

Comparisons

&

Conversions

Also by Harry Guest

Poetry

A Different Darkness
The Achievements of Memory
Mountain Journal
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Another Island Country
Mastering Japanese
Traveller's Literary Companion to Japan
The Artist on the Artist

HARRY GUEST

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COMPARISONS

A Travel Log

for Lynn, ideal companion

Early evening. Spread over its hi-jacked crater
the city's glitter's muted under dregs of smog.
Eighteen thousand feet. Our starboard wing
glides past the tapering summit of a brown
volcano—not shining as in Turner's poem
since fresh lava's smeared the snow off. Two
miles of air to fall through till we face
the future on solid ground. In the event
terra proves somewhat less than firma during
the optimistic trek to claim our luggage
for a minor tremor makes the airport windows
rattle. Then frantic traffic. Church doors gape
to show quivering candles. In this muggy
November shirtsleeved men on the sidewalk
fry tortillas. At sunrise from the fifteenth floor
we peer down on a flat roof piled with fir-cones.

At Guadalupe the Old Basilica's lopsided.
This crater used to be a lake. Buildings here
tend to tilt and sink. We tiptoe warily under
iffy-looking arches clamped with metal struts
remembering that church in Venice whose
crypt is permanently floored with water,
the altar standing on itself reversed in murk.
Quite near St. Mark's. Tasha, intrepid, ran along
those scary galleries inspecting the mosaics.
I followed cautiously whereas you and Nick
stayed earthbound on marble.

The New

Basilica's thronged splendidly for Mass.
An unstressed subtext of the Vision surely means
that in the pauper Mary had already found
the most important person in the land. No need
to winkle out a viceroy or a bishop as
that peasant filled the bill. And whether one believes

in the miraculous roses is of secondary importance—like tossing evidence about the Turin Shroud from scientific hand to hand since intellect and epiphanies belong so far apart that any truths get fumbled in between.

The Mayans thought gold was the sweat of the sun and silver the tears of the moon. Japanese eyes detect a hare in the lunar disc and Ray Bradbury's rocket-ship sought to scoop out incandescent gobs of solar matter conveying a few of Yeats's golden apples back to earth. The haphazard quality of my early education meant I never had to study chemistry or physics yet at Teotihuacán the Pyramid of the Moon mimics the contour of a mountain to the north. I looked down from halfway up the steps to an enigmatic quadrangle with low partitions in each corner open towards the centre. A photograph caught you exploring the south-east wall not glancing up when I waved. From that plaza it's half a mile and down a slope to reach the Pyramid of the Sun but the designers made sure both platforms stand at precisely the same height. Two Swallowtails flicked by brilliant on the hot wind. You didn't ascend this structure either. Hard-going, actually. Grabbing hold of the steep rope as youths red-shirted for a Sunday outing leapt past jeering at shrieks of terror from their girls. The sky extended cloudless but alas clogged molecules of fumes concealed the two volcanic landmarks. From Tokyo in the sixties

Fuji too loomed visible for just a few days
each New Year when the factories had closed—
then, gradually, through January, its white cone
went back to non-existence beyond haze.
Last August though each evening we could see
its dark triangle block some stars from the roof-bar
of that improbable hotel in Shinagawa
with five thousand rooms. On our second stay,
after that conference on the coast where I'd
run seminars about Ole Ez, I went
down to the shop for whisky, postcards
and o-sembei. Then could not recall the number
of our new room nor which one of the three
skyscrapers we were lodged in. "Sumimasen.
Heya no bangô wa wasurechatta ga."
The lass at Reception was sympathetic.
Accepted I was speaking Japanese
without releasing even a single giggle
one slim hand fanned up to protect her mouth.

Off in the bus to visit Shôzô, dear
poet-scholar-painter in his lush highland
fastness. At noon we passed the flank of Fuji
as cinnamon as Hokusai showed it menaced
by a most unlikely lightning-flash. In Shô's
wild garden irises and a persimmon-tree,
the skyline circled by dark green mountains.
Each day we walked to a spring with nonstop water
delectable as that torrent in the Mani
crashing into a stone trough under Taygetos
to slake wayfarers for at least three thousand
years. We were driving back from the majestic
remains of Mystras scattered on the slope
beneath the fort. A fresco in the Pantanassa
shows two Kings only heading for the stable—

one on a blue horse, one on a red, several centuries before Franz Marc. Off on a fruitful tangent one would hope. A bunch of grapes dangling from a spar in some surrealist geometry.

But back to Mexico

a year ago, accompanied again by you, the shadowy other, my private vocative, that second person singular of wedlock. A light plane started slanting round to land showing that longed-for flattened hill set so symmetrically with ruins. Oaxaca itself guards memories of Lowry—Malcolm not L.S. although it could be intriguing to place Lancastrian matchstick-figures clad in broadcloth on sunstruck plazas. My Penguin copy of *Dark As The Grave* contains a misprint: Parker's *place* for *Piece*. Understandable for readers unacquainted with that patch of green in Cambridge. In Lowry's novel SIGBJØRN and PRIMROSE (no kidding) get lost attempting to walk up to Monte Albán. We were more fortunate. Its graceful plan's rectangular, north-south, with one perhaps observatory at odds with other structures—a blunt-built arrowhead directed at a special colony of the nighttime sky. As elegant a site as Copán flown to by a "crate" Biggles would have been proud to take up. On the runway, chocks really did get whipped away. In that Honduran canyon the flaking wings seemed likely any second to scrape against the cliffs on either side. The terminal by the tufted landing-field boasted a thatched roof. We hung around

and spied bright birds with no names. A yellow bus
passed shady gardens where naked children
smiled and waved, forded a stream as jolly
families were laving their jalopies,
squealed at last to a halt: Ruinas
de Copán. A dusty square. Gaunt donkeys
tethered. Men, dark eyes hidden under wide-
brimmed hats, clenched thin cigars between gold teeth.
Two tame macaws summed us up from a fence
when we bought tickets but we'd seen as vivid ones
flying over that river at dusk, the snout
of a crocodile breaking the surface as if
to contradict my prep school master who
contended cacti and alligators belong
to The New World, crocs and succulents being
prerogative of The Old. Arid pastures
to the south did let cactus-hedges protect
ochre soil. Black vultures floated like scraps
of burnt paper. In *The Power and the Glory*
Greene compares them to indigestion-spots.
Going over the Sierra Madre we must have
crossed the route taken by the whisky-priest
(not named) dogged by the lieutenant
(equally lacking a label) who stood
for the steelgrey power of the secular state
unable nonetheless to stifle the glory
of the oh so unworthy martyr but who am I
to measure worthiness? How can I gauge
the virtues or demerits of an action
undergone by others? It's hard enough
to end each day recalling where I've failed,
how often and so unforgivably. That's why
we journey on, hoping by space to leave
the faults of time behind but men seem bound
to loop back like a boomerang lobbed deftly

to similar commissions of despair.
Gloom-thoughts to be going on with. Let's
click back consolingly to visiting
that church in Zinacantan. Broken free
from the establishment it's run by shamans.
We sidled in, welcomed indifferently.
Men were busy carpeting the entire
floor with dry pine-needles. Luckily no-one
jogged any of the many flickering candles.
One part-time deacon reverently traced the outline
of a kneeling supplicant with two eggs held
by thumb and middle-finger symbolising
rebirth into crowing health. He then dosed
his patient with Coca-Cola. The gas helps
to expel evil spirits. (On a wall
in Cartersville, Georgia, they've preserved
a huge advertisement for this beverage
painted in the 1890s. Its usefulness
for exorcism doesn't rate a mention.)
Despite their apostasy, they've retained
effigies of accepted saints—the one
nearest the high altar is the main target
for their prayers. If there's no response,
he's banished to the west end of the queue.
After a sound thrashing.

Our Tokyo landlord
used ceremoniously to berate the parental
ashes kept in bronze urns on a scarlet tansu.
That room was shadowed by his pride and joy—
a banana-tree shrouded in winter
with coconut sacking. Its jagged leaves
drooped exactly as Bashô described them—
like the injured tail of a phoenix. (Neither
he nor I can vouch for the accuracy
of the comparison.) It's been cut down.

So has the orange-tree whose foliage,
aglow with uneatable fruit in December,
darkened the room in which the children played
listening to EPs of Moomin or (Nichol's
favourite) *The Grand Canyon Suite* by Grofé.
One strict rule. Toys at bathtime put away
behind the uncomfortable sofa so parents
(each doubtless clutching a replenished glass)
could cross the yellow carpet in stocking feet
without tripping over a kettledrum, Noah's
Ark, Ultraman in two sizes, chipped lorries,
grey scabbard (long swordless), a white furry
bear daubed for some reason with green paint,
block letters of the alphabet, a top
which used to whine a song, slippery cards
displaying ethnic costumes or painful
pieces of Lego. The other Tzotzil church
placed horses and jaguars of wood at random
near the entrance to the chancel. We trod
just as carefully.

Back in the colonial
hotel—Spanish-style patio, the cool trickle
of a fountain—I wondered at the ironclad
conquerors, what they replaced, the whole
repeated shift of violence again
replacing violence. Everywhere we go
we're told of suffering victims and were *they*
worthy or unworthy? No focus merely on
what looks symmetrical when hearts got prised
still throbbing from the rib-cage. Even rulers
pierced their own tongues and penises to make
a gift of agony to the rain-withholding gods
who thrived on blood. I'm squeamish, try
to censor off the cruelty. Truth though (some
of the time) will out. Like honesty. As Lewis

(C.S. not Wyndham) pointed out, each now-gleaming temple in the Ancient World formed a sacred abattoir and reeked of blood. At least the heifer Keats saw on that Grecian urn stays safe from harm. Indifferent centuries have cleansed those altars and obliterated screams as feathered priests hurled captives, wrists and ankles lashed, down the cliff-flight of steps like ones at Tikal jutting from the jungle canopy where howler monkeys loll. A dead fer-de-lance lay by the shadowed wayside and our guide peered round unhappily in case its mate should still be lurking.

At Paestum
the meadows look as if they had been groomed
in preparation for Persephone's bare
feet to walk there hardly dinting the golden
asphodels but sacrificial slabs
give off the unsniffed stench of animals
selected for their beauty for the knife.
A modern hypocrite, I'm able guiltily
to choose the ambience I seek to see
and don't allow the proof humanity
gawps happily at different ways to maim
or kill both beasts and its own kind to spoil
my pleasure at the architecture, mar
craving for a safe dream. Once, to my shame,
I saw kick-boxing in Bangkok. Back in Japan
on the grey-blue TV screen, it had seemed
like a rather sexy ballet. The real thing
was different. I left, sickened by
yells of protest when a bout was stopped.
One of the contestants had been badly hurt
and the spectators wanted him to go on
getting hurt.