

Three Gnostic Poems (2007)

by **Greg Bartholomew** (born 1957)

Too often modern society expects its artists to be on a pedestal, removed from society. But in the philosopher Fletcher Bartholomew and his composer son Greg we have two prime examples of people who have successfully explored creative impulses while maintaining day jobs. The former made his living in the aviation industry. During World War II he was a test pilot for the United States Army Air Corps in India. After the war he developed his love for aviation through a degree in meteorology from MIT. This led to a career as an analyst for Boeing—Greg remembers his father bringing home large weather balloons—and then in airport planning and management. Though he loved his career in aviation, Fletcher Bartholomew found his greatest passion in philosophy. He was deeply concerned that “scientific humanism” had diminished many individuals’ regard for spirituality, and expounded these thoughts in a book and a volume of poetry.

His son, Greg Bartholomew, had a restless youth, as his father’s work took the family from Minneapolis to Seattle, northern Virginia, and Connecticut. Greg learned the trombone and piano and enjoyed writing pop songs. During college in Michigan, Virginia, and England, he became a choir groupie of sorts: choir was the core of his social life, though he never studied music formally. In 1979 he returned to Seattle, the happiest place of his childhood, with just two suitcases and a typewriter. He eventually got a law degree from the University of Washington, and practiced law periodically for twenty years, even rising to a partnership. Amid all of this, Greg continued to develop his love of composing, writing, and the visual arts. In 2000 he began to compose more earnestly, especially choral music. By 2005 he had settled into a “new life” as a full-time composer.

A year after Fletcher Bartholomew’s death, Greg set three of his father’s philosophically oriented poems to music. (In the texts below, the poet’s original titles are given below the composer’s movement titles.) The first movement begins with the men’s voices, almost representing the voice of the poet himself. Slight fluctuations of tempo yield a conversational pace. In the second chosen text, the poet poses existentialist questions but concludes that life alone is not “enough for any man”. Again the men’s voices are prominent. The final movement depicts the “awesome beauty found in sailing / Through black of night upon the open sea” with varied repetitions of the same phrase, just as each wave on the ocean is slightly different. This text, like that of the first movement, recalls the poet’s wartime journey to India by ship. The composer concludes the cycle with a grand gust of “the wind”, as the choir expands dramatically into nine parts.

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1. An Open World

Sanity

There is a certain madness born of sailing
From port to distant port the world around.
There is a certain way it has, unveiling
Unused chambers of the mind so that the sound
Of many different voices can be heard.
— The range of human thoughts and views,
From which with joy can be inferred,
An open world, and paths to choose.

2. When I Land

Humanity

I fly da Vinci's dream on wings of speed,
With effortless delight I cleave the air,
Free in the boundless realm of sky, I feed
My soul with wonder, questions seeming fair.

Why brought forth to wander on this earth?
Why given this brief breath of life,
To wonder at our enigmatic birth,
To reach for stars, want reason for the strife.
Yet, being here, why try to find a plan?
Why waste time in thought before we go?
Is not life enough for any man?
How many have, as theirs, my answer, "No."

When I set foot again upon the land,
And darkness gains upon the setting of the sun,
I long to feel the welcome of your hand
In mine, to rest, let Time its silly cycles run,
Life's nights are all too few.
No other hand, no other's look, no other one,
Can bring that peace to mind or heart or soul,
No peace. Although I know there's always fun
In life, to reach that sublime goal,
I must return to you.

3. And the Wind

Intrepidity

There is an awesome beauty found in sailing
Through black of night upon the open sea,
Your vessel mauled by unseen waves and trailing
Her phosphorescent wake, as steadily,
She plows into the darkness,
And the wind.

— Fletcher LaVallee Bartholomew (1918–2006),
from *And the Wind: Gnostic Poems 1945–1979* (published 1980)