Comparisons

&

Conversions
Also by Harry Guest

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The Artist on the Artist
Harry Guest

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Contents

Comparisons 7

Conversions 41
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 Zinancantán. 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 stockinged 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.