

A Symbol of our Time

And even in my most carnal desires, magnetised always in a certain direction concentrated about a single dream, I might have recognised as their primary motive an idea, an idea which I would have laid down my life, at the innermost core of which as in my daydreams while I sat reading all afternoon in the garden at Combray, lay the thought of perfection.

I Are we not then part of the landscape?

The purpose of art he replied
Mimicking to all aside
Is to restore our human love
It does not point to God or
That gentle youth in doublet hat and cloth
But ourselves going forward
In the setting of this land

The air was thick that Winter
The low white clouds impenetrable
Silent with the coming snow
Which lay quiet welcoming
Across the whole landscape,
The world was closed
Sunk in the creamy air
Which if you recalled
Sent one into the past
When life was static, fixed
In one village one town
A valley, between two rivers,
We lay almost embalmed
No motor car no plane, what happiness,
Not even the friendly train
Which once you set your watch by

But whose romance had dwindled
With eternal arguments in newspapers
Concerning their survival,
The snow held us captive
Imprisoned in a faery world
And if the shallow sun was seen
The brilliance of tree and bush
The house the village there below
Seemed to give a great shout of beauty
Holding yourself steady by the gate

Time itself was frozen
In a procession of Christmases
What gifts could we bear?
For what we took for granted
Now presented with a new face
As when we go to the theatre
And recognise our own dilemmas
So this old world seemed new
Through which our hero strides
Who like you is poised toward the unfamiliar
Where he must play
(Though half the part)
In England whom he loved

Tarn hailed a cab in wintry rain
Leaving the lecture at the BM
To tourists intent on ending art,
Afternoon darkness filled the station
Which more and more reminded him
Of Russia or Poland
Leaving by train the only choice
Here where cars were impossible
There there were no cars,
The lovely fields were black
As sickly urban lights lit
The tiny gossamer flakes
Unending in their falling,
The line ran by Dedham Vale
A motorway had struck that little world
Which Delacroix had bowed to
(Forgive our foolish ways);

He made every journey a return to safety
The oasis of the landscape
Calmed the divided mind
Now the glorious snow
Touched with a living serenity
The broken tree by the road
The lane dipping and turning
By the stream where the hall lay
Just seen through the bent oaks

As you stood by the long gate
Looking down the field into that exterior face,
The train passed Venta Icenorum
(At last you have come law and empire)
Entered faithful Norwich, now growing
Like a hideous octopus
Into the unshareable fields,
Approached slowly the station
The arrival recaptured for the millionth time
Which even the space age could not wholly reduce

Tarn gazed on the station facade
Bringing her pathos and blessings
Seen through a child's eye
The palaces of wonder
Standing motionless in St Petersburg,
For the snow had restored
The child's instinct to the man
An unforced and natural understanding
When from the window of the house
The mystery of the snow garden
Loved and familiar objects
Laid to rest by a magic wizard
Whose flowing cloak and staff
Would sweep across the land
Sprinkling his enchantment with the gentle breeze,
The taxi rank seemed empty

He stood gazing ahead
A tattooed man waved obliquely
Arms still uncovered in the freezing air
Prepared to make the journey
At twice the price
Snowflakes settled on their eyelids
Tarn inclined his head
And fell into the warm plastic folds
Of a battered consul

He was tired of Russia, America
The third world, oil
Above all tired of politicians
Who would not make us see
It always seemed
For he had diagnosis and treatment
England, what we must do
Or smoulder away
The remedy was simple once you saw
A nation that must steel itself
To thirty million or thereabouts
By all inducements
(For there are no more sweets)
Will bring again the demi-paradise
Not fool-ridden economics
What monsters does it breed
In which this earth, this England

Might be one long runway
Filled with the screaming air

The deserted road was almost lost
In a world of silent villages
Here the holly hedge begins
Invisible but for the shock of berries
There the nut walk grows
Bent beneath white fruit
Now the hawthorn hedge leading
Beyond times disintegration
Toward the frozen river
Where banks of bowed reeds
Point an honoured way
Lead the imagined glance
To home and silence

And now with difficulty
They turned beneath the giant oaks
O that those trees could speak
Could move to our defence
Some were older than the church
Which stood across the meadow
Alone adjacent to our heart,
Approached in the high grass of Summer
Necklaced by poppies
The tumbling organ sounds

The word is spoken
But here face upward
Gazing at the tower
The figure of the church
In this field of poppies
Is itself the inexpressible
Not the funeral dirge
Tasteless in thought
Nor the literal word
Craving for our submission
But here at this moment
As the sun sets on evensong
We dream outside
Where a symbol lives
Stands higher than the fighters overhead

No sign from the tattooed man
The silent rider almost knightly
In strength and form
Steerer of the driven snow
By mighty gates upholding
The flint filled walls of Elsonville
Where an immeasurable journey
Joins the stones the races,
The snow fell like holy water
Tarn stood in the embered light
Beside his gentle darling

Tender as the night
The presence of kindness, loving care,
But the rider could not go
In this great night
Was shown the Chinese room
And left there by the fire
Full of silent inclination, grace,
Absorbed by another world

Tarn stood on the seventh stair
How high the glorious snow
So lovely to his darling
Returning him to childhood
To toy soldiers
And the unclouded past
Which yet was filled with death
Pointing to one future
The leper or the saint
Both victims of God's
Failure or success
Dissolution or confidence
Friends dispelled, forgotten,
Sadly we are the same thing

The old covenant is broken
None shall enter the Stygian shore
The brave rise higher than fortune

Destiny is hurled from her throne
Suffering has taught us peace
More suffering is unforgiveable
The un hoped for blessing
The unlooked forward to
He mounted the curving stairs
The experience of history
Confronted by a single life
Is the inherited consciousness
Of an antique tongue

Morning and the snow shone
The rider met him on the stairs
'Do you think there will be war?'
For this man knew the world
'Even now in the face of horror
As when the crew see the tempest
Are almost destroyed by it
So the victory promises
An unbreachable confidence
This is the accolade
What choice is there
Are we to be a satrap
In the eye of the storm
What of the poppies of yesterday
The effort of centuries,
The seas about us are controlled

Our forces outnumbered
But together a mighty hand
On the neck of their ambition
Die with them in a final struggle'
Tarn gazed at the snow garden
'No not the unending curse
Where what remains is mishapen
Tortured through long generations
Not even freedom'

He saw for the first time
That in the hands of man
Art and science
Beauty and truth
Even in their sanctuaries
Contain their destruction
Religion above all things
Join in seeking one end
Which science now supplies
A perfect dissolution
Of all our veneers
Unto a wasteland.
Where then can the romance of the lane
Deeply cut on the side of the valley
Wandering to an unknown village
Revealing through the hedgerow
The secret views of undisturbed landscape

Where the dark oaks
Stand in their abiding passion
Alone in a realm of cornflowers
Where is there an end
Of the golden fields
Of barns and towers and hills
By gentle sloping meadows
Swept by the running sky
The drone of the bi-plane overhead
Or the happy noisy bees
At the end of an English afternoon
The cycle by the white gate
Hand on shoulder gazing outward
To this scene which secretly
Has constructed us
Given us our meaning
Our aquatic life.

*II And he is a portion of that Christian dust,
But I shall see it reanimated*

O ride across the ancient sea
Where Tarn's memory serves his cause
Upon the Bundu plain
He strode by African village
Seeing the horror of dung on the cord
The health resort of malaria
Typhoid and the curse of leprosy
Raged, while cousins argued
And our new black men desired
Their new world
And all his work undone
By one or other stroke of pen
And unthought words

Mtewba where John and he
Had sung from Beerbub tree
Looked into the eye of God
Drunk with long days
Beneath the purple Jacaranda
Blossoming by the feet of lepers
So gay and ill
On the limping savannah
O dip into the ocean
Of sleep and happiness

The lunar rainbow
And the honeyed crispy fly
By the beerbub tree
Emilia Duo Darwin bride of Christ.
Was the snow high on the window ledge
The dark garden entombed
By memories of the unceasing past
This village this place
Hidden in winter
Was this the moment of illumination
The lepers dissolving
Carried in wheelbarrows
Drunk on a Saturday night
John with the dapsone
Beside his sea of Galilee
Singing a lamentation of Jeremiah
Comparing the air with the Virgin
Is buried in his colony
By an African bullet
Gone are the Beira women
O madman of Kent
Generous and holy
With a suitable past
Incoherent, irrelevant
Symbol of our time?

They lived before him in the snow
But were they an answer?
From the wolf in the North
There is no safeguard,
Surely for us too
It was a world without mercy
And we were unprotected
By those ancestral voices
It is a dream for the leper
And a dream for us
We giving it up
Not having suffered so much,
Motionless by the white window
The fire of Winter
Are they then a signal
From beyond the stars
Or as victims of the past
Repeating it,
We cannot dismiss our inheritance
It is our phantom limb
O lepers
Between your void and our new bomb
Is there a way through
Which is not an insult
Is a metaphysic?

The Greek light is fading
The hope of nobility charity
The just assessment
Seem almost naive
Yet it is the landscape which
Maintains our innocence
In the face of our desires
There leper and bomb
Are united in a single action
Neither victory nor defeat.

III *We can only embody truth we cannot know it*

The ground became Spring
But Tarn, not old, was too old
For the promise of snowdrops
He saw them in silent envy
Loving their outward form
Their momentary splendour
The whole of botany
In its unseen future,
Was love so different
As it sat a governor
Of all our sensations
Overriding the light and shade
The freedom of not being in love,
Thus it espoused freedom
For the duties it held
The necessity of kindness it bred
Brought us far from freedom of will
Which he understood, knew
To freedom of spirit
Which he maintained he did not know.
Yet love for most men
Was the condition of sanity
Of work and confidence
Or was it an admission
Of repetitive defeat

The safe harbour from fear
Of our daily desires
A retreat from the challenge
The recognition of failure
To deliver creation

He knelt by the snowdrops
But gazed up at my approach
Smiled knowing my anterior knowledge
And I spoke the needed lines
For only he could experience
The arcadian time of memorial days
Emblems of human struggle
Where he has touched time
And the myrtle avenue
Let Caesar speak
And from our ancient farms
Leave the vine and olive
And go forth to Empire,

An idea to bow down to.

IV

His darling crossed the Summer lawn
He stood gazing by the lake
'My increasing fear is this
And what will we look forward to
Where is our meeting place,'
And he replied in haste with words
Of harshness and deceit
And she with tears flowed back
To her appointed tasks
Waiting for the promise
Which will not come
Deceived by his boyish charms
His ageless grace

She let her hair grow long again
Returning to the oriental coiffe
And paleness crept in every pore
Resolved and went her way
Waiting for a sign
The symbol of this love
Which will never come in
Those familiar ways but moves
In his mind to a distant echo
Of another place, a world
Where he departs looking

To death's distinguished life
And that preparation consumed
And warmed his heart
Even though his love for her was great
His love of death was greater
Though he waits for a natural grace,
He saw the time before birth
Time present and after death
Were held only by consciousness
Which when gone time itself dissolved
And the snow garden, the beerbub tree
His unrecorded desert life
The freedom of shore and jungle
Were crushed into a grain of sand
And thrown against the wind
To scatter hopelessly
Among the lost avenues
Of human, of eternal consciousness
Where he assumes his place

Others found their roles
Played them and departed
Did one really differ?
Here in a single place
Where time embodies childhood
And the Christmas tree
School and onwards

To the evidence of science,
There seems a return
Not to the philosophy of childhood
But to a metaphysical conceit
Forever beyond one's grasp,
For a moment the church bell rings
And the carol sings of older days
Then a churchman speaks
And all is lost again,
The inanimate also speaks
But man has killed his source
By careless words
Destroying too the hopes of others

Thus in parallel did our hero's
Life succeed in striving upward
Of sorts within his limitations
Providing and moving in his way
And to those beyond it
In the night-time walk
By the tube station confined
To the purgatory of Camberwell
Or the hell of Leyton,
But in the night walk by the hall
Across the park and by the lake
Through the gate in the mossy wall
To the winding lane moonfilled and misty

The trees hanging wetly in the Summer chill
Owl and bat on this prehistoric tour
The soul of England held as a mystery
Which in these tender moments
Sanctified and reconfirmed him,
But in the hardening of life
When each shock breaks something more
And we are slowly driven
(Or more quickly) to our graves
Then do these moments fructify
For a final end?
No, the sensation fails us
We arrive trembling and in shame
At these new horrors of the world
But he contended that the moments of happiness
If forgotten were still
The moments of truth and the rest
The horror and disintegration
Where the daemon untrimmed
Nature's course

He could return to them
(If the mind still worked)
As he took the wandering lane
Passed the river where the black swan sailed
On through the oak wood
Where in a clearing the church stood

Embattled by time and algae
Mounting the hill where the wild garlic
Signalled the honoured way
Then the deep cut descent
Where the towering hedgerows
Deepened the blackness
And only the coming motor car
Could destroy his happiness
Down down he plunged
The fields appeared in moonlight
The lane continued open to the sky
Hugging the river bank
Which flowed lovingly
To the sea there a mile or so
Before him like steel beneath the moon
And as he turned full circle
The sea, the fields, the hill,
The transcendent moon
The oak wood, the hall, the dying roses
Seemed to swirl like a vortex
And lift him upward to that black sky
Which would not answer him.

V *The brave man does what he has to do*

Tarn stood among the great oaks
Watching the white clothed tresses
Beat in the Western wind
His tattooed guardian guided
The people on the lawns
Now his faithful friend, his arm,
The lake shone in the September sun
And the black daemon of his heart
Conversed with his darling,
He at the periphery
His enemy and his friend
The danger point
When control was lost.
Others of the past had come invited
From childhood, school, medicine
And distant lands,
So life had been a disappointment
(He hoped to live in verse)
Science was the crossword
He had fed in print
But that marionette the metaphysic
Had played in a suite of Bach
What were these notes?
Yet here in that secret voice
Plain as geometry

Science and life were united in time
The marionette freed.
So with the landscape
The visual truth displayed
By generations
Or in a picture by Corot,
Here the living Hall
A maze of gardens, walks
And ordered serenity

He waited for Tir Nan Og
And as his friends wandered
On the Dodo terrace
Held hands among the corkscrew bays
Or disappeared liaising
In woods far off
His hands tightened
While his daemon strode the grounds
Wrestled in the peace garden
With his tattooed friend
Grinned through his despair
The daemon waved
And he waved back,
The fountain walk was crowded
But in the filling grounds
The picture of a life was formed
Through the lives of others

His loves and doubts
Work and pleasure
Fear and sexuality
Were encompassed by them
Growing now one figment
Now another of a metaphysic
Where only his darling
Held the door against
His alter self

'...Do not speak of bells to ring
Or lanterns waving on November nights
Forget the mist on marsh banks
Where St George still rides
Do not speak of freedom's cenotaph
When England is one blade of grass...'
They rose before him like a cloud
Wishing him well, a great oration
For with this voice he attended
A sublime will
Uttered, uttered, uttered
And the rain fell in tiny spikes
His friends dispersed
Only the daemon and the tattooed were left
Walking by his darling
As they trudged to the hill
Where he would shortly rest.

Look on, look on
Across the lake and garden to
The Hall the woods and there
The fields the land itself
Glowing with ancient love
Beyond the long lanes way
Beside the curling river
Down the valley through the hills
And there the priestly sea
The limit of our vision.

VI *Is not nothingness a form of perfection*

And where is the music of his past
Look across the sea of time
Seeing the horror of our end
In the midst of innocence
Each solitary day a monument
To be honoured and wept over,
The rolling mist from the sea
Gives way to Winter sunshine
The unhoped for Spring
And the silence of Summer
In the quiet secret village
Where no pomp bestrides
But far away the great tunes play
Yet to be wiped away,
The end beckons
A crown, a village, a play
The emotion shudders
And death's soft face
Appears from the pleached alley
Moves with peerless eyes
Among the roses of his darling
Waits upon the calm lawn

The ocean of his life is spent
The wave returns

And where the sand was scored
The shore is fresh and smooth
All trace of us depart
They have replaced us
And we are a portion of that happiness
Which precedes our birth
Which brought us here to life
The bequest returned,
O the unreachable blessed oaks
Is that the sea-bell sounding?
The hero of the Summer...
Wind your way to Sydling
Elsing, Ashprington
Go forth into the world in peace
Elsonville, Quarles, Tansonville

Cool hand on the sickly vein
Which crossed that ageless brow
African river, Malayan jungle
And the Arabian desert
Italian pictures and a tour of France
Greece and the image of England
Fail as sense becomes nonsense
And nonsense nothingness.
And he is borne across those sacred fields
The wind is cold, the sun passes
And I can feel her fingers on my eyelids.

VII *Requiem*

'This is the place he lies
Beneath this English turf
He loved beyond reason,
Here you must fight to death's anguish
Join him in the journey
Casting off life's reference'
And there they struggled
True inheritors of his past
Companions of good and evil
Locked in a fatal embrace
Exhausted she ministered the poison
And they sank beside him
The tomb was sealed yet open to the sky
Encircled by the woods around the hill
An antique pagan site,
She descended and from the lake
Gazed on her inheritance
But could make nothing of it
Was nothing in his absence, lost,
And as the days passed into months
Signed all to the son
Became a shadow in that place
Wandering daily to the hill
In rain or snow or wind
And there she died in grief

Joining them in the race to
The unknown cause
He had dictated to them

O lovely river, hill
The living world faces its decay
And we are bound to it
By time's great starlight source
Who seeks our old mortality
What price are these harmonic notes
Which make me dizzy hearing them
Enter the resurrection of the tomb
Or the peace of nothingness?
The multiheaded gods of sense
Or the ancestral voices?
The great Omega of faith
Is all turned up and out of place
But here the September sun
Still meets the apple
And darkening plums swell
To nature's tune
And we are returned to passing days
Only to be destroyed
By man's dangerous toys

To speak directly seems
Not to speak at all

And yet to hesitate and puff
Is weakness or conceit
Where is the root from which
This monster man has grown
And where will he find rest,
The landscape and the lab
The quiet town and study
Work upon things
Hidden by beauty
The system run on noble size
Where we can be
And there the metaphysic
Will be harnessed
To our willing destiny,
There the winding lane
Will lead us in our search
For peace and honour
To the enfolding hills
These gates and fields

Dancing with tree and hedge
Making our new tapestry,
Encode our lives O sun
Bring us through birth and death
And every shock between
A great anointment
Which is the springboard

Of our going forward, upward
Artificer of this setting life
Diversified as Tuscany or Umbria
Or the Weald of Kent
The Norfolk shore
Or the March of Wales
The rich escarpment of beauty
Jewelled in botany
Cypress, oak and nut
New elm and high hedge
Chiselled on an endless face
Now evilly tortured
(Except in the hidden battle
By the railway station
Or in the dark night
Of London roads, time's biology)

Then Tarn sank deeper into the earth
With his beloved, friends
But they are not passing remains
Of an archaic life
For they are reconstituted
Unrecognised into new life
And as you pass the Hall
Possessed by a new nation among
The crowds who throng the doors
A new face has entered

Unbeknown and consciousness
Is the connecting reality
Before and after
From which we leave, rejoin, leave
And join again until
We enter that perfect time
The time before our birth
The incarnation of consciousness
Suspended.

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