

Extracts from “The Portrait Gallery”

The Initiates

Syria was beautiful that year; the summer nights
Heavy with scents of cinnamon and flaming pine,
The torchlit streets all strewn with flowers for the Festival;
'O Dionysus, come!' the piercing chant arose,
'Diana!' *'Tammuz!'* *'Attis!'* *'Cybele!'*, the hundred names
Of the Great Goddess and her consort were intoned, dancing began
As black-robed hierophants in satyr masks and hooves
Of goats chased laughing maidens through the olive groves...

We were still young but did not heed such revellings,
Our eyes had seen too far, already we had learned
To put no trust in the enticements of the flesh;
We sought pure mind, a truth beyond experience,
But we had gained no satisfaction from the Schools,
Here all was but opinion and each claim advanced
Met with by others, the result pure scepticism,
Philosophy itself seemed purposeless. Where, then,
Might one obtain knowledge of truths beyond dispute?
For years we searched without success. At length we heard
Of that extraordinary discipline that could explain
All things by lines and figures, even the soul itself,
And were admitted to the Secret Brotherhood.

We met always by night: a household slave brought in
A tray of sand, giving each visitor a cane,
With joy we gathered round; the latest theorem
Imported from North Africa was scrutinised,
The argument abridged, occasional points of style
Touched up... Then silence fell, a sense of ultimate peace
Came over us; these lines and circles that we traced
Were clearly images of a superior world,
Indifferent to man, exempt from frailties,
War, death, disease, could not affect them and their truth
Did not depend on trial or experiment,
Each step self-evident, demonstrable and sure.
'Diana!' *'Tammuz!'* *'Attis!'* *'Cybele!'* — these cries
Brought to us by the breeze seemed cries of agony;
For in those fleeting moments we had thrown off flesh
And merged our being with those cold majestic Forms,
Perfect embodiments of abstract principles,
Containing in themselves the laws of Harmony,
While all around us raged the sea of ignorance.

Emigrant

A VOICE, a shape, petite in a pale-blue suit,
no one to see her off except her youngest brother,
facing her on the runway
the aircraft taking her away forever to an unknown land,
no one to meet her
when the black-and-white plane with one propeller touched down at Montreal
and now the immensity of an empty continent only known from maps
and the train
the train with the absurd cowcatcher
the weeklong ride across the prairie
the wheat fields covered with snow
and always in her ears the siren call of destiny
calling her from her family and 'job with prospects'
the summons to a brave new world
and then Vancouver and the embarrassed relatives,
the unruly children, the impossible house-sharing,
followed by the tiny room in the dark boarding-house,
the dead-end job, the cancer ward and the unvisited grave...

The Drowsiness of Sophie

THEN one day she grew sick, not 'ill' ill, out of sorts,
Dispirited and languid, staring at the wall
For hours on end without a movement, singing nonsense rhymes
In a ridiculous lisp, sleeping interminably,
Then sitting up in bed waving a handkerchief
To a great crowd of visitors... This was no common malady
That medicine could cure – prana deficiency perhaps?
Or maybe that the slender silvery cord
That holds each of our astral doubles to ourselves
Had frayed a little? a vague cosmic ache,
Longing for lost horizons, labour pains
Doomed to persist until the Golden Age returned,
And incapacitating her for any kind of work
Both inside and without -- she spent all day in bed,
Listening to records, doodling... After dark
We sauntered through the docks, skimmed pebbles on the waves,
And hung about in desolate-looking cafés; I was unperturbed,
Her listless charm spellbound me, illness suited her.

THE LAST EMPEROR

"In 1644 a rebel army encircled Peking and the last Ming Emperor, Chong Chen, hanged himself in a pavilion on Coal Hill in the Palace Gardens abandoned by his faithless court."

Fitzgerald, History of South East Asia

Darkness, the void of pre-existence, formlessness,
The absolute nothingness from which the world each day is made,
Heroes of light battle against the obscurity,
Lanterns, the flare of torches, further out camp-fires,
Innumerable soldiers lie amongst them -- who can halt
This endless trail of ants? *Go home! Back to your plots!*
Your country needs you, never more than now -- we in the capital
Weighed down like yaks with hateful superfluities
Envy the simple life led by our ancestors -- do we in fact?
Yes, on the whole we do, but nonetheless
We wouldn't care to lead it... Still, *Go home!* even as I speak
Your beans demand the hoe, weeds run amok, th' abandoned wife
Scans the horizon with a tear-filled eye, your little dogs
Scamper towards the door at every sound...

Most probably

It's not at all like that — insects and snakes, no rain,
A smoking chimney, mouths to feed and the perpetual dread
Of the tax-gatherer's knock... Of late I hardly dared to read
The memoranda from the provinces — depressing stuff,
Famines and floods, earthquakes, a killer epidemic starting up,
The Tartars massing underneath the Wall, corruption everywhere,
Last but by no means least, a useless Emperor... Does one
Conclude from this the Mandate from above has been withdrawn?
Seems so. And that the Brilliant Dynasty is on the wane? Likewise.
And finally that the rebellion will put all things right?

That's

Not so certain since one feels somehow the grand outcome
Of this almighty uproar will be just another gang of thieves —
I think I'll tell them so:

*'Listen to me out there, revolt's not worth the candle! Give it up!
Keep to the dynasty you know!'*

No answer. Second-hand experience,
The proverb says, is rice that's masticated in another's mouth,
Not only tasteless but repulsive... An impressive sight
These armed migrations nonetheless, as spectacle
They outdo plays-with-music... This is history!
In just such fashion the battalions of the Ch'in

'Ate up the others like a silkworm eating mulberry leaves'

To cite the well-worn phrase; simplistic lot, the Ch'in,
To fight, to farm, to feed... No culture...Engineering works, a bit...
The Han? A definite improvement...Fails...Confusion, waste...
Dark figures from the north gallop across the plains...
Three kingdoms...Civil gore... It's him, then *him*...The tigress Wu
Snatches the Dragon Throne... But now a pause, a lull,
Let us stand still a while in silent reverence,
Ethereal like the fragile moon amidst storm-clouds,
The T'ang arises, beauty never seen as yet...Destroyed...

No end and no beginning, cycles of events
Repeat themselves mechanically, disorder,
Order, discord, harmony; a hidden principle
Controls these rhythmic oscillations -- man is free
To take advantage of the current, raise a weir,
Divert the water to fresh paths, but openly oppose
The Way of Heaven he may not...

Hush, suspense,

The smaller lights go out, dawn is not far... Our glorious infantry
Harry the Mongol horde — that's it! Stick them with pikes! Gut them!
Cripple the cursed curs! Back to the steppes with you! Clear off!
My rebels are at least all home-grown ethnic specimens!
Go gorge yourselves on raw flesh, milk your mangy mares, and may
Your flatulent females with their elephantine feet
Never again give birth to gunge like Khan! At last!
The summum of two thousand years! Sunrise! The Ming,
The Brilliant Dynasty of which I am the final autumn butterfly,
Beams forth on man and plant...

All seems a blur at first,

The ground-mist smoothes the outlines, shapes are vaporised;
The same applies to man's estate, we see too much yet not enough,
Though to the future-reader certain ominous events stand out
As clearly as those crouching lions on their pedestals,
Hints from above, signs, presages -- an infant with two thumbs,
A sun that wept real tears, a comet several weeks ahead of time,
A triple crop of artichokes -- faced with such evidence, one hardly needs
To study the *Y Ching* for fifty years to see the end is nigh,
No hope for anyone, better invite the Tartars in at once,
Sell up your heirlooms, place your girls in Buddhist nunneries,
Take to the hills pell-mell to weep and pray (and even then)...
Yet all this while the smiling Emperor is indifferent -- '*Approved*',
'*Shih, Shih*', down with the seal, bam-bam! '*So now that's law,*
Don't bother me again for fifteen months' — I never even viewed
The print-outs of the yearly finances, life is too short
To squander on such trifles, at the time I was preoccupied
With a rare flower sent in from Lhasa or the milk-white globes
Of an as yet untested concubine...

How interesting
The play of colour in these gardens, here the rose and white
Of prunus blooms offset the coal-black trunks,
The blossoms not too dense, handfuls of snow
Scattered at random, to the left azaleas; behind me treads
An aged eunuch bearing the effects -- there are but two of us
Though yesterday a countless throng... The boundary
Of the Forbidden City is at hand, before me lies
The Hall of Absolute Peace with to its right
The Gate of Truth (the very name), its jutting eaves
Emerging from the haze like prows of fishing-boats
Across the Yang-tse river -- I imagine this,
In fact I never saw its banks, my maximum range
Does not exceed these inner walls, beyond them lies
A vast mysterious domain they call the world, this path
I tread tempts me towards it... but I halt, I turn,
Not daring to proceed... The song-bird's wings are clipped,
He cannot fly...

In lieu the sorry fellow clammers up the slopes
Of the green mound known as Coal Hill, a charming spot
Despite its undistinguished name... This earth is sacred ground,
None but Imperial feet have trodden it! My follower,
Aware of this, holds back; I beckon him on... The sun
Moves much more smartly than one gives it credit for;
Who was it proved that motion is impossible?
Hui Shih, I think; such paradoxes hit the truth,
We live the inconceivable, ought not to be...
This eunuch's obstinate loyalty is admirable,
The Master lives again -- with hands of skeletons
Rank upon rank of mouldering whiskered mandarins
Applaud him from their tombs just as they execrate
His idle, frivolous lord... Should I encourage this?
To fob him off at this stage seems unthinkable,
At the same time...odious predicament... No, no,
Clearly he wishes it...

From this high promontory
One sees Beijing in all its intricacy, its roofs
Yellow and gold and russet gleam like dragon scales,
Colours of autumn in the midst of spring! What's this?
Great plumes of smoke arising from the outer walls,
The suburbs are ablaze! Put the whole place
To rack and ruin, fire and sword -- why should I care?
And yet I do somehow... A sentimentalist at heart
Despite my turtle carapace... If I could save the capital
(Thus me) by giving in at once I'd do so resolutely!
None better, by my sword!... They say the Tartars of the East
Enclose their prey in a great ring of burning grass,
Then massacre them one by one, thus none escape -- note how

In the collective memory, the annals of the tribe,.
The overtones persist after the gong is struck,
What has been, is; such ripples spread abroad the *ch'i*,
It lives through others, yours in deeds of gallantry, and mine
In what exactly? let me think... In certain transitory acts,
Things of no moment to the vulgar but the breath of life to me,
A gesture, choice of headgear, well-turned phrase -- behaviour
Absolutely fitted to the current moment, deeply 'right'
(Not in a moral, in a cosmic sense)...

We Chong Chen Emperors decline
To leave too gross an imprint on our eras, not for us
To *wound* our time with conquests, edicts, monuments,
To live it is enough -- simply to celebrate
The passing moment's passing intimacies,
Such is our destiny; deliberations on the why,
The how, the who-and-what-are-we, though interesting,
Cannot detain us overlong, the current is too swift;
Burn with the flame! the dance of life! before us lie
The pleasure palaces of Xanadu! each moment is
A captive princess, tantalising, coy, insatiable,
Appearance is Reality!

Not quite, it seems an underswell
Subsists throughout these surface scintillations, end
And origin, the 'o', the open mouth, the Yin and Yang combined,
Zero, the void of pre-existence, formlessness,
The absolute nothingness from which the universe is made;
Nothing is new: all possible entities exist
Already in this mighty matrix but not yet as things,
Not yet as acts; the spray condenses, droplets form,
To us this more compact and colourful stuff is life,
But to the formless, death; dispersion, loss of self,
We fear this, but the opposing argument
Is equally legitimate — IT IS THE GREAT RETURN!