (1: 63)

The phrase "the last horizon" is reverberative; not only does it suggest a coming dark, but also an ultimate arrival—Man in self-possession possesses the future. Simultaneously, the "I," the poet-dreamer, asserts a permanent freedom born of a reversion to the primordial. It may be apposite at this point to quote Davidson on poets: "Men of letters are humane, moral, civilized, cultured, sceptical; whereas poets are inhumane, immoral, barbaric, imaginative, and trustful" (*Theatrocrat* 29).

Campbell identified the Terrapin with masculine energy; to it he applied the epithet "Flaming." In the passage early in his poem where he introduces it, he endows it in relation to humanity with the attribute of Davidson's Matter—it makes humanity its "self-consciousness": "men who do great deeds / Are but the germs his awful fancy breeds." Other aspects of the description may be seen to gain significance as Davidson's conception is borne in mind, particularly when one paragraph in the preface to *The Theatrocrat* is considered. But, first, more of Campbell's introductory imagery should be recalled:

a mighty Terrapin,
Rafting whole islands on his stormy back,
Built of strong metals molten from the black

Roots of the inmost earth. . . .
 the winds and currents
 Are his primeval thoughts. . . .
 The Flaming Terrapin that towed the Ark
 Rears up his hump of thunder on the dark,
 And like a mountain, seamed with rocky scars,
 Tufted with forests, barnacled with stars . . . (1: 34)

This imagery is later completed in the wonderful sequence on "The ponderous material of his bones." Juxtaposition of the passage in Davidson's preface with this description of Campbell's reveals a fundamental similarity. Davidson wrote: "Oxygen seems to be the chief male element, the sultan of matter, with his seraglio of dazzling metals, earths, vapours, not one of which he ever fails to remember; it is he who knits up the rocks and ridges of the globe, the bones of men and beasts; he supports all fires of suns and hearts; he is the food of flame and the fibre of the shower which extinguishes flame . . ." (*Theatrocrat* 37). The entire meaning of *The Flaming Terrapin* becomes much clearer when one identifies the pilot of the Ark with Davidson's Matter, the coalescence of Ether. "Matter is a condensation of the invisible, imponderable Ether. . . . man is therefore Ether become conscious" (*Theatrocrat* 73).

This identification is further strengthened when one entertains the probability that, as a result of his reading of Davidson, Campbell saw the dramatic and poetic relevance for his own work of the following passage from the ending of *The Testament of a Prime Minister*.

To be dispersed in elemental sport
 Of heedless energy—the uncontrolled
 Imagination of the Universe,
 That flashes out an instant nebula
 By chance encounter in the spacious dark
 Of ancient suns extinct and vagrant, turns
 To teeming wonder every water drop,
 Afflicts the human race with hope, attunes
 The nightingale, and launches in the deep
 The monstrous rorqual. . . . (*Poems* 2: 372)

As an embodiment of energy transformed into matter, the great sea creature is fittingly climactic in this sequence and a com-

manding representative of evolutionary advance as well as duration. But the great finback, though an habitu  of Antarctic waters, would have been unsuitable as the Ark's pilot—*Moby Dick* had made sure of that! With resulting mythic power, Campbell chose the terrapin, made monstrous, but equally evocative of the range of evolution.

The influence of Davidson's poetry and ideas upon Campbell's appears to have been intense but short-lived. It is virtually inescapable, however, that "The Zebras," composed some two years after *The Flaming Terrapin* (Alexander 49-50), owes much of its inspiration to a segment of the Hackney's speech in *The Testament of an Empire-BUILDER*,⁷ and in so doing testifies further to the deep attention Campbell paid to Davidson's long poems. Recall "The Zebras" in reading its faint precursor:

How might enduring memory be evoked
 In free forgetful stallions, thunderhoofed
 In prairie, pampas, heath and Tartar steppe;
 Exempt as winds that round the vagrant world
 Pursue their idle fancies, or, in dreams,
 Enamoured roam the starry wilderness?
 How might an ignominious sense of shame
 Invade the treasure-laden loins surcharged
 With proud posterity? Those valiant hearts,
 Triumphant in the combat for the mares
 When the great miracle of grass begins
 And simple emerald blades elaborate
 The soul of earth, the virtue of the sun,
 Replenishing the sexes!—how might they,
 Those hearts of stallions eager for a heaven
 Of fragrant manes, wild glances, quivering flanks,
 Wherein to root their admirable race—
 How might they lose their courage, how admit
 The treacherous fear that undermines the will?

(*Poems* 2: 338)

In the chief aspects of its development, the passage bears a basic resemblance to Campbell's poem. In both, an observer notes the emergence in dream-like fashion from darkness into sunlight of the animals described. The horses—on pampas, prairie, heath or steppe—go from "starry wilderness" to where "the great miracle of grass begins," a miracle that demonstrates "the virtue of the

sun"; the zebras leave "the dark woods that breathe of fallen showers" to "draw the dawn across the plains," the sunlight "zithering their flanks with fire." In both pieces, the coming of the sun ushers in the arrival of spring and the animals' mating season. "The simple emerald blades elaborate / The soul of earth . . . / Replenishing the sexes," the "stallions eager . . . to root their admirable race"; and, in Campbell's poem, after the herds have "waded knee-deep among the scarlet flowers," round them "the stallion wheels his flight . . . / To roll his mare among the lilies." Both sequences lead up to this stress on the stallions' violent sexual ardour. In addition, some details in Davidson's poem seem to have contributed to Campbell's. The horses are described as "exempt as winds"; the careering zebras, on the other hand, have the complex play of sunlight and shadow on their stripes compared to the motion of "wind along the gold strings of a lyre." The epithet "thunderhoofed," applied to the horses, may have inspired the electrical imagery in Campbell's poem, as in "volted with delight." Both poems call attention to the seductive attractions of the mares: "fragrant manes, wild glances, quivering flanks," "rosy plumes," "dove-like voices." Both poems hymn the unfettered triumph of sentient matter; however, Campbell's romantically adds a far greater dimension of sensuous natural beauty.

In "Modern Poetry and Contemporary History," Campbell makes us aware of other similarities between Davidson and Nietzsche. These echoes enter into the fabric of *The Flaming Terrapin* and give it its tone of heroic vitalism. Characterizing this tone are the poem's muscularly affirmative and sometimes hortatory declamation, its insistence on the bankruptcy of reliance on spiritual powers, its emphasis on the doughtiness of the Ark's crew, and its tincture of imperialist aristocratism.

At the close of the first phase of his lecture, Campbell contrasts Francis Thompson, as a representative of the *fin-de-siècle* decadents, with John Davidson:

At the same time as the decadents were engaged in their fragile and exquisite visions, trying to escape from life in their art, a very different figure rose into prominence among them—a man who had fought his way through poverty, hardship and sickness, with unflinching

courage, and who at the end of it all was still prepared to shout his holy Yea to life. This was John Davidson. (4: 175)

Later, Campbell implies a parallel outlook when he states that Nietzsche "makes us see that art for art's sake is as sterile as morality for morality's sake. That nothing is fertile unless directed towards the perfection of the human race in the future" (4: 178). Campbell's famous declaration in propria persona that interrupts the narrative of *The Flaming Terrapin* near the opening of Part IV is foremost a dismissal of art-for-art's-sake poetry:

Far be the bookish Muses! Let them find
Poets more spruce, and with pale fingers wind
The bays in garlands for their northern kind.
My task demands a virgin muse to string
A lyre of savage thunder as I sing. (1: 49)

In one section of his poem Campbell goes so far as to make the Terrapin, the embodiment of his newly declared faith, responsible for the discrediting of conventional religious belief. In Part III we are told that, because of the absence of Noah's family and their pilot on the quest "to mend the swamping havoc of the Flood," "The sooty Fiend, deep in his mirky firth . . . / Bawled his fell triumph far along the Styx" (1: 46). The Fiend's principal agents, now faced only by impotence and weakness, begin to exercise their full sway:

On earth again

Foul mediocrity begins his reign:
All day, all night God stares across the curled
Rim of the vast abyss upon the world:
All night, all day the world with eyes as dim
Gazes as fatuously back at him. . . .
He grasps, but dares not wield, his thunderbolt.
Sodom, rebuilt, scorns the wilting power. . . .

Plutocracy, Patriotism ("Satan's angry son"), and Corruption exert themselves boldly,

While priests and churchmen, heedless of the strife,
Find remedy in thoughts of afterlife;
Had they nine lives, O muddled and perplexed,
They'd waste each one in thinking of the next!
(1: 47)

But in Part IV, Leviathan's great proclamation of the coming to land and imminent reign of Noah's sons signals the downfall of Sodom and the discomfiture of "old Corruption" (1: 52-53). Above all, the sudden reappearance of the Terrapin so terrifies the "old Fiend" as to bring about his fall, literally, through the entire depths of his own Hell until he finally lands in the last vestiges of the Flood. Campbell suggests that sin does not really exist in the face of a natural dynamism that goes beyond good and evil, an idea both Nietzschean and Davidsonian.⁸ The powers of evil have been overcome not by God and virtue but by humanity and virtù. Accordingly, a rather complex irony stemming from "steepled" resides in the Marlovian

Old Noah's sons, in pomp and princely pride,
Through all the gardens of the world will ride,
And steepled cities stun the hollow sky
With thunderclaps of bells as they go by. (1: 53)

The closing section of the poem makes clear what is really going to be celebrated: "the proud irreverence of man" (1: 62).

Expressive not only of heroic energy but also of imperialist aristocratism is this description of those on the Ark after they have surmounted the terrors of the Horn and the Antarctic waters:

Fit men they seemed in vigour, brain, and blood,
To mend the swamping havoc of the Flood,
To breed great races and in pride to reign
Throned in the flowering cities of the plain. (1: 46)

These lines may be seen as a condensation of the two last points Campbell makes about Nietzsche in his Durban lecture. The first is stated directly: "[Nietzsche] was a socialist only in so far as he despised a commercial aristocracy—he is the prophet of a physical and mental aristocracy." The second emerges in the transitional statement that follows: "The best teaching to be derived from Nietzsche, namely, the need of a rich supply of great personalities, the love of the earth and the love of the body, is remote from ordinary politics." It enables him to continue, "[b]ut to quote one of his biographers, 'It is thereby, however, in spite of their Christian ideals that the English have built up an empire such as was never seen on this earth . . . as long as athletics

and out-of-door life are dear to the English they will be strong and rule the earth they love. Nietzsche's philosophy comes as an assurance, a stimulus, and a monition to the political instincts of the English race'" (4: 180). The view expressed is a strange twisting and reduction of Nietzsche.

The first person of note in England to relate Nietzscheanism to British imperialism was John Davidson.⁹ Campbell, with his knowledge of Davidson's writings, would surely have known this. Whether he adopted Davidson's viewpoint or merely found it to some degree congenial is moot. In either case, in singling out *The Testament of John Davidson* for special praise, he must have been aware that its dedication contains a strong expression of imperialistic sentiment. Davidson's dedication deals extensively with Nietzsche and imperialism; as Thatcher has pointed out, Davidson had earlier expressed the same basic view about their connection in an article, stating:

There are signs of a Nietzsche panic in certain quarters; and the word "overman" is supposed to be an index of evolution in humanity. This seems to me to be very foolish. Nietzsche has nothing to tell the Englishman of the "overman"; the Englishman is the "overman"; in Europe, in Asia, Africa, America, he holds the world in the hollow of his hand. (qtd. in Thatcher 78)

Campbell does seem to have shared this imperialistic dimension of Davidson's thought, which also pervades *The Testament of a Prime Minister and Holiday and Other Poems*, to judge from some of his remarks in his letter to his parents concerning *The Flaming Terrapin*. In a statement which incidentally prefigures his lifelong hatred of socialism, Campbell wrote: ". . . in a world suffering from shell-shock, with most of its finest breeding-stock lost, and the rest rather demoralized, it is interesting to conjecture whether a certain portion of the race may not have become sufficiently ennobled by its sufferings to supplant the descendants of those who have become demoralized and stagnant, like the Russians for instance" (qtd. in Smith 22).

One has to conclude that for Campbell, as for Davidson, aristocratism and imperialism were easily linked, though this was not so for Nietzsche. At first blush it may seem absurd to relate Campbell's Noah and family to British imperialism; however,

Alexander's biography persuasively suggests that the Ark's destination is South Africa's east coast, in fact, Natal. And in Campbell's poem the inhabitants of the Ark are unmistakably depicted as colonists and settlers, and where they land the flora and fauna are clearly African, and in some instances peculiarly Natalian.¹⁰ The desire behind this depiction—since the voyage of the Ark takes place after the "Flood" of the Great War—seems to have been to summon up emulation of the best examples set by the pioneers in South Africa. In this regard, what Campbell says in his lecture at one point is suggestive, if egregious (especially in view of his later epigram "The Truth about Rhodes"): "Rhodes is a pretty fair sample of a true Nietzscheanite. . . . we must have a few men who are ready to risk eternal damnation in order to make the world a better place for future generations" (4: 180).

Any attempt to map the symbolic route of the Ark in Campbell's poem is impossible. But at least it seems clear that, having rounded the Horn, skirted Antarctica, and then gone east to pass the "nameless cape" (1: 45), the Ark nears journey's end:

Now from their frosty fetters bursting free,
To dare once more the terrors of the sea,
The Ark and her grim pilot churned the foam,
Crested the waves, and hoisted sail for home. (1: 50)

The idea of a return home has already been emphasized at the end of Part III, just preceding—"See where the Ark, bearded with frost, rolls home." This being so, it must be, literally, that the Ark, representing the values needed for man's survival and renewal, was built in Natal and launched from there. Accordingly, the details of the effect of its building gain a particular significance:

When Noah thundered with his monstrous axe
In the primeval forest, and his boys,
Shaping the timbers, curved their gristled backs, . . .
Then, like a comet, the pale Phoenix rose . . .
To the scared nations, volleying through the calm,
Her phantom was a signal of alarm,
And mustering their herds in frenzied haste,
They rolled in dusty hordes across the waste. . . .
and still
Those low concussions from the forest rolled,

And still more fiercely hounded by their dread
 Lost in the wastes the savage tribesmen fled. (1: 37-38)

If one grants the presence of a double meaning—a touch of humorous irony?—in the lines, a suggestion of imperialism also enters the description of the disembarkation from the Ark:

The dauntless crew, turbulent in their mirth,
 Sprang from the decks to stamp the solid earth. . . .
 They strayed the fields, among the flowers they rolled
 Like plundering bees, dabbled with dusty gold. (1: 54)

Noah and his sons, as archetypal heroes, had earlier been extolled as “Fit men . . . in vigour, brain, and blood . . . To breed great races and in pride to reign.” It is odd to think that Campbell should have distorted Nietzsche by associating his “physical and mental aristocracy” with imperialist politics and the idea of racial superiority. Only a year later in *Voorslag*, the journal he co-edited with William Plomer and Laurens van der Post, he was to attack South African racism with courage and vigour, as he then did mockingly in *The Wayzgoose*. But previously he had held imperialistic views. His Durban lecture concludes on this note, with a side-glance at *The Flaming Terrapin*:

While commerce must remain as the mainstay of our social existence, let us not think of it as such a high form of self-expression that it will keep our supremacy out of range of the lower races: we must have our sagas and our iliads: it is not enough to have the great traditions of European literature behind us: we must either apply them actively to our own age and country—or formulate our own. (4: 186)

The reviews of *The Flaming Terrapin* following its appearance pay very little attention to its meaning.¹¹ Instead, they devote themselves to extolling the exuberant energy of its language and the colourfulness of its imagery. Many of them concentrate on identifying, usually loosely, a host of linguistic and imagistic parallels with the work of poets old and new. Very soon some of the more discerning reviewers recognized that Campbell’s principal inspiration in these respects had been Rimbaud’s *Bateau ivre*. Despite the acclaim his poem had brought him, Campbell must have been galled that almost no heed had been paid to its intellectual content. His natural response would have been to endeavour to have it understood and appreciated. But it was one

thing to provide mystified parents with a bald explanation, quite another to confront the literary public with one. To seem to have had to do so would have been tantamount to an admission of fatal shortcomings. By means of the indirection in his Durban lecture, Campbell tried to overcome the effects of the one-sided reception *The Flaming Terrapin* had received.

NOTES

- 1 See Eliot xi-xii and McDiarmid 47-54.
- 2 With this long narrative poem (1924) Campbell achieved fame at the age of twenty-three. *Adamastor* (1930)—from which his most anthologized poems, such as “The Zulu Girl,” “Horses on the Camargue,” and “Tristan da Cunha,” have been drawn—was an equal success. Much of his later work has proved less estimable. His translations of European poets—above all, of St. John of the Cross—have gained considerable recognition. Though born and raised in South Africa, Campbell spent most of his life in England and on the Continent.
- 3 See Alexander 58 and Smith 12, 21, 23, 39.
- 4 See *Collected Works* 4: 173-86. The lecture first appeared in the *Natal Advertiser*.
- 5 Not until Andrew Turnbull’s assessment of Davidson’s verse (*Poems* 1: xxx-xxxii) did his achievement in blank verse obtain its due.
- 6 Thatcher states, “Davidson had a number of possible sources for [his] gospel of materialism—the cosmologies of Heraclitus and Lucretius, the nebular hypothesis of Laplace and Tyndall, and the evolutionism of Darwin and Haeckel” (71). See also Townsend 483. In an account for the *Cape Argus* in 1926 of his seafaring in the Mediterranean, Campbell wrote: “I signed on in Marseilles purely to satisfy my abdominal yearning; nothing else could have induced me to spend such a dull six months. . . . Fortunately I had a ‘Lucretius’ and a ‘Zarathustra’ in my pocket, which kept me alive” (4: 226).
- 7 Lester reports that Davidson acknowledged that the Hackney’s speech draws its argument largely from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, “Second Essay,” Section 3 (421).
- 8 The similarity of Davidson’s “immoralism” to Nietzsche’s going “beyond good and evil” is noted by Lester (423) and Thatcher (69). In each of his three last Testaments, Davidson depicts Heaven and Hell as myths of contrasting earthly human reality to illustrate his transvaluation of values; each time he has his hero enter Hell, only to succeed in banishing it as a reality for himself.
- 9 After pointing out that three salient ideas of Davidson’s (imperialism, materialism, and the conception of the poet) “were distinctly antithetical to Nietzsche’s philosophy,” Lester adds, “Davidson was in fact one of the strongest proponents of imperialistic thought in the early twentieth century. It was related in his mind to a growing conviction that the English were an elect people” (426). See also Thatcher 55; Bridgwater 52.
- 10 See Alexander 39-40. Unmistakably African features of the landscape in which Noah, his sons, and their wives find themselves after leaving the Ark determine that they cannot literally be in Asia Minor, despite Noah’s going once more to stand atop “Mount Ararat.” We are told that “Far down in the valleys below / The lilies of Africa rustled and beat.” We get what could be an allusion to Natal’s distinctively red soil in “. . . from the glad red turf the eager grain / Springs dancing to the silver flutes of rain.” Herds of koodoo, roan antelope and buffalo

graze the plains, and "by each silent pool and fringed lagoon / The faint flamingoes burn among the weeds"; attended by the moon, "the green Evening" "Sprays her white egrets on the swinging reeds." Beneath Noah, as he stands on the mountain, "Great aasvogels, like beetles on a pond, [veer] in slow circles," while "from his craggy pulpit, the baboon / [Rises] on the skyline, mitred with the moon" (Part VI *passim*).

- 11 For representative excerpts see Parsons 180-84, Smith 16-18, and Alexander 36-37.

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