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Tong Aesthetics

Hakim Bey

“The lodge was symbolically named ‘The City of Willows’ (mu-yang ch’eng). (It) contained an inner sanctum called ‘The Red Flower Pavilion’ (Hung Hua T’ing), in which the essential part of the initiation took place, and where the secrets of the society were revealed to the recruit ...”

“In a full-scale ceremony, the ritual appears to be divided into three main stages. The first stage consisted of the recitation and dramatization of the Myth of Origin in the main hall of the lodge. This was called ‘performing the play (tso-hsi) and ‘watching the play’ (k’an-hsi) depending on whether one was an active or passive participant; or ‘releasing the horses’ (fang-ma), (‘Horses’ = recruits, or new recruits; hsin-ting, ‘new tops’, was another name for new recruits.) The second part of the ritual consisted of the oath-taking ceremony in the Red Flower Pavilion, the issuing of the certificates of membership, and the exhibition of secret documents, furniture and objects of the lodge to the members. The feast and theatricals of celebration

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which followed after a few days formed the third and final part of the initiation.“

“All brethren who are brought hither are faithful and loyal: they all are iron-galled and copper-livered. From the inexhaustible metamorphoses are born millions of men, who are all of one mind and one will. All these of one affection in the two capitals and thirteen provinces have now come together to petition Father Heaven and Mother Earth; the three lights, sun, moon (and stars); all the Gods, Saints, Spirits and Buddhas, and all the Star Princes, to help all present to enlightenment. This night we pledge ourselves, and vow this before Heaven, that the brethren in the whole universe shall be as from one womb; as if born of one father, as if nourished by one mother; as if of one root and origin; that we will obey heaven and act according to its ways; that our loyal hearts shall not change, and never alter. If the august Heaven will protect and assist in the restoration of the Ming, then happiness will have a place to which to return.”¹

The City of Willows is the imaginal space of the traditional Chinese Tong or secret society, (especially the Hung Triads), its “Temple of Initiation”.²

The space itself, visionary or oneiric, contains within it (like a hermetic “memory palace”) the details of the political myth of the Triads, based on conspiracy to overthrow the Manchu dynasty and achieve the “restoration of the Ming”, i.e., of Chinese rule. G. Sorel would have understood this mythopoesis, this passionate reading of a set of symbols which is like a place but not a place, like a text

¹ Fei-Ling Davis, *Primitive Revolutionaries of China: A Study of Secret Societies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Honolulu 1971), pp., 129, 135. see index under “City of Willows”

² see Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation* (London 1986)

but not a text; which prescribes a “general strike” or uprising in the language of legend; which points to the future by pointing to the past, and to the “Sea of Images.”³

Elsewhere we have proposed the Tong as a possible model of organization for realizing immediatist goals, including the TAZ itself; now belatedly we should consider the importance of style or aesthetics in the emergence of a successful contemporary occidental Tong. In building a Tong, style may not be “everything”, but it certainly cannot be considered merely secondary or inessential. The Tong must be “a work of art” in itself, like all Immediatist game-structures. A legend such as the City of Willows provides this essential aesthetic shape.

We might think of the “Bee” as a temporary immediatist group organized for one project (like a quilt). But even the Bee must both be and produce a “work of art”. The Tong by comparison can be defined as a more long-lasting group, theoretically “permanent”, devoted not to one project but to an on-going “cause”. But what makes a Tong different from an open group, like a sect or political party? The members of an Immediatist Tong or TAZ core-group

³ The myth is made in a language of symbols – a word which originally meant the two halves of a token which must be fitted together in order to provide identification or meaning – like two spies with halves of a dollar bill, recognizing each other by the exact fit of the torn edges. Every myth, we might say, has at least two symbols, which are in effect halves or opposites of each other. Hence the total ambiguity of myth: – depending on which half is “up”, so to speak, a myth’s meaning can be seen to “turn into” its opposite. Sorel’s myth is no exception (indeed it seems odd that no one appears to have thought of analyzing it according to the techniques of the history of spirituality) – it appealed as much to fascism as to anarchism. Consider for example the Myth of Progress, propagated by all the major ideologies of the 19th century, from monarchism to anarchism: all idolized Progress, a myth which would make the 20th century hell for millions. And the Sorelian Myths of the General Strike, and of Social Violence, were appropriated by Marinetti (the ambiguous pivot between anarchism and fascism) and eventually by Mussolini. Myth-mongering has its dangers. Unfortunately, myth remains one of the few effective ways of talking about “reality”, which is itself far more ambiguous than any myth.

may not be held together by strong class, ethnic, geographical, or economic motives; moreover, the collaborative production of non-commodifiable art cannot be considered by itself a sufficient cause for the formation of a secret society. “Illegalism” per se may add cohesiveness to the group structure, but still cannot serve as the only *raison d’être* of a real Tong. Insurrectionary action or “social sabotage” provide even stronger motivation for a clandestine “order” – but not yet enough, perhaps, for a full-scale “invisible collage”. Without “Tong aesthetics” – no Tong.

The two essential aesthetic elements of a Tong are: – (1) a cause; and (2) a legend. Both cause and legend can be classed as aesthetic or “mythic” systems, rather than as ideologies – since they are based on symbols, which are real but ambiguous, rather than on “ideals”, which are much more clear, but relatively un-real. When Sorel proposed a “social myth” (specifically the *syndicat* and the General Strike) he did not mean “myth” in the modern sense of the word – as an empty story, a palliative and illusory narration. “Myth” in the Sorelian sense can be called a story which is not only about “real life” but also wants to manifest as real life. A cause, one may argue, is not a “real thing” because it has not yet appeared. It is an aesthetic construct – but it is also an Image-complex which intends to impose its pattern on “reality”, like the hermetic spells of Renaissance magi or the ceremonies of tribal shamans. It expresses this intention in the the form of a legend about a cause, a symbolic narrative of highly-charged images arranged to augment a dynamic potential (“conversion”, “initiation”, “enlightenment”, “action”), in the group which adopts and adapts it. The cause, therefore, is the public Sorelian myth, the legend, its private propaganda within the Tong.

The “poesis” of the City of Willows, for example, reveals its workings in the imagery of the visionary journey of the “Vanguard”, who sees: – The Tong initiates like taoist sages or spiritual nomads, “far off at the horizon (yet) near before my eyes. They roam about the world without a fixed residence “white herons flying past a

tive. One does not write scripture; scripture is written. Or better: the legend pre-exists its realization as text, so that the “writer” acts rather as a “treasure finder” than an “author” – oneiric and visionary texts partake in their extreme subjectivity of the “objectivity” of that “subconscious” wherein (according to Taoism) the Gods reside, and which hypostatizes in the most gripping and inspiring ritual art. Such art may not meet the aesthetic criteria of the academic critic, for whom it will appear either as mumbojumbo or as agit-prop. But it will light fire in the minds of certain hearers, precisely those for whom the legend crystallized out of the noosphere in the first place. The Tong will be nothing without the actions which it will carry out. But before the actions come the intentions. The link between the intentions and the actions is the text, the legend and the cause it represents. The text draws out the actions from the sea of potential energy and gives them their specific shape, their “style” – just as the Moon was once thought to shape, color, and draw up pearls from the ocean by its attractive rays.

These legends will be the greatest poems of the most unknown poets of our age. Like magic incantations they will sing new realities into being, as the shaman sings rain, or health, or abundant game from potentiality to actuality. These poems will be meaningless without the actions they invoke, and will therefore achieve either the highest goal of poetry, or else nothing at all. The City of Willows is not merely an “imaginary city” but an Imaginal City, a dream-space which will be manifested more and more clearly until finally the Ming is restored – and yet the City of Willows is also a poem. The legend of our Tong is nothing but a text, true – but it will call a world into being – even if only for a few moments – in which our desires are not only articulated but satisfied.

fan, a pear-shaped censer, a sword, a flute, two jade castanets, a scepter, a floating bridge the daughter of the Dragon King “gathering mulberry flowers” (a password) caves of drizzle, summer showers, hoarfrost a volcano and so on (Davis, op. cit., 132–134). These images may seem merely decorative or arbitrary to us, but they were charged with cultural memes for the Hung adepts, and were built into a system which cohered not only as a “poem” but also as a multiplexed evocation of their cause. This poem of potential action becomes even more vital in our immediatist Tong, since the text must serve to provide some of the cohesion lacking in such a variegated group as ours may be. A mere political program will not suffice, nor will a mere poem. Cause and legend must point beyond (or even away from) ideology and abstraction; the “Utopian Imagination” and “Utopian Poetics” must be used to construct something more than a mere daydream.⁴

“Poetic language” here serves as a guarantee of the genuineness of the experience which is evoked, for in matters concerning desire only the “language of the birds” can attain some degree of accuracy. “Revolution” has certainly served as a poetic image strong enough to provide the cause for numerous secret societies, from Marx’s flirtation with the Carbonari to Proudhon’s anarchist “Holy Vehm”, Bakunin’s “Brotherhood”, Durutti’s “Wanderers”, etc. “Insurrection” is a term which might be better suited to the post-existentialist requirements of an Immediatist Tong, however. The uprising possesses the spiritual prestige of both apocalypse and millennium, and yet remains a genuine historical possibility – remote but verifiable.⁵

⁴ Not that I share the usual disdain for “reverie” as opposed to “imagination”. Like Guston Bachelard I believe that poesis begins with daydreaming, and that “idle fancy” is as sacred as “genuine vision”. Nevertheless, in order to inspire action, the daydream must first become a “poem”, then a “legend”, finally a cause”.

⁵ Consider, for example, Dublin 1916, Munich 1919, Tijuana 1911, Paris 1871 and 1968, the Ukraine 1920’s Barcelona 1930’s. None of these gave rise to “the Revolution”, but all were noble and well worth the risk – at least in retrospect!

The TAZ, however, presents itself as an immediate possibility: – both as a tactic on behalf of the Cause, and as a taste or fore-taste of the cause itself. We cannot say that the TAZ “is” the Cause, because the TAZ remains spontaneous, evanescent, impossible to pin down. The Insurrection is the Cause; the TAZ is a tactic for the cause, but also an “inner” *raison d’être* of the Tong. Thus when the Hung triad repeated the ritual of the City of Willows it not only validated its eternal attachment to the cause (the anti-Manchu uprising), but also virtually created the “paradisaal space” of the anti-Manchu world within the Temple of the society. This ritual Time/Space might be experienced and valued as a TAZ; and when combined with a banquet (the necessary “material bodily principle” of the TAZ) no doubt the adepts did experience and value it as such. The immediatist Tong therefore would not be “founded” in order to create TAZ’s but rather to potentiate their manifestations as pre-figurations or evocations of the Uprising and the “anti-Consensus” reality it envisions. Ritual and conviviality do not necessarily combine to produce the TAZ – spontaneous orderings of fractal complexities must fall into place to produce such a “magic Moment”. One can maximize the conditions for such “luck”, but one cannot force the Muses. As in archery, one shoots at a point above the target in order to hit it. Here that lofty point at which we aim must be the Insurrection, but by shooting at its distance we may yet strike the proximity of the TAZ – (like those adepts who are seen both far on the horizon and yet near to the gaze).

The legend is the story the secret society tells itself about the cause. In some cases, such as Freemasonry, the legend is remembered even when the cause is forgotten, so that the legend can be re-interpreted or re-deciphered or re-read – and the Cause re-invented – again and again. The legend, in effect, becomes the Cause: the two texts are conflated into an illegible but powerful palimpsest. A good legend may come to act more potently even than a good cause, since it taps the archetypes more directly, and owes less to time than to Eternity.

Therefore the poesis of a legend for our Tong is no petty business. It concerns the surface but is far from being “superficial”. Taste here assumes a “life-or-death” seriousness, as when one speaks of the “style” of a martial artist. Our legend cannot simply consist of a text about the cause; rather, it must arise from our passionate reading of the cause, our psychic experience of its inner structure. It must have an “objective” aspect, in other words, like that possessed by “scripture” or “spirit writing” in the eyes of religious believers.

Moreover, while the cause of the uprising is one which can be served in many ways, our legend must be specific to our Tong; it must contain a special message in a special language meant to form a cognitive bond amongst precisely our own group. In other words the legend serves as the exact act of poesis without which our Tong simply will not come into focus. Where are we rootless cosmopolitans to find a language in which such a text could be composed, much less the text itself? The Surrealists experimented with automatic writing, a technique also used by Taoists and other spirit mediums. In fact, “religion” provides a possible language for the Tong legend – provided that one speaks the tongue in heretical sentences. The City of Willows combines millenarian Buddhism and the imaginal aesthetics of Taoism with its revolutionary politics. In our occidental world the image-complexes of many religious phenomena retain great power – and are thus susceptible to refiguration, or “subversion”, as heretical revolutionary texts. Imagine, for example, a secret society devoted to the “sabotage” of reactionary Christian dogma and policy, based on an “Anabaptist” legend espousing the cause of radical millennialism, or even inspired by some syncretive brand of neo-paganism. Does this sound serious and risky enough, in today’s climate of shit-kicking moralism and recrudescant “religious conservatism”, to justify both the passion and the clandestinity of our hypothetical secret society?

A viable legend might be manifested by one person, or it might arise, so to speak, out of “group-dreaming” – but in any case it will not be produced by the rational lineal process of fictional narra-