A NIGHTINGALE AMONGST THE CHINA

By T. N. S. LENNAM

IN the early Summer of 1913 Rupert Brooke travelled in America and Canada, sustaining his wanderings with contributions to the Westminster Gazette. In October of that year he set out for the South Pacific and visited in turn Hawaii, Samoa, Fiji, New Zealand. In the Spring of 1914 he was in Tahiti and stayed at Mataiea, a place some distance from Papeete the principal town. He has described Mataiea as "the most ideal place in the world to live and work in".[1] and it was here, probably around February — March, that he recommenced writing verse. Of the three poems which are the product of this period — "Retrospect," "Tiare Tahiti" and "The Great Lover" — the last named alone has achieved popularity. It is, at any rate, one of that small group of poems — the others are: The Fish (1911), The Old Vicarage, Grantchester (1912), and the War Sonnets "If I Should Die," "Blow Out, You Bugles" (1914) — by which Brooke is chiefly remembered today. It is these which find place, singly or collectively, in the popular Anthologies.

If these indeed are representative of the best of Brooke it is interesting to note that they were all either written abroad or, as in the case of the sonnets, at least owe their origins to action abroad (Antwerp). A powerful nostalgia seems to provide Brooke with the necessary tension fruitful to his creative imagination.

"The Great Lover" is certainly a product of this mood. Its catalogue of loved objects is a nostalgic evocation of the sight, sound, smell, touch of the familiar and everyday as recollected from the poet's temporal and spatial isolation among the strange and exotic. The fact that the things brought to mind are for the most part either domestic minutia or the sensorily commonplace increases rather than diminishes the vitality of the poem and its nostalgic undertone. This section a list of sensory experiences — "these I have loved" — forms the main body of the poem. It is preceded by a twenty-five line introduction and followed by a somewhat shorter tail-piece.

The opening eleven lines of the introduction are a fairly clear if conventional statement of the Lover's predicament and his intention to list and praise what he has loved. It concludes with a question:

1. Rupert Brooke: Collected Poems (1942) Memoir by Edward Marsh p.CVI.

> Shall I not crown them with immortal praise
> Whom I have loved, who have given me, dared with me
> High Secrets, and in darkness knelt to see
> The inenarrable godhead of delight?

Now what exactly does Brooke mean here? The choice of relative pronoun is, to say the least, enigmatic, in so far as the catalogue is impersonal throughout. How does one reconcile "strong crusts of friendly bread" for instance or "the good smell of old clothes" with the giving and daring of "high secrets" or to the sight of "the godhead of delight" which he (and they) kneel to see "in darkness?" As it stands the question has no clear relation direct or symbolic with the body of the poem, and thus divorced of contextual significance, simply appears as high-sounding romantic claptrap.

The dichotomy between the introductory matter and central section is further extended in the lines that follow. Here we have three statements:

> Love is a flame: we have beaconed the world's might.
> A City: and we have built it, these and I.
> An Emperor: we have taught the world to die.

It must be supposed that "we" is a unity of Lover and loved. On that supposition the first two statements, if extravagances, are at least acceptable conceits. The third cannot so justify itself. The disparate images of this statement have not been successfully yoked into a metaphysical unity — and the whole, like its preceding figures, have no relation to the rest of the poem. The remaining six lines of this section degenerate into a series of abstractions remote from any recognizable significance. At best they are rhetoric. In Yeats' words, "the will is trying to do the work of the imagination."

Brooke has failed to make clear the relationship of the parts to the whole. The result (or cause?) of this failure is that several passages achieve an audible effectiveness at the expense of sense. This breakdown does not merely confuse but obstructs the logic of the poem. A detailed analysis is not intended here. The Great Lover, one must assume, finds its way into the popular anthologies (and more regrettably, School Texts) upon merits which have nothing to do with lucidity. It is in fact a triumph of sound over sense.

Mention of the sound of the poem brings us to the main proposition. Even a cursory reading of the poem leaves a disdistinct and persisting aural impression. Here and there words chime like faint though familiar bells. An analysis of the

verbal content throws an interesting light upon Brooke's poetic talent and raises the question of the nature and extent of his indebtedness to Keats' "Ode To a Nightingale."

A first impression of this similarity arises from isolated word-echoes, the multiplicity of which, as they accumulate, suggest a lingering Keatsian undertone throughout the poem. Words such as: "pain," "cheat," "darkness," "benison," "foam," "despair," "immortal," "Emperor," "faery," and line endings "blown" and "known," "death" and "breath." These individual tonal similarities emerge more clearly and forcibly into recognizable patterns as the phrasal parallels, both singly and in suggestive clusters, now being to attract both eye and ear. The tabled list of comparisons below makes this clear.

Line	*The Great Lover*	Stanza	*Ode To a Nightingale*
5	to *cheat* despair	VI	easeful *death*
		I	*drowsy* numbness pains
9	*cheat drowsy death;*	VIII	fancy cannot *cheat* so well
10	My *night* shall be remembered as a *star.*	VI	tender is the *night* cluster'd round by all her *starry* Fays.
6	for the *perplexed* and *viewless* streams.	IV	the dull brain *perplexes* the *viewless* wings of poesy.
12	*immortal* praise	VII	*immortal* Bird
24	to dare the *generations*	VII	no hungry *generations*
45	Dear *names*	VI	call'd him soft *names*
50	the little dulling edge of *foam.;*	VII	the *foam* of perilous seas
64	I shall *wake*	VIII	Do I *wake*?
18	we have taught the world *to die*	VI	now seems it rich *to die*
66	. . . . .But the best I've *known* Stays here and changes, breaks, *grows* old, is *blown* About the winds of the world, and fades from brains Of living men, *and dies*	III	Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget What thou among the leaves hast never *known* Where youth *grows* spectre thin *and dies.*
			Ode to Psyche
31	couching in *cool flowers*		*cool*-rooted *flowers*

Perhaps the strongest link with Keats is Brooke's use of the word "high." It is one of Keats' favourite epithets, recurring in poem after poem, sometimes abstract, vague, romantic, at other times concrete enough. To mention a few:

from: —

Sonnet	"cloudy symbol of a high romance"
Sleep and Poetry	"high imagination"
Fancy	"high commissioned"
Ode to a Grecian Urn	"high sorrowful"
Ode to a Nightingale	"high requiem"

One is accustomed to accept "high" as a familiar word in Keats' "romance" terminology. It is interesting to note that Brooke uses this adjective no less than four times in The Great Lover: "dared with me high secrets," "for the high cause of Love's Magnificence," "break the high bond we made," and finally "sleep; and high places."

An intriguing and slightly ironic comment upon these parallels is to be found in a letter written by Brooke in mid-December 1913. Therein, and talking of Samoa, he wrote:

> "and then among it all are the loveliest people in the world moving and dancing like gods and goddesses, very quietly and mysteriously and utterly content. It is sheer beauty, so pure that it's difficult to breathe in it like living in a Keats world, only its less syrupy — Endyminon without sugar."[1].

Nevertheless Brooke did breathe in it — and deeply; nor has he been able to avoid the syrup. There are parts of The Great Lover which are undeniably melliferous.

1. Rupert Brooke: Collected Poems: Letters to Lady Violet Bonham-Carter p. xcvi.