

Prayer for the Year's Turning

E P Thompson

*'I was looking on that Sign in the Heaven
which is called by the name of the Ballance.'*

Sir Richard Steele

I

The cruel solstice of our kind,
The axletree of all is stuck –
There is no way of turning on
Nor any way of turning back.

Sign of the Balance, House of Mars,
Lord of the ascendant over Hope:
The stars in heaven look down on us
And shudder at earth's horoscope,

Where in our violent zodiac
New constellations exercise –
Trident is showing in the West,
Poseidon and Polaris rise

And Vulcan scuds across the moon.
Hades is setting over France
And, see, beside the Neutron Way,
The Fitter, Flogger and the Lance!

Oh kings and wizards, shield your eyes!
Oh shepherd, shepherdess, beware
Of following the Peacekeeper!
Oh loyal flock of sheep, take care
Lest the stars throw down their spears
And water heaven with our tears!

II

Oh watchers in the night, you watch
An emanation of yourselves,
And all that alien hardware is
Ourselves wheeling about ourselves.

Good people, do not watch the sky,
 But keep your watchfulness below
 And hasten with your gifts of love
 To Newbury or Comiso,

And strike a match within the dark
 To search about the planet's floor
 For the nativity of hope
 Like software stirring in the straw.

Oh fasten heaven back to earth
 And stick in one the human race
 And make the cargo of this globe
 Less odious company in space!

Oh powers and influences, turn
 Us into an ascendant House:
 Oh fortune, budge your wheel once more!
 Let this arrested solstice pass
 Out of the boreal cold, and bring
 The soft apocalypse of Spring ...

[*Newbury or Comiso*: sites for cruise missiles established in 1983]

During 2013, events have been held in several European cities to mark the 30th anniversary of the huge demonstrations against cruise and pershing missiles, in 1983, as US President Reagan contemplated 'theatre nuclear war' with the Soviet Union. Caspar Weinberger, his Defense Secretary, complained of 'marbles rolling around a tray', as European capitals were thronged, one after another, by mass demonstrations against the planned installations. Later, Weinberger (a 'dangerous man', as Edward Thompson described him publicly at the time) debated with Thompson at the Oxford Union. Eventually, the planned emplacements were abandoned and the missiles removed.

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