Vikram Seth [1990]

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Books:

Mappings (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1980)

From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet (New York: Vintage, 1987; London: Chatto & Windus, 1983)

The Humble Administrator's Garden (Manchester: Carcanet, 1985)

The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse (New York: Random House, 1986; London: Faber, 1986)

All You Who Sleep Tonight (New York: Knopf, 1990; London: Faber, 1990)

Periodical Publication:

"Forms and Inspirations," The London Review of Books, Vol.10, No. 17 (29 September 1988): 18-20.

Vikram Seth's novel in verse, The Golden Gate, won wide acclaim on its publication in 1986. Its verse was sometimes playful and sometimes exquisite, and its narrative was involving, often funny, and sometimes profoundly touching. The long

narrative poem had been making a resurgence after long years of dormancy, but with Seth's work it seemed to have regained not only respect, but popularity: The Golden Gate drew the attention not just of the New York Times and the New Republic, but also of People magazine and the Book-of-the-Month Club. And the book attracted the intense devotion of many readers, who read passages aloud to whoever would listen. What made the book all the more surprising was the range of cultures encompassed by the book and its author: a novel in English about yuppies and computer programers in San Francisco, cast in the stanza of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, and written by an Indian educated at Oxford, who was a student of the economic demography of China, and whose earlier works were an entertaining travel book about hitchhiking across Tibet and two books of short poems.

Vikram Seth was born into a Hindu family in Calcutta in 1952. His mother is Ms. Justice Leila Seth, a judge of the Delhi High Court; His father, Mr. Premnath Seth, is a consultant to the leather industry. (Seth describes his position in an upper middle class Indian family in the poem "The Comfortable Classes at Work and Play.") He received an English-style "Public School" education in India, at the Doon School. He then went to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he read Philosophy, Politics, and Economics.

After receiving a B.A. from Oxford, Seth went to Stanford to Study Economics. Seth's academic specialty became the economic demography of Chinese villages, but while at Stanford he also studied poetry. To begin with, he balanced courses in Macroeconomics with tutorials in poetry, but he later devoted one year to work in Stanford's Creative Writing program. He singles out the influence of two poets with whom he studied at Stanford, Donald Davie and Timothy Steele. Both Davie and Steele use traditional forms, and both display a devotion to a craftsmanlike precision in the use of language, and in these Seth follows them. In his essay "Forms and Inspirations," Seth describes how both his teachers molded his thinking about verse. Steele, with whom he first studied, emphasized the formal aspects of verse, and introduced Seth to the work of other living poets, like Philip Larkin, who use traditional forms. Davie stressed "the crucial oral element in poetry," demanding that the poem be heard, and that the form, however exquisite, must convey something to the reader beyond the poet's mastery of his craft.

Seth received his M.A. in economics from Stanford in 1979, and in 1980 his first volume of poetry was published. That same year, Seth began two years of study in China at Nanjing University. His research there has not yet produced his projected dissertation, Seven Chinese Villages: An Economic and Demographic Portrait, but the stay in China

did bring forth other important works. In the Summer of 1981, Seth returned home to Delhi through Tibet and Nepal, which is not a usual or convenient route, but an appealing one for the adventurous. Seth describes his journey in From Heaven Lake. This entertaining and varied travel book gives a fascinating portrait of China in the years of relaxation after the upheavals of the cultural revolution.   From Heaven Lake also shows Seth's abiding interest in the encounter of different cultures: in the course of his journey he discusses the influence of Islam in Sinkiang, the interaction of Tibetans and Han Chinese, and the contrast between Indian and Chinese life. The book makes vivid the hardships as well as the pleasures of travel, both of which are occasionally described in verse:

Cold in the mudlogged truck
I watch the southern sky:
A shooting star brings luck;
A satellite swims by.
The Silver River flows
Eventless through the night.
The moon against the snows
Shines insular and bright.

Here we three, cooped, alone,
Tibetan, Indian, Han,
Against a common dawn
Catch what poor sleep we can,
And sleeping drag the same
Sparse air into our lungs,
And dreaming each of home
Sleeptalk in different tongues.

From Heaven Lake was written during Seth's second year in China. The poems in the first section of Seth's next book of poems, The Humble Administrator's Garden, also date from his time as a student at Nanjing, and some revisit places described in the travel book. Some poems, including "The Accountant's House" and "Research in Jiangsu Province" describe the tension between studying people as subjects of research and encountering them as human beings. Others evoke places—the ruined Confucian temple in Suzhou, Nanjing at the end of the school year, the garden described in the title poem—or moments of unexpected feeling, as in "A Little Night Music:"

> White walls. Moonlight. I wander through
> The alleys, skein-drawn by the sound
> Of someone playing the erhu.
> A courtyard; two chairs on the ground.
>
> As if he knew I'd come tonight
> He gestures, only half-surprised.
> The old hands poise. The bow takes flight
> And unwished tears come to my eyes.
>
> He pauses, tunes, and plays again
> An hour beneath the wutong trees
> For self and stranger, as if all men
> Were brothers within the enclosing seas.

The poems written in China take many forms—there are a number of Shakesperean sonnets, poems in ballad stanzas, and several unrhymed poems—and encompass many tones, from the flippant to the most sober.

The poems in the two remaining sections of The Humble Administrator's Garden were written in India and California, and reflect those locations. In many of the poems throughout the collection, Seth's attention is focused on the place of human activity in the natural world, and images of trees and animals are juxtaposed with descriptions of human joys and sorrows. Mr. Wang, the humble administrator, and the comfortable classes in one of the Indian poems, inhabit carefully tended gardens, which Seth renders very attractive, while at the same time hinting that these preserves full of squirrels and carp, are built on something dubious. In some of the California poems, there is a sense of communication between a man and a wild creature. In "Curious Mishaps," the speaker sees a squirrel who has seemed to salute him carried away by an owl. In "Ceasing Upon Midnight," a man contemplating suicide walks out of his dreary house and finds himself not alone:

> The breeze comforts him where he sprawls.
> Raccoons' eyes shine. A grey owl calls.
> He imitates its cries,
> Chants shreds, invents replies.
>
> The alcohol, his molecules,
> The clear and intimate air, the rules
> Of metre, shield him from
> Himself. To cease upon
>
> The midnight under the live-oak
> Seems too derisory a joke.
> The bottle lies on the ground.
> He sleeps. His sleep is sound.

(That the rules of meter are as protective as the natural world is not surprising in a poem by Seth.) This concern with the interplay of the human and the natural continues in The Golden Gate, amusingly in the many cats that prowl through the book, more seriously in the contrast between the cultivated nature of the Doratis' vineyards and the potential destruction embodied by the defense plant.

The Humble Administrator's Garden contains a number of more confessional poems about lost or absent love, such as "From a Traveler," and "From California," as well as one fairly long narrative poem, "From the Babur-Nama, Memoirs of Babur, First Moghul Emperor of India." All are tightly structured and many are amusing, and some are deeply touching. But for all its skill and variety, The Humble Administrator's Garden gives only hints of the breadth of skill that Seth would display in his next work.

Most of The Golden Gate was written at Stanford—Seth was a senior editor at Stanford University Press from 1985-1986—though parts were composed during visits to England and India. Seth's immediate model was Charles Johnston's translation of Eugene Onegin, which accomplishes the difficult task of making Pushkin's stanza work in English. And one of the delights of The Golden Gate is seeing Seth work in that complicated stanza, with its alternation of feminine and masculine rhymes. From the acknowledgements and table of contents at the beginning to the note on the author at the

end, everything is in the Onegin stanza. There are many echoes of Johnston, Puskhin, and Byron—as in the opening "To make a start more swift than weighty/Hail Muse."—but Seth is firmly in control of his form, and can adapt it to everything from comic descriptions of cats to an extended speech at an anti-nuclear rally.

But The Golden Gate is not just a bravura technical performance. It is also an involving narrative. The story describes the loves and friendships of several yuppies in San Francisco in the early 80's. John, a computer programer in a defense plant, meets Liz, a lawyer and the daughter of an old wine-making family, through a personal ad placed for him by his former lover Jan, and the novel follows these three and their friends. The plot complications are characteristic of the 80's: John is estranged from his best friend Phil, and later from his other friends, over the question of the nuclear freeze; Phil has a brief affair with Liz's brother Ed, a devout man guilty about his homosexuality. Though some of the trappings are trendy—the personal ads, the telephone in the shape of Mickey Mouse—the central action is that of the traditional novel: a courtship leading to marriage and birth. And some of the characters become very vivid, especially as Seth describes their reactions to loss. For though The Golden Gate is often funny, and has the overall shape of a comedy, it often describes grief, in one

form or other: John drives his lover Liz away, and she marries his friend Phil. And as John realizes that he loves Jan, she is killed on the highway.

Indeed, though The Golden Gate seems akin to light verse at the beginning, it is often surprisingly touching, as when Paul, a small boy, is reminded at a concert of the mother who has divorced his father and moved away:

> The lights have dimmed. Now they're returning.
> Throats clear. Brahms' A Minor begins.
> The brisk allegro. Then a yearning
> Warm ductile length of lyric spins
> Its lovely glimmering thread at leisure
> Inveiglingly from measure to measure
> With a continuous tenderness
> So deep it smooths out all distress,
> All sorrow; ravishing, beguiling. . .
> And on and on till silence comes.
> Paul whispers, "That's the tune Mom hums!"
> Phil's eyes are closed, but Paul is smiling,
> Floating on a slow tide of Brahms,
> Back in his absent mother's arms.

One of Seth's achievements in The Golden Gate is making his characters speak in lively colloquial English while their creator follows Pushkin's form. As the novel proceeds, the characters debate many issues—nuclear weapons, religion, sex. Some critics have found all these discussions a distraction from the story, but most are lively.

The novel ends on a note of grand reconciliation. After many deaths, and the marriage of Liz and Phil and the birth of their baby, there is only one figure left estranged: John, mourning the dead Jan and angry at Liz and Phil. In the final stanzas,

Liz writes to invite John to be the god-father of the child, and John can almost hear Jan telling him how to reply:

> "I'm with you John. You're not alone.
> Trust me, my friend; there is the phone.
> It isn't me you are obeying.
> Pay what are your own heart's arrears.
> Now clear your throat; and dry these tears."

Not just a birth and a marriage—a christening. The novel about yuppies comes to an almost Victorian conclusion.

The critical reaction to The Golden Gate was, over all, very positive. Most critics were supprised a novel in verse was attempted, and delighted that it suceeded so well. John Hollander wrote that "The use of expertly controlled verse to give moral substance and extraordinary wit and plangency to a far from extraordinary tale is an astonishing achievement in it own right." X.J. Kennedy noted the involving story conveyed in the vese, "A splendid tour de force, The Golden Gate finally hooks us into caring less about its author's skill than in caring how its sad and wistful comedy will turn out. For pages, we forget Seth's incredible dexterity. Mesmerized, we watch, as in a kaleidoscope, the shifting and resettling pattern of five lives." Adverse commentary tended to focus on the work's politics and its accepting treatment of the homosexual sub-plot. In a review in Commentary, Carol Iannone objected that "The ideas and themes of The Golden Gate

derive wholly from the arsenal of contempoarary liberal orthoxies." Iannone complained that the characters with liberal politics win all the arguments and that "The ability to accept homosexuality in oneself or in others becomes one of those measures of a character's entitlement to emotional rewards." But most readers, even those with more conservative views, did not find that ideology reduced their pleasure in The Golden Gate's verbal skill and narrative force.

In 1990 Seth published another book of short poems, All You Who Sleep Tonight, in which many of the themes of The Golden Gate reappear. There is even a poem written to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the bridge itself, which becomes a meditation on the place of human artifice in the natural world. Once again, Seth displays his mastery of a wide variety of forms. The first group of poems, "Romantic Residues," is made up of reflections on lost love—or love never quite grasped. They do not describe the grand moments of romantic drama, but rather the more mundane moments that continue to agitate the heart. In "Round and Round," the speaker sees a familiar suitcase on a baggage carousel:

> I knew that bag. It must be hers.
> We hadn't met in seven years!
> And as the steel plates squealed and clattered
> My happy memories chimed and chattered.
> An old man pulled it off the Claim.
> My bags appeared: I did the same.

In all these poems, feeling is genuine, and not overstated.

The second section, "In Other Voices," is made up of dramatic monologues on historical subjects. A translation from the Chinese of Du Fu,"To Wei Ba, Who Has Lived Away from the Court," is especially fine. This address to an old friend, with its delight in friendship, food, and rhyme, is reminiscent of Ben Jonson. The remaining poems in the section are on grimmer subjects: the holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny. The final poem, "Soon," is the monologue of a dying AIDS patient. Like "From the Babur-Nama," these poems show a novelist's interest in capturing the voice of another.

The third group of poems, "In Other Places," continues the series of poems on China and Northern California from The Humble Administrator's Garden, and some of them, especially "Hill Dawn," and "Suzhou Park," are exquisite. This section is followed by series of epigrammatic quatrains reminiscent of another Stanford poet, J.V.Cunningham. A final group of poems, "Meditations of the Heart," deal mostly with the isolation of each person. The Golden Gate, with its concluding vision of community, is largely about overcoming that isolation. These poems are more about the fact of isolation—which is, at least, shared:

All you who sleep tonight

Far from the ones you love,
No hand to left or right,
And emptiness above—

Know that you aren't alone.
The whole world shares your tears,
Some for two nights or one,
And some for all their years.

In "Things"—a poem whose form recalls Frost's "Provide, Provide!"—Seth considers the place of human relationships and human speech in the world of things.

Put back the letter, half conceived
From error, half to see you grieved.
Some things are seen and disbelieved.
. . . .
As if creation wrapped the heart
Impenetrably in its art,
As if the land upon the chart

Were prior to the acred land
And that a mark could countermand
The houses and the trees that stand.

Though she would fell them if she could,
They will stand, and they will have stood
For all the will of dare and should.

Language neither constructs the world, as literary theorists now claim it does, nor bridges the gap between people, as most hope it will. The things of the world seem more trustworthy than the words we use to describe them. Yet the preference for things is conveyed is an intricate pattern of words.

The Golden Gate established Vikram Seth as an important figure in American literature, and his career may take new directions. Since the publication of the novel in

verse, he has written, besides the poems in All You Who Sleep Tonight, a verse play set in an English publishing house and a book of translations from Chinese poets of the Tang Dynasty, and begun a prose novel set in India. (In part because of the novel, he has recently been spending more time in his native land.) But he will remain important for more than his daring exploration of new forms. The voice that speaks through his works, especially The Golden Gate, shows a sweetness very unusual in modern American verse, and that, together with his great verbal skill, make Seth a poet of the greatest interest.

Vikram Seth won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award for From Heaven Lake in 1983, The Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1986, and The Sahitya Akademi Award in 1988. He held a Guggenheim fellowship for 1986-1987.

References:

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