

'CHIAROSCURO'

Robert Tilleard

Presented by

My poetic side 

summary

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SEEKING WORDS

EX CATHEDRA or A Moving Picture

EX CATHEDRA or a MOVING PICTURE

Is this a snapshot of a searchlight?
Of a family of chairs in flight
Seeking refuge, escaping the chase
By the unseen pursuers off-screen?
Or a moving picture of a moon
Illuminating a darkened sky
That could be a haven or dead-end?
Or is it a clip of hanging chairs
Before falling to a fatal fate?
Or a still of six arrested seats
Awaiting their uncertain future?
Their shadows the images of bats,
That presage freedom from fearfulness.
Is the door an entrance or an exit
Into a land of hope or despair?
Is a chair without a seat, a chair?
Would Magritte say: "*Ce n'est pas une chaise*".

In truth, they're in a small Spanish church,
In brief suspended animation,
In stop-motion beneath an aisle roof.
Should they not be in a cathedral?
After all, is not a cathedral named
For the Chair which seats the archbishop?

THE OLD CAMELLIA HOUSE

Here they once tended the camellias;
Now all the camellias are deceased,
Choked by the fresh flora that flourishes
In this broken purposed infirmary
For tender flowers consumed by the years.
The red, remembered as a period piece,
The white, no longer abed, still waiting
For the nurseryman's nurturing hand.
Now never beheld through the shivered panes,
Les dames were offered no kindly mercy.
Today, the house is enclosed by nature
Before it too will return to the earth,
Reconciled with its red and white patients

THE SPINNING TOP

A spinning top moves and is motionless.
A seemingly contradictory thing,
Like a whirring brain in a limp body
Issuing timeless ideas on timelessness.
Opposites as one - a double agent?
(He's a Cambridge spy, not a physicist)
There is the sleeping force waiting to pounce -
A miss or mister passive-aggressive -
Indifference loitering with intent
A catapult before loosing a stone.
Or ungracious insubordination.
I am the spaceship hugging the rocket
Inert until discharged into the void.
"A body persevering in a state of rest".*
Not everybody. Some folk persevere
With quiescent love which, once unfettered,
May unravel into mocking chaos ?
Another constant with no constancy.
A spinning top spins and still stays in place
A revolution ends where it begins
And then what? Should we say: " ' Twas ever thus? "
Is it: plus ça change plus c'est la même chose?
* Isaac Newton

THE TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS NEAR EPHEBUS

'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'
OZYMANDIAS - Shelley

At first, the sign is difficult to find.
The third Wonder of the Ancient World
Is hidden beyond a dusty car park
Large enough for five or six chariots.
Blocking the view, three abrupt notice boards.
Below, a lone teetering stone column
Stacked on a quaking base fashioned from scraps.
Next to it a discarded treadless tyre
With an expectant pole thrust through its heart
As if fellow worn-out tyres will be piled
To build a rubber, rival monument.
And on a slab, once of a great wonder,
An alien peach left by a stranger -
One would like to think as an offering.
The public is across the barren fields,
Centuries away, trying to picture
Ephesus without the cafés and stalls.
But back here in this deserted wasteland
It's simpler to add to the dry landscape
Than do the crowd's effortful subtraction.
To add the pillaging and the earthquakes,
The dumb arson and the hopeful rebirth.
To ponder the worshipful erections
To an earth mother and a cold virgin;
The strange, contradictory, Artemis.
Though once a wonder of the ancient world,

Her temple's stone fragments neglected now;
Perhaps that leftover peach, with a core
Of an enceinte stone of a different kind,
When nurtured by the virgin earth mother,
Will enter the untouched surrounding soil
And grow to be a wonder of the world.

CHIAROSCURO

Clear and obscure means more than light and dark;
It's more subtle than these stark opposites ?
One cannot exist without its other.
I was once given some fragrant roses
Whose tenuous scent was also heady,
Whose quiet colours were yet effusive,
Whose caressing petals had a partner
Who crept up and cruelly drew my blood.
An entity can only be entire
When united with its vital allies,
Who, like antagonistic siblings,
Cannot abide each other's company,
Till they understand that ? to be as one ?
Luminous male Yang needs alter ego
Yin, his tenebrous female counterpart.
Perhaps a painting is an entity
Which, when reconciled with adversaries,
Should combine with these erstwhile opponents
To create an undivided image -
Yet still a jigsaw of contradictions.
It should lie down to be seen in full sight,
And stand erect to be hidden away;
It should be imprecisely well-defined,
And unambiguously diffusive;
Sensuously curved and openly arced,
But within a linear straight-jacket;
With a perspective that's a verity,
An illusion that hoodwinks nobody.
Contriving, either apart or as one,
To unmask the face of an artifice,
A breathing, inanimate entity,
Aspiring to an equilibrium.

REFLECTIONS ON THE LORELEI

It was getting dark when the young couple Drove past the murmuring, luring outcrop Concealing its echoing waterfall. The Lorelei lurking beside the Rhine, Named for the beautiful abandoned girl Who saw herself in her faithless lover - A reflection she would come to despise, A revulsion that became petrified And an enticing hazard to all men. Her fixed love for this untrue looking glass Turned her into a bewitching danger. Men, helpless at her self-hating beauty And her seducing, whispered siren call, Willingly crashed onto the hidden rocks. The restless woman in the car desired To go to the crest of the Lorelei. The heartbroken girl, once upon a time, Had had a vision of her lost lover. Far below the wide and beckoning Rhine Welcomed her plunging body. The man refused His earnest lover's desire to ascend. So they agreed to go to the village, And there, in a bright Sankt Goarshausen bar, They, on reflection, parted forever.

A STILL LIFE BY JUAN SANCHEZ COTAN

Juan Sanchez Cotan the Spaniard
Puts a membrillo and a repollo
To be preserved in the larder window.
They hang from hidden hooks in the night sky,
Five objects in celestial order,
Planets geometrically processing
Through the impenetrable infinite.
They are still there - preserved in a painting.
Myopically sublime and numinous,
He sees his God in the quotidian.
Across the Mediterranean sea
Is a parallel, disconnected life.
The great Galileo Galilei.
With telescope and hyperopia
He too sees the planets in procession
In a heliotropic universe.
Still there - a new testament to reason.
In parallel - a monk; a heretic:
Juan enters the contemplative life
To serve his purblind Church and his God.
Galileo enters the papal court
To be condemned by the Inquisition.
To guarded house arrest for his end years.
I would like to think he went home alone
And, contemplating Juan Sanchez Cotan,
And the ways of Man and the Universe,
He ate cetriolo with melone

THE GREEN KNIGHT

In fourteen-eighteen Sir John Gawen died, Buried here comforted by an angel. Over the years the corrupting limestone Blankets him in green protecting algae To whimsically colour him the hue Of his namesake's enemy, the Green Knight. The latter would have liked the happy fluke That the man should become, even in death, His doppelganger, his annoying twin, Hiding an unchivalrous two-edged sword With which to accomplish the teasing test Of swapping dead deer for stolen kisses - As if the hunted is now the hunter. One-upmanship in death has no winners, There can be no resounding sweet revenge, Only reverberating frustration In the echoing constant collisions Between temptation and bleak resistance, Ending in the clash of deadly face-offs. The Green Knight's sanguineous coat-of-arms Has a shield with a golden pentangle; For Sir Gawen the dead, but now green, knight, An ancient sign of immortality And of everlasting replication. Pentangles have within them another Pentangle which, still yet, has another. *In perpetuum et unum diem*. Or, as one should say: As night follows day And ? inescapably ? knight follows knight.

TIME FOR A NEW YEAR POEM

As I was saying: Once upon a time... I could bang on and on, which I could, should There be an infinite number of words - Maybe one day there will be sufficient. The heavens have been banging on and on For aeons, yet there is still no time to say That there's no beginning and there's no end To this continuous speculation About how long this has been going on And if it is ever going to end. What you can do to finally shut me up - Because it will go on, and I won't last - Is to be patient, but that does take time. Today is December the 31st, Which marks a break in my continuum, As do all momentary disruptions As the earth doggedly orbits the sun - But I'll go on as if nothing happened. Until I'm stopped and I join the stardust, Or so I am told, from whence I came. But for the moment: Once upon a time...

A LITTLE COWBOY PAINTER

Once there was a lonely little cowboy Sitting in his room and feeling no joy, For he was also a painter who yearned To create pictures, when one day he learned It was essential to travel abroad To behold all the paintings he adored. It was Florence, he was told, is the place Where he'd find and encounter face to face Those pictures he'd seen solely in photos And in their real presence they would disclose. Their dark secrets and awesome mysteries, Their craft and their art and their histories. However, he'd not been there all that long When he felt there was something very wrong - Because he felt so sad and so alone He did something you and I couldn't condone: He stole a beautiful purple Vespa Was it a cry for help and a gesture? On this, he escaped to Venezia Pursued by the local Polizia. Harried and hunted, he kept up morale By cleverly crossing the grand canal. And daringly driving up and down stairs And tearing through ancient cloisters and squares. At last, he took refuge in some paintings, Where he hid himself away and found things In pictures which were so subtly sublime, He began to feel that, if given time, He could create his own secret landscape And in it make a clandestine escape. Which he did and then he fled and he flew Home on his stolen Vespa and he knew Now he could be a very good artist Perhaps neither the best nor the smartest But he would always have the company Of his artist-teachers from Tuscany And he would never again be alone For he'd learn by his mistakes and he'd grown.

RELIEF

Such a simple idea, moveable type:
I don't have a single ' i ', I have a lot.
You don't have one single ' u ' you have many -
Multiple types moving from line to line.
The same character each made from one mould
Changing places with many parts to play.
And manhandled to make an impression
So, issuing forth, one becomes many,
Coming to some common understanding
Which can be scattered to the far corners.
Though lurking at the edges of the earth
Are Hydra's many-headed dark monsters,
Who, even before the world wide web, were
Faking news and conspiracy theories.
But with ' u ' and ' i ' in multiple forms,
Like Heracles, we will defeat the beasts

THE DIVINE PROPORTION

The earthly godlike proportion states:
The smaller part is to the greater
As the greater part is to the whole.
Did the gods on a Mount Arithmos
Come up with this divine division?
The alchemy of the Golden Mean.
A universal logarithmic
Is a phrase that counts, as all words do ?
A phrase describing this mundane verse?
Is a logarithmic spiral's song
A poem that could ascend or plunge?
A paradigm lost and then regained,
Scanning the gap between coupled words
Like heaven and hell or love and hate.
A precious proportion, though confined
In a golden rectangular page.
Or just say: 1 to point 618
That's roughly one way of putting it

THE GIRL IN LACOCK CHURCH

The inclination to ask her her name
To satisfy a curiosity
Is defiantly met with a blank stare.
There is no Aphrodite to melt this
Galatea into a living nymph,
So - though not her maker - I may kiss her.
The church is named for Saint Cyriac
Who had to cast out demons in a girl,
But she doesn't look the type of maiden
Who once entertained the Prince of Darkness.
She's neither a simple Virgin Mary
Nor a lady of the nearby manor,
But I'd like to think she's a village girl,
Lover of the local Pygmalion,
Who caressed and fashioned the yielding stone
And, when she was living flesh, did kiss her.

LA SACRESTIA ABBANDONATA

'And what is actual is actual for only one time And only one place...' ASH WEDNESDAY T.S.Eliot
After saying the Latin Mass, the priest Quietly closes the sacristy door. It is Ash Wednesday and the sacristan ? The holy palm ash cross still on his brow ? Locks it fast shut until the next Sunday; But forty days go by and no one comes And the palm ashes are now holy dust. Hidden in the wardrobe are the vestments: The priest's white alb tunic now not so pure; His chasuble covering now sinned against; His stole ? at hand for drying ? now unwashed. Unconsecrated wines, some for the Mass, Some wisely kept back for the thirsty priest, Not needed now, and only vinegar. The waiting jug is empty of water, Of no use to the spirit of the stairs. This place is no longer the only place, Entombed now, not embalmed but decaying - And what is actual is for all time. After forty days it is deserted And now forsaken for eternity. The sacrestia abbandonata.

LA FONTANA

This travertine marble has travelled far. It was thirsty work those two hundred miles, Those eight hundred feet from quarry to here; All those heights above undrinkable water. Under the burnt streets of this hilltop town This cooling water will spill from a wound Neptune made in the side of the mountain. We, with our dried-up throats, cannot yet drink From this fresh source of our own devising ? The naiads are playing with Tantalus. We kneel with hope on the stone steps and pray, But that pale-faced chalice remains unfilled. Years pass and the fountain gives of its gift To those who need help and ask for relief. Now our thirsty work has been forgotten When we return and find the fountain dry. But today our prayers are heard nearby, For there is a small bar across the square Where mischievous naiads are forbidden And water comes in bottles, not fountains.

LA VESPA

There she is waiting, wearing the purple, More royal than the absentee princess Who went on an unscheduled holiday In Rome tearing round the Coliseum. (Although no relation, Vespasian's Monument to good fun and bloody game - Pane e chichi for the plebeians). Attendant on her owner emerging, Sensuously perched on radiant tiles, Seemingly tethered to a Mondrian, Painted earth and ochre on an off day; Wasp coloured walls sheltering violets. Who will emerge in the cool, dark doorway? For it can never be a Miss Hepburn Or a Mr Peck, now crumbling like the walls, But a ragazzo and a ragazza, Suitably alla moda l'ultima, As exhilarating as their fresh steed.

A BOOK BINDER'S LAMENT

You write asking for a book to be bound. A book by all known scribblers and scrawlers
Containing all the words of truth and untruth - Whether they be fake facts or true fiction. Weighty words
written over the ages, First on scrolls and now on printed pages. You wish they be let slip as
bounding hounds: Those textual retrievers and pointers On a paper chase littering knowledge. Yet
you insist they must first be kennelled, Confined by walls of leather and buckram, Kettle stitched by
us artisan warders, Encased in stiff board and burdened with weights. This utters volumes as a
paradox: You eat the cake yet keep it in the cake box.

IN THE VILLA BORGHESE GARDENS (revised)

It has been said the Borghese garden's Parasol pines are green floating islands, The cypresses funereal candles. The ilex is ancient and undisturbed. Today by the Temple of Asclepius There are four women, three smoking - *Ma fumavano con eleganza*; Two old men, arm in arm, time-honoured friends; A young cellist practicing by the lake; Couples tucked into small flat-bottomed boats; Playful children trying to be trying. But beyond these children, this novice cellist, These two old men and those smoking women, The eternal ilex, the floating pine, The tall crepuscular cypress candles, And the distant drone of encircling cars. Beyond this Arcadian dreaming Once skulked the memento mori, The 'bad air' ? the ghost of malaria. There is abroad another pestilence - Though not here, a remote threatening dread, The constant throb of imminent conflict, A replicating worm in the apple Of this pure prelapsarian garden, A circulating serpent of bad blood Joining with the miasma to defile The undefiled bodies in far-off lands.

SEEKING WORDS

He asks to see her art exam paper: the subject set is 'Serendipity'. She promptly looks it up: *The faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident, especially while looking for something else* (coined by Horace Walpole after 'The Three Princes of Serendip', a fairy tale of chance discoveries). So she draws a picture of a white man in baggy shorts and a sola topee. He's a butterfly hunter with a net on an exotic tropical island. In a clearing he beholds a dragon, A lovely girl-dragon sitting alone playing a friendless game of backgammon. Serendipitously he's chanced upon more than a butterfly, and she's acquired a partner for her game of backgammon. He asks her: "Does he net the dragon-girl?" "Yes, he does - but the dragon-girl breathes fire". "Is he falling in love with the dragon?" "Yes, he is ? but the fire is burning him." "Do you think his love is unrequited?" "Requited?"? she consults the dictionary: *Make return for, repay (for good or ill). An early variant of 'quit': to clear; Repay, relinquish, absolve, abandon; Discharge; resting, free from war, debts; unmarried.* She thinks it is an *unrequited* love. "But", he says to the girl, "unrequited love is a prerequisite for heartbreak." She looks up 'requisite': *Necessary; from 'requisitus', ask for, seek to know.* The girl asked for and sought for meaning. The hunter sought the butterfly but found an unasked for unrequited love for a dragon-girl - bringing heartbreak and loss. And the dragon-girl? How was she repaid? - though in her innocence she sought nothing. She got to breathe fire on a searching man And found a backgammon partner ? and won.