

The Timid Hero

Canon Copernicus (1473 - 1543)

Through hazy, damp grey vapours' swirling chill,
An omen crow descended silently
Then waited on a framing window stone,
Grey in grey mist about a weathered tower.
Hung far below, indifferent, unseen,
The citizens of Frouenberg awoke
To stretch and piss, to dress and take their bread
Or argue on a coin's toss their means,
Or toil about the business of the day;
Upon the tower none turned a caring eye.
None saw the crow cold-huddled, sentient there,
Nor spent one thought upon the man within -
A corpse still breathing, clammy cold he lay,
Awaiting death and full oblivion.

For two millennia, corpse-like as the priest,
Darkness of intellect had cloyed the air.
The light of reason, by gross umbra dulled,
Had atrophied through fear and bleak neglect,
Consigned so low, on heaven's Gold Chain acrouch.

His revered hero, Ptolemy, had claimed
That: "Physics of the skies is idle play,
For divine bodies different laws obey
And have no common links with earth's dull clay.
Astronomy is not reality."
Copernicus wished just to simplify
His hero's fixed, ungainly, rigid wheels
And spent his lifetime trying to reduce
Their number by a single cog or two
By taking out the motion of the sun
About the earth. It wasn't fun,
For agonies of doubt assailed his mind
With fear of ridicule at what he'd done.
Medieval fetters pinioned spirit's verve
And strapped him, impotent to leave their bind.
By setting earth adrift, Copernicus
Became anarchic rebel to his God,
And bid to sit at Lucifer's right hand.
Decentralising man among the stars,
Donne's Little Mathematician trembled here:
For if a planet, planets too are worlds
And all elfin existence disappears.

Throughout the universe, from heaven to hell,
Democracy is cosmic in extent:
No absolute, no anchor up nor down,
No rigid cast - the Golden Chain was torn,
Anticipating revolution's fire
When all its tarnished links should be unborn.

Within his mind, the walled-in sanctuary
That framed medieval thought to finite ways
With limits set on knowledge, space and time,
Had cracked, revealing chasms through the rends
Insufferable in dark perplexity.
Infinity, with change eternal wrought,
Subquarried through the fabric of his world
More surely than would Luther's thunderous call.

For thirty lonely years he'd paused, unsure,
Afraid to print the contents of his mind
Until persuaded in his deathbed hour
To touch his manuscript, and sense its power.
To hope alone Copernicus now clung
With mantra chant of what had driven him:
"I kept the stars firm-fixed before my eyes
To rid posterity from ancient lies."

Inside the room, with new momentum gained,
The book fell from his hand till, tumbling slow,
It cracked the floor to stir the dusty silt
And startle up the waiting, glint-eyed crew.

(c) *John Marr*

References

Copernicus

Koestler, Arthur (1959) The Sleepwalkers

(p.76) They knew that the sun governed the motions of the planets, but at the same time closed their eyes to the fact...it is in the nature of the unconscious that it may simultaneously affirm and deny. This controlled schizophrenia continued throughout the Dark and Middle Ages, until it came to be almost taken for granted as the normal condition of man.

(p.77) Their main concern was 'to save the appearances'...The astronomer 'saved' the phenomena if he succeeded in inventing a hypothesis which resolved the irregular motions of the planets along irregularly shaped orbits into regular motions along circular orbits - regardless whether the hypothesis was true or not, i.e. whether it was physically possible or not. It serves a practical purpose as a method for computing tables of the motions of the sun, moon, and planets; but as to the real nature of the universe, it has nothing to say. Ptolemy himself is quite explicit about this: "We believe that the object which the astronomer must strive to achieve is this: to demonstrate that all the phenomena in the sky are produced by uniform and circular motions...because only such motions are appropriate to their divine nature..."

(p. 219) Medieval universe had firm limits in space, time, knowledge:

a) In time: a beginning- the Creation, 3 or 4 hundred generations ago; an end- the second coming of Christ, in the foreseeable future.

b) In space: Bounded by the ninth sphere beyond which lay Heaven.

c) In knowledge: equally firm limits to progress of knowledge, technology, science, social organisation, all completed long ago. There was a final truth regarding every subject, as finite and bounded as the universe itself. Truth about religion in scripture; geometry in Euclid; physics in Aristotle- because they had come first and discovered everything there is to know. Since there is only one answer to every question, the ancients had filled in all the answers.

(p. 220) Copernicus- the "little Mathematician"- undermined the edifice of the medieval structure of the universe more effectively than Luther... He let in the destructive notion of infinity and eternal change which dissolved the familiar world like an acid. While the earth was still, the stars rotated on a fixed sphere every 24 hours. But once the earth moved, the stars could recede to any distance.

There was no longer a limit to the sky- infinity had opened its blackness, (allowing us to peer into the eternal silence.)

Ptolomy

Copernicus On The Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres. New Translation by A.M.Duncan (1976)