

# *The Explorer Who Never Left Home* —Arthur Waley

By Jonathan Spence

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ARTHUR WALEY, *March 1949:*  
*against a Chinese screen. Photograph*  
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ARTHUR WALEY selected the jewels of Chinese and Japanese literature and pinned them quietly to his chest. No one has ever done anything like it before, and no one will ever do so again.

There are now many Westerners whose knowledge of Chinese or Japanese is greater than his, and there are perhaps a few who can handle both languages as well. But they are not poets, and those who are better poets than Waley do not know Chinese or Japanese. Also the shock will never be repeated, for most of the works that Waley chose to translate were largely unknown in the West, and their impact was thus all the more extraordinary.

WALEY SAT on a quiet edge of “Bloomsbury.” Because he lived to a fine age—from 1889 to 1966—I have always associated him in some corner of my mind with E. M. Forster and Leonard Woolf, for they were all educated in the same special area of pre-World War I Cambridge, and all lived well into the 1960’s, shrewd observers

of a cataclysmically changing scene. All three were very talented, and none of them was gregarious. They might meet occasionally for tea at Lytton Strachey's house Ham Spray, or run into each other in Gordon Square, but they all defended their right to run their own lives. And all three, rather oddly one might have thought, had an interest in Asia. For Forster there was India; for Woolf, Ceylon; and for Waley, China and Japan. But though Forster worked in India, and Woolf worked in Ceylon, Waley never even visited either of the two countries that gave him such extraordinary inspiration.

One can make all kinds of guesses concerning Waley's reasons for not going to Asia: that he didn't want to confuse the ideal with the real, or that he was interested in the ancient written languages and not the modern spoken ones, or that he simply could not afford the journey. Certainly we are safe in assuming that the trip would have been disconcerting, and it is worth reflecting on why this might have been so.

Waley was a Classicist; and he was also in King's College at the time when Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson—known as Goldie to generations of students—still presided over young minds, inculcating the virtues of an esthetic humanism which are the heart of what people came to know as "Bloomsbury," virtues that were permanently captured in the essays and novels of E. M. Forster.

Dickinson was dejected by the ugliness and cruelty and insensitivity of the world that lurked just outside Cambridge; how could the Athenian ideals be preserved in such an appalling environment? Those men who valued decency, honesty and compassion must state their values clearly lest the new Englishman—"Divorced from Nature but unreclaimed by Art; instructed, but not educated; assimilative, but incapable of thought"—inherit the earth.

This particular characterization of the Englishman was written by Dickinson in 1901, just after the Boxer Rising in China, and appeared in a little book of anonymous essays called *Letters from John Chinaman*.

As Dickinson warmed to the theme the inspirations came thicker, until his critique of his own society, his affection for his young friends, and shreds from the Chinese poets he had read in translation, all merged into a remarkable hymn to Chinese humanism, written in the first person by "John Chinaman" himself:

In China. . . . To feel, and in order to feel to express, or at least to understand the expression of all that is lovely in Nature, of all that is poignant and sensitive in man, is to us in itself a sufficient end. A rose in a moonlit garden, the shadow of trees on the turf, almond bloom, scent of pine, the winecup and the guitar; these and the pathos of life and death, the long embrace, the hand stretched out in vain, the moment that glides for ever away, with its freight of music and light, into the shadow and hush of the haunted past, all that we have, all that eludes us, a bird on the wing, a perfume escape on the gale—to all these things we are trained to respond, and the response is what we call literature. This we have; this you cannot give us; but this you may so easily take away.

It is remarkable enough that William Jennings Bryan should have taken these

letters literally, and written a stirring rebuttal (published in 1906), in which he defended Labor-saving Machinery, The Home and Christianity. But what is perhaps even more remarkable is that Dickinson—the political scientist and expert in comparative governments—could visit Peking in 1913 and come away with his fantasy confirmed as reality! As he wrote to E. M. Forster: “China! So gay, friendly, beautiful, sane, hellenic, choice, human . . . Yes, China is much as I imagined it. I thought I was idealizing, but now I doubt it.”

THAT CHINA should be Hellenic comes hard on a modern graduate school product. But when Arthur Waley took his job in the Oriental Subdepartment of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum in 1913 such an esthetic approach was very much in the air, and he breathed in a good deal of it. His first book, *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, appeared in 1917, and in the introduction Waley wrote of the rationality and tolerance of the Chinese, of their powers of self-analysis, and of their friendship, in a way that could satisfy both Athens and Bloomsbury: “To the European poet the relation between man and woman is a thing of supreme importance and mystery. To the Chinese, it is something commonplace, obvious—a need of the body, not a satisfaction of the emotions. These he reserves entirely for friendship.” And again, “For sympathy and intellectual companionship they looked only to their friends.”

Furthermore, in the person of Po Chū-i, the great T'ang poet who lived from 772-846, Waley found someone who was immensely compatible, who spoke directly to the worries of Waley's time with a wise voice 1100 years old. It was a witty, warm, slightly melancholy voice, one that abhorred pretension, one that could both sympathize with the poor and excoriate the vulgar. On the death of his little daughter Po Chū-i said: “At last, by thinking of the time before she was born,/By thought and reason I drove the pain away.” When traveling through the dangerous Yangtze gorges the poet wrote: “How can I believe that since the world began/In every shipwreck none have drowned but rogues?” And, with startling force:

*Sent as a present from Annam—  
A red cockatoo.  
Coloured like the peachtree blossom,  
Speaking with the speech of men.  
And they did to it what is always done  
To the learned and eloquent.  
They took a cage with stout bars  
And shut it up inside.*

A second volume, *More Translations from the Chinese*, appeared in 1919. In a brief introduction, Waley noted that no reviewers had treated the first book of poems “as an experiment in English unrhymed verse, though this was the aspect of it which most interested the writer.” I am not sure about that “most interested,” but certainly Waley's touch was growing more sure, and he was writing his translations with total simplicity, and total command of stress, as in these lines by Po Chū-i's contemporary Wang Chien:

*Poisonous mists rise from the damp sands,  
Strange fires gleam through the night-rain.  
And none passes but the lonely fisher of pearls  
Year by year on his way to the South Sea.*

In another passage of the same introduction, Waley shows his mastery of combining paraphrase, translation and analysis, when he writes of the *No* dramatist Seami's usage of the Zen word *yugen*:

It means 'what lies beneath the surface': the subtle, as opposed to the obvious; the hint, as opposed to the statement. It is applied to the natural grace of a boy's movements, to the gentle restraint of a nobleman's speech and bearing. 'When notes fall sweetly and flutter delicately to the ear,' that is the *yugen* of music. The symbol of *yugen* is 'a white bird with a flower in its beak.' 'To watch the sun sink behind a flower-clad hill, to wander on and on in a huge forest with no thought of return, to stand upon the shore and gaze after a boat that goes hid by far-off islands, to ponder on the journey of wild geese seen and lost among the clouds'—such are the gates of *yugen*.

Such a passage is art, as surely as the poetic translations themselves, or the originals from which the translations were taken. If one has a feeling that Waley found what he needed to find—a wryness, a delicacy, a languor, that seems to imbue Genji and Yuan Mei, Sei Shonagon and Monkey, even the Imperial Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu—one cannot cavil, and can immediately find other works that negate any simple generalization. He also translated the *Book of Songs* and Confucius's *Analects*, for example, and the Ainu poems.

THE FORCE OF the impact that Waley had, over the 50 years of his creative life, upon a wide circle of artists, intellectuals, teachers and students is . . . abundantly recorded in a risky but beautifully executed book that Ivan Morris has compiled: *Madly Singing in the Mountains: An Appreciation and Anthology of Arthur Waley* [see Appendix on p.37]. I say risky, because one may collect reminiscences, accolades and passages of a person's works, without having any kind of a readable book. But this beautifully executed anthology is an exception.

Ivan Morris, himself an outstandingly good translator of Japanese literature, has somehow composed a book that is both intimate and distant, that manages to respect Waley's privacy and to be forthright. Much of the credit for the book's effect must go to the essay with which the book opens, "Intent of Courtesy" by Carmen Blacker, a wild, gentle and beautiful example of the genus "Eulogy," building up to a savagely romantic ending, that puts most other such pieces to shame.

As the book progresses, the range of Waley's talents becomes increasingly apparent. The more each modern specialist says how good Waley was in his particular field, the more one is conscious of Waley's independence; his remark that he "would rather be dead" than a professor at Cambridge dances in the air above those pages that sometimes grow a little solemn.

WALEY'S REPUTATION grew steadily. In 1929 he was able to retire from the British Museum and devote himself full time to writing—though how he could possibly have written more in the time past than he already had defies imagining. Fame brought its rewards, some conventional and some surprising. How very nice it must have been, when everybody who was anybody in England thought that Edith Sitwell was brilliant and rather dotty, to have Edith Sitwell think that you were the one who was brilliant and dotty. Having found a book written in some exotic language lying around her brother Sacheverell's library, she placed it next to Waley's bed (he was an overnight house guest) in the hopes that he might prove unable to translate it. As she recorded the sequel:

Next morning, Mr. Waley looked a little pale; his manner was languid, but as he placed the book on the breakfast table he announced in a faint voice: 'Turkish. 18th century.' The pages were few; and after an interval of respect we enquired: 'What is it about?' Mr. Waley, with sudden animation: 'The Cat and the Bat. The Cat sat on the Mat. The Cat ate the Rat.' 'Oh, it is a child's book.' 'One would imagine so. One would *hope* so!"

It is an affectionate anecdote; all the Sitwells, indeed, seem to have been captivated by Arthur Waley. His ability to translate from the Chinese and Japanese languages so dazzled them that they spoke of all the works he translated as being his own work. Thus Edith Sitwell wrote in a letter about his translation of the 15th-century Chinese novel *Monkey*: "I don't really know *Monkey* yet, of course. But it has given me that sense of inevitability, of excitement with peace, that your work always does give me." "Your work"—whether it was Chinese poetry, *The Tale of Genji*, *The No Plays of Japan*, an *Introduction of Chinese Painting* or *The Analects of Confucius*. There is a kind of negative side to this: If the work was Waley's, then no attempt had to be made to comprehend the cultures that gave him his raw material.

As Sir Osbert Sitwell (*circa* 1950) could write in a passage extolling Waley: "It is precisely in individuality that Western Europe has excelled. Not for us of the Occident the schools of poets and painters, almost indistinguishable one from another in style, and continuing for millenniums: our works of art are sharply differentiated and defined." Yet if Waley felt patronized he didn't show it. He dedicated his marvelous book on the 18th-century Chinese poet Yuan Mei to Sir Osbert.

THE CHINA AND JAPAN that Waley gave to his readers were humane and balanced. From perusing their newspapers Westerners knew from 1895 onward that China was a torn and wretched country, with its people in misery from famine and civil war, and that Japan was entering a strident and dangerous phase following her startlingly rapid and successful industrialization on the Western model. Later they could read of the 1911 Revolution and the Manchurian crisis, of Tojo, Mao Tse-tung and Hiroshima. But with Sei Shonagon and Po Chü-i they were back in a world where courtesy mattered, and good taste was not simply something connected with food.

Waley's translations enraptured readers—whether they were of the Sitwells'

social class, or of the comfortable upper middle—who felt that the forces of darkness and unreason were taking over. His Oriental benedictions to a way of life so seriously threatened were in no way banal. They were, rather, the products of a prodigious energy and erudition, and of a belief that there are certain values that are not transitory, certain attitudes that can never be anachronistic because they have always been (and always will be) true.

I find it very hard to take leave of Arthur Waley. This is, at least partly, because by reading *Madly Singing in the Mountains* I have learned that at the time I spent a long happy afternoon with Waley when I was a graduate student just embarking on the study of Chinese history and literature, his lifetime companion Beryl de Zoete was dying painfully upstairs. It is clearly fitting that the last words should be his, not mine. So here are some lines from his translation of “The Bones of Chuang Tzu” by Chang Heng. This, he once told Carmen Blacker, was his favorite Chinese poem.

*Suddenly I looked and by the roadside  
I saw a man's bones lying in the squelchy earth,  
Black rime-frost over him; and I in sorrow spoke  
And asked him saying, 'Dead man, how was it?  
Fled you with your friend from famine and for the last  
grains  
Gambled and lost? Was this earth your tomb,  
Or did floods carry you from afar? Were you mighty,  
were you wise,  
Were you foolish and poor? A warrior, or a girl?'  
Then a wonder came; for out of the silence a voice—  
Thin echo only, in no substance was the Spirit seen—  
Mysteriously answered saying, 'I was a man of Sung,  
Of the clan of Chuang; Chou was my name.  
Beyond the climes of common thought  
My reason soared, yet could I not save myself!  
For at the last, when the long charter of my years was  
told,  
I too, for all my magic, by Age was brought  
To the Black Hill of Death.'*

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Jonathan D. Spence, professor of history at Yale University, is the author of *Ts'ao Yin and the K'ang-hsi Emperor* and *The China Helpers: Western Advisers in China 1620-1960*. The foregoing essay first appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, October 18, 1970, © 1970 by The New York Times Company, and is reprinted by permission of the author and the newspaper. The book mentioned by Prof. Spence—*Madly Singing in the Mountains: An Appreciation and Anthology of Arthur Waley*—was first published by Allen & Unwin, London, 1970.