My Time with the Abbess at Qiãn Bù Diàn

The Temple is historically difficult of access, known informally as Qiãn Bü Diàn, the Temple of the Thousand Steps. The Consul says that no one goes there, but that can't be true, obviously. Not since the gift of the Leonardo anyway. The Consul is quite ignorant about almost everything.

After the damming at the Three Gorges the Yangtze rose sixty feet, and the reservoir itself was over 500 feet higher. But in the old days when she was a young novice, the Abbess tells me, she was responsible for descending all those steps with the heavy iron keys to open the gates every morning. Today supplies are brought directly by boat, and the site of the Temple has become an island.

The Abbess is wheeled about everywhere by a young nun who takes great care of her, tucking in her shawls, giving her dry salted plums that she eats incessantly from a round green tin, and making encouraging remarks. The Abbess is weak, and a little deaf, but her eyesight is good, and her mind needle-sharp.

The Abbess's modesty: she says it is only her persistent survival to a very great age that has allowed her to become the Abbess. It is her memory that is the true map and history of the Temple in the last century, and the nuns naturally defer to it. She claims no other qualities, either of administration or personal enlightenment.

Even her prodigious memory has notable gaps. She doesn't remember how or why or when she came to the Temple. I ask about her parents, imagining somehow that she must have been presented there, just as Mary, mother of Jesus, was presented at the Temple in Jerusalem at a significant moment in a career of pure holiness. Perhaps I am also thinking of the thousand drowned steps and Tintoretto's painting in the Church of the Madonna dell'Orto in Venice, of the Presentation of the Virgin.

Her laughter is as frail and delicate as the rustle of the leaves of the rust-coloured acers in the courtyard. To be the mother of God! She finds that ridiculous.

In the Temple's kitchen garden there are row upon row of radishes and turnips. The Abbess says: "The *bikkhunis* dislike turnips.". But I am aware that turnips are served at every meal.

For two days I don't dare to broach the reason for my visit, which is to view the Temple's greatest treasure, the long-lost painting by Leonardo da Vinci of the *Madonna and Child with an image of the Buddha.* Another representation of the mother of God seems a step too far at the moment. Besides, I feel that I have to take due account of the differences between Western and Eastern cultures: for the Abbess, the Temple's greatest treasure is the painting of Zhu Jingjian, the first Buddhist nun in China in the Third Century. Or, of course, its celebrated statue of the Buddha himself.

But I haven't reckoned on her natural understanding and generosity. She knows perfectly well where my interest lies, and shows me the painting of her own accord. Of course it's a fake, as everyone knew all along, and only an ignorant and overweening Wuhan tech billionaire would have fallen for it and loudly donated it to the Temple.

When we look at it together, our different silences seem to acknowledge as much. Are we comparing, from our different hemispheres, two quite distinct forms of that ambiguous smile that seems to withhold the secret it wishes to divulge? The Buddha's is serene and inscrutable; the Madonna's is ambiguous, like the Mona Lisa's. Does she know, or does she not know, the claims and fate of the pudgy infant on her lap? And what does the infant himself know, as he clutches, like a familiar toy, the golden doll-sized representation of the One Who Achieves His Aim? I have promised to write to the Leonardo expert, Martin Kemp, with my thoughts, but I hardly know what my thoughts are. Not so much about authenticity, but about this unspeaking conflict of traditions. Can it be possible to reach the truth through torture? Can it be possible to reach the truth at all? When does a baby realise that it is the incarnated God?

No one remembers being a baby. The Abbess's earliest memory is of sitting on the lap of the novelist Tolstoy. Tolstoy! He did of course travel east in the last year of his life to investigate various mystical traditions that might offer him something more promising than the Russian Orthodox Church that had excommunicated him for heresy. In fact he had long taken an interest in Chinese philosophy. She remembers his great white beard tickling the back of her neck, and the little game he played with her fingers that sounds remarkably like our own game "Here's the church and here's the steeple", bizarrely appropriate, no? She shows me the room

in their library that contains Western books and points to the volume that has "Л. Н. ТОЛСТОИ" along its spine. I lift it down and see that it is a work of 1872, Лэбука. My Russian is non-existent, but I google it later and see that it is a book of fables for children. Does the Abbess know Russian? She does. And English. And Bengali. "I have lived long enough to learn many languages", she says. "It is not difficult."

The question of her age is not too hard to resolve. If the meeting with Tolstoy took place in 1910 and she was something between five and eight years old at the time (she can't be more precise) then she is now at least 119 years old, possibly 122. Is this realistic? Yes, of course it is. Jeanne Calment lived to 122, and thereby famously confounded the lawyer with whom she signed a reverse mortgage on her apartment when she was 90: she would get 2500 francs a month and he would get the apartment when she died. An unexpectedly bad deal for him! He died first.

We have many conversations about death—and about life, too, of course, which contains death as death does not contain life. My conclusion is that there is not much difference between her beliefs and those of the secular stoic tradition of the West, but perhaps this is wishful thinking on my part or politeness on hers. I am largely a Seneca man myself, with friends who might subscribe to an apophatic approach to the ineffable (that is to say that it is everything that we can't understand). Is this too simplistic for her?

She holds up a spray of cherry blossom. "You see, this is something that does not know what it is going to become. Certainly at least it is something that is not yet something else."

"Yes," I say, thinking that as far as the simplistic goes she can give as good as she gets.

"And the cherry that it will become has no idea of the stone within it that might become a tree bearing blossom?"

"Agreed."

"It must die to be born again."

At this, my mind naturally turns to John xii. 24-5: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." It's the death of the grain that is a symbol of psychological and spiritual growth in certain writers like Gide, and Eliot, and Auden.

But I'm thinking that this is all very well, as a symbol. But the poor cherry tree itself dies, and is lucky not to know it. A person knows that they will die and can only be born again in their children.

When I put this to the Abbess, she smiles a beautiful smile.

"We cannot say, can we, whether the tree is the child of the blossom or the blossom the child of the fruit?" She says this with the merest hint of naughtiness, as though I am to expect paradoxes and have to be appeased. She pops a salted plum into her mouth. "The cycle is eternal."

Well, I have to leave it at that.

The thought of Eliot and Auden puts me in mind of William Empson, for I know that in 1931 Empson had visited Qiān Bù Diàn to photograph its statue of the Buddha. In his long-lost book *The Face of the Buddha*, not published until 2016 long after his death, he proposes his theory of a deliberate facial asymmetry in portrayals of the Buddha equivalent to his dual moods of detachment and teaching. As he put it: "The startling and compelling quality of the Far Eastern Buddha heads come from their combining things that seem incompatible, especially a complete repose or detachment with an active power to help the worshipper." The asymmetry was demonstrable by photographically replacing the right-hand side of the face with a mirror-image of the left-hand side, and vice versa. The Qiān Bù Diàn Buddha, grey stone with arresting green jade eyes, was an important example of this.

Would she have met Empson then?

In all our conversations I have not yet seen much evident emotion. She is largely matter-of-fact in conveying information, whether of the kinds of radish grown in the kitchen garden of the Temple or the feeling of Tolstoy's beard on the nape of her neck. It is all one to her. But at the mention of Empson I can swear she is blushing.

"Even then, I was the most senior of the *bikkhunis*, and was deputed to look after him. He was a most gracious and considerate man."

She will say no more than this, and I must respect her delicacy. By a rapid mental calculation I remind myself that she would have been 29 at the time, and Empson 25. He had quite recently lost his hope of academic tenure in Cambridge after condoms were found in a drawer of his college rooms. The evasions of

expected institutional chastity are easier for a man than for a woman, but a mutual desire can conquer all restrictions.

Why should I feel this? And why in particular should I feel it in respect of a religious woman 122 years old?

Perhaps I would ask more about Empson if we could be quite alone, but the attendant nun, ever ready to convey the Abbess in her wheelchair to whatever her next duty might be, somehow puts me off, even though I know that she can't understand a word we say.

I feel the force of this forbidden line of questioning because the Abbess is beautiful. Her name, which is Cui, means "green jade", like the eyes of the Qiān Bù Diàn Buddha, and when I look into her face I can see reflected in her eyes an embodiment of that astounding gaze. Does it seem impossible that a woman of 122 should be beautiful? I might have thought so before coming here, but now I know that it can be so. There is a sense in which no young woman is without a trace of magnetism in her features when they exist in the first flush of maturity, but that is not true beauty. True beauty is ageless. What must Empson have thought of her then in 1931, calm among all her bustling or devoted fellow *bikkhuni*?

And what do I think of her now, after several days exposed to her life and thoughts? Principally I wonder how someone living at the most extreme limit of possible age cannot be obsessed by death. Or at any rate, share in Prospero's "every third thought." Shakespeare was a mere 52 when he died. Today someone in their eighties might expect to reach their nineties. Someone of 99 has a fair chance of becoming a centenarian. And we put off fear in our daily attention to living.

Is she afraid of death?

She speaks formally, as though reciting a lesson:

"When the dams were built, the river levels rose, as you know, and the orange farmers had to move the wrapped bones of their ancestors from their crevices in the rock and carry them higher up the mountain."

I look questioningly at her. It is impossible to interpret that complexity of acceptance and amusement that I am now so used to. Understanding the Absolute!

What an impossible task that must be. I responded dutifully, half-interviewer, half-pupil:

"And the ancestors don't care one way or the other, is that what you're saying?"

"We honour our ancestors," she replies. "But such love is a prerogative of memory. It is understandable. The dead, however—"

She pauses, and there passes across her face the smile of the practised teacher, challenging but affectionate.

"The dead, however, have no memory. It is their greatest loss, of course, but there is also relinquishment. And relinquishment, like detachment, is peace."

Something tells me that she does not think this enough, not by a long chalk, but I am incapable of arguing. At this moment a heron flies across and we both turn to look at it, a little choreography of our profiles. I feel, as I have often felt, that life is made up of moments like this. Not an amorphous fluidity in the behaviour of matter, part-consequence, part-accident, to which we struggle to give meaning, but calculated moments, like words in a mysterious language which we could possibly learn if we had time enough.

More than 122 years, I reckon.

I am aware that my departure is pre-arranged. The Consul has commissioned the boat for 10.00 am the following morning. I ask the Abbess if I may take photographs? Of course. Of the treasures? Yes. Of the life and routine at Qiān Bū Diàn? Yes. And may I take a photograph of her? Yes.

And I do so, as she looks directly at me, not so much questioningly but as if to elicit a question. This seems natural, as I have been asking so many questions, and I give it no thought.

After my breakfast of rice congee and boiled turnips I depart, to the sound of the chanting of the *bikkhunis* and the raw thrusts of the boat's engine.

The Abbess didn't answer my question about the fear of death, or perhaps I didn't understand her answers. I thought that for a religious contemplative with no blood relations, letting go might be relatively easy. I thought then of "Let It Go", Empson's great poem about not writing any more poetry because experience is ultimately so various and confusing that you can't make sense of it. The vain attempt to do so leads to what he calls "madhouse", which is perhaps a way of

saying that being too attached to life can drive you crazy. Empson is probably our most Buddhist poet.

Some weeks after my visit, when I was writing up my interview and going through the photographs I had taken with a view to offering a selection to the editor, I had the idea of trying out Empson's theory of calculated facial asymmetry in representations of the Buddha on my photograph of the Abbess. I don't quite know why I decided to do this. Perhaps it was just to see what might happen to a real human face in the process of lateral duplication, and whether it would square with the theories of asymmetry (not confined to Buddhist sculpture) discussed by Empson in his book. Perhaps I was also fired by discovering that my photo-editing software was easily able to perform the required operations of cropping and flipping and that my photograph of the Abbess was the right sort of direct full-face representation required.

The photograph showed her just as I remembered her—a penetrating, half-quizzical gaze. After the photo-shopping process I now had two portraits, one of the doubled left-hand side of her face and the other of the doubled right-hand side. When I saw them I felt a strange small lurch of shock.

In the first, the otherwise intelligently-assembled lips had somehow mimicked themselves into a direct smirk of mockery, and the eyes joined in what felt like an accusing stare.

In the second I could hardly tell what had happened. The duplication had flattened out the face. The eyes seemed utterly blank and the mouth seemed to be trying unsuccessfully to open.

It was a look of pure terror.