

Malice in Wonderland: Dreams of the Orient and the Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China*

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To Europeans, for centuries, the palace of the emperor of China was a main feature of their dreams of the Orient. Not surprisingly, the few European visitors who actually had seen the place came back with accounts filled with wonders. Medieval friars and travelers outdid each other with tales of the beauty of the palace and of the immense power wielded by the “Great Kaan.” And although subsequent reports from Jesuits stationed at the imperial court were more measured, they too spoke of its beauty and its many varied delights. And then, in 1860, during the Second Opium War, the imperial palace, the Yuanmingyuan, was first looted and then burned to the ground by a contingent of British and French troops. “J’ai marché pendant deux jours sur plus de trente millions de francs de soieries, de bijoux, de porcelaines, bronzes, sculptures,” wrote Armand Lucy, a French soldier, “Je ne crois pas qu’on ait vu chose pareille depuis le sac de Rome par les Barbares” (1861: 96). “The light was so subdued by the clouds of smoke,” Garnet Wolseley, one of the British officers, remembered, “that it seemed as if the sun was undergoing a lengthened eclipse” (1862: 279).¹

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¹ On the history of the palace, see Malone (1934) and Wong (2001).

The aim of this article is to explain this destruction. Most explanations focus on the political and military context of the time: the lack of discipline in the French army and a British desire to take revenge for the brutal treatment that a group of hostages received at the hands of the Chinese.² Yet when it comes to the destruction of an object that hitherto has featured mainly in dreams, political and military contexts are never going to be enough. A proper explanation must also consider the status of the palace of the Chinese emperor in European cultural history and in the minds of the people responsible for the destruction. The question, in other words, is not so much *why* the destruction happened as *how it could have* happened. Investigating the conditions of its possibility, we need to understand how the imperial palace has been described by Europeans and how the descriptions have changed over time.

In European accounts of the imperial palace recourse was always taken to the latest aesthetic principles embraced not in China, but in Europe. As a result, the descriptions changed, often abruptly, not because the palace itself changed, but because of changes in European conceptions of beauty. Comparing two eighteenth-century accounts of the Yuanmingyuan, written only fifty years apart, shows how dramatic these transformations could be. "Everything there is grand and truly beautiful," the Jesuit missionary Jean Denis Attiret assured his European correspondent in 1745, "and I am all the more struck by it, since I never have seen anything like it." Everything is "of a beauty and a taste which I could never express" (Attiret 1819: 389–390, 393). Yet in 1793, John Barrow, a member of the Macartney mission to China who spent five weeks inside the palace, "saw none of those extravagant beauties and picturesque embellishments" that had made Yuanmingyuan famous throughout Europe. "Of those parts contiguous to the palace, which may be supposed the most carefully cultivated, and the numerous pavilions and ornamental buildings in the best order, I can say nothing in praise; no care whatever appeared to be taken of any, nor regard had to cleanliness" (Barrow 1804: 85–86).

As we will discover, the language of wonder has implications for the distribution of power between the wonderer and the thing wondered at. Wonderland may be a magical place, but it is political through

² On 18 September 1860, the Chinese took thirty-nine hostages, including twenty Indian soldiers and Thomas Bowlby, the correspondent for the *Times*. In the end, only eighteen of them were returned alive. See D'Escayrac de Lauture (1864, 2:349–355) and Loch (1869). For the official rationale for the destruction, see Stanmore (1906) and Knollys (1875: 214–225).

and through. By eliciting wonder, the palace of the Chinese emperor had a power over its visitors, which they could either resist or passively submit themselves to. In submitting themselves, the medieval travelers acknowledged the immense power of the emperor and their own inferiority. In refusing to marvel, the British commanders in 1860 emphasized the powerlessness of the Chinese in the face of European imperialism. In this way the language of wonder provides us with a way of characterizing the relationship between Europe and China, and its transformation over time. The question is not only who the wonder-inducing power belongs to, but also how the wonderers react to what they experience. This article argues that the transformation of the language of wonder allowed for a reinterpretation of the Yuanmingyuan, which made it vulnerable to European aggression.

THE MARVEL OF MEDIEVAL TRAVELERS

The language of marvel was the preferred idiom of medieval travelers (Daston and Park 2001: 25–38; Greenblatt 1991a: 52–85; Bynum 1997: 12–14). In the Middle Ages travelers always marveled at what they saw, and since marvels were thought to be more common “in the margins of the world,” they were more common in the East.³ This supposition was amply confirmed in the thirteenth century when *Pax mongolica* made it possible for European merchants and missionaries to travel all the way to China. In their accounts, the palace of the “Great Kaan” featured prominently. The most famous description is by Marco Polo (1871), who reached Beijing in 1266 and spent some twenty-four years in China, but Odoric of Pordenone, who set off from Padua in 1318, also mentions the palace, as does Giovanni de Marignolli, who visited Beijing in 1342; William of Rubruck left an account of the palace in Karakorum, which he visited in 1254.⁴

The emperor’s palace was not just a single building, the travelers explained, but a vast compound “some four miles in compass,” and “within this space [were] many other fine palaces” and an enclosure where the khan lives with his family. There was an artificial hill planted with trees, and a man-made lake with bridges across. Much of the com-

³ Or, for that matter, in Ireland (Daston and Park 2001: 34–39).

⁴ An influential collection of primary sources, first published in 1614, is Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, which included all the then published accounts of Jesuit missionaries in China; see Markley (2006: 81) and Ruysbroek (1900).

pound was filled with birds, but also wild game so that the emperor could “follow the chase when he chooses without ever quitting the domain” (Odoric 1866: 130). The main palace had twenty-four pillars, and the walls were hung with skins of red leather. In the middle of the building was a large jar from which visitors could drink. There was a collection of artificial peacocks, and, amazingly, a tame lion walked around from room to room.

Everything in the imperial palace was great in size and number. The emperor’s family was “so numerous,” Odoric explained, and his courtiers formed an “innumerable multitude,” and so did even the birds of his artificial lake (Polo 1871: 261). And everything was exceptionally beautiful. The artificial hill was “the most beautiful in the whole world,” the red leather on the walls of the palace was “the world’s finest,” and “if there be in the whole world any fine and large pearls” they were sure to adorn one of the emperor’s ladies. Plentitude and beauty emphasized the emperor’s wealth. The twenty-four pillars of the palace were made from gold and so were the artificial peacocks; the drinking jar was carved from precious stone that “exceeded the value of four great towns,” and the pearls that adorned the coats of his courtiers were each “worth some fifteen thousand florins”—and there were no fewer than fourteen thousand of them (Odoric 1866: 132).

Plentitude, beauty, and wealth, in turn, were expressions of the emperor’s immense power. Before his throne, the visitors first fell silent, then they prostrated themselves—performing the *koutou*, the “three kneeling and three knockings of the head” prescribed by the court protocol.⁵ And yet their silence was more a result of sheer dumbfound- edness than fear of incurring the emperor’s wrath. The palace was a “marvel” and a “wonder to behold.” “In short,” Odoric concluded, “the court is truly magnificent, and the most perfectly ordered that there is in the world” (1866: 134). To *koutou* before such a ruler was a sign of submission to be sure, but then again the European visitors were few in number and they had nothing but their good behavior to back up their modest demands for trade and for the right to preach the gospel.

Returning home, the “marvels of the East” featured prominently in the travelers’ accounts. Marco Polo was nicknamed “Millione” for his reputation for exaggeration, but believable or not, plenty of marvels were required if the stories were to find an audience. Marvel was what travelers were supposed to do, and when they did, it helped to make sense of their long journeys (Greenblatt 1991a: 77–79). By making

⁵ For a description, see Rockhill (1905: 28).

their listeners marvel in turn, the tales and their tellers borrowed some of the magic and power of which they spoke. But just like the travelers' initial reaction, the response of their audiences was not one of fear. Behind the many wondrous objects, animals, and people, there was an emperor who was the source of them all, and his person, in the end, was the true marvel (Bynum 1997: 13–14, 20, 24). Seeing him in his attributes and in his actions, but rarely catching more than a glimpse of the person himself, the Europeans were amazed.

THE CURIOSITY OF THE JESUITS

Following the example set by Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionaries in China pursued a top-down strategy of conversion.⁶ By first convincing the imperial court to embrace Christianity, they hoped to later convert the whole country. To this end they presented the emperor with various examples of European-made technology and arts, and offered their services as painters, cartographers, astronomers, clock makers, and even cannon founders. The letters home from the Jesuit mission—published in Paris as *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*—provided, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the most authoritative source of information about China. The *Lettres* were widely read, not least by defenders of royal prerogatives in England and, in France, by *philosophes*—Voltaire most famously—for whom China became a model of rational government and social order.⁷

Although their access was restricted, their work in the Yuan-mingyuan allowed a few of the Jesuits to put together a reasonably comprehensive description of the palaces and gardens. The most famous account is found in a letter written in 1745 by Jean Denis Attiret (1819: 387–412), a painter at the court. Attiret described a park, complete with palaces, pavilions, teahouses, temples, pagodas, and lakes filled with birds and magnificent boats. The emperor had selected forty locations from which the garden presents itself in a particularly attractive fashion, he explained. Among them were buildings taken from around China and the world: temples from Mongolia and Tibet, a hamlet and a river scene from Hunan, gardens from Suzhou and Hangzhou, and a set of European-style palaces (Wong 2008; Thomas 2009: 133–134).

⁶ On Ricci, see Mungello (1989: 44–73) and Porter (2002: 83–108).

⁷ On the sinophile fantasies of the English architect and amateur scholar John Webb, see Markley (2006: 76–79) and cf. Porter (2002: 124–132).

Yuanmingyuan even had a faithful replica of a regular Chinese street filled with shops, stalls, hawkers, customers, and beggars, where the emperor moved around at his own leisure, and his women struck bargains with the eunuchs who played the part of vendors (Attiret 1819: 396–397). In addition there was a farmhouse, complete with fields, animals, and all kinds of agricultural equipment.

Most remarkable, however, was the “beautiful disorder” and “anti-symmetry” that governed the layout and the design. Buildings of very different kinds were placed close together; the paths were not straight, but meandering; the bridges across the lakes were zigzagging; the doors and windows were not square but round, oval, or shaped in the form of flowers, birds, or fish (Attiret 1819: 401–402). Although such a description may sound ridiculous, Attiret admitted, “seeing it in person you think differently and begin to admire the art with which this irregularity is put together.” Since nothing could be taken in by one glance, one was forced to explore the gardens on foot, and each new turn of the path provides new vistas and impressions. This “admirable variety” gave the visitor a delightful and enchanting feeling, which made the Yuanmingyuan into a “pleasure ground” rather than an imperial palace. “Il y a de quoi s’amuser longtemps, et de quoi satisfaire toute sa curiosité” (Attiret 1819: 400–401).

The person for whom these amusements had been assembled was the emperor, but in the Jesuits’ accounts he was no longer the omnipotent ruler the medieval travelers had described, but instead something like a *petit prince* who walked around in his enchanted garden surprised and delighted at everything he saw (Attiret 1819: 403; Porter 2002: 147–155). The Yuanmingyuan, in its variety and comprehensiveness, represented all there is: times past and times future, exotic locations, amazing animals, flora and fauna, high mountains, oceans, the countryside, and the city. And the emperor was the unquestioned ruler of this *bijou* universe. Moreover, since everything was harmoniously ordered and at peace, the garden gave ample evidence of the virtue of his reign.

In terms of the aesthetic categories popular in the eighteenth century, this was all very *curieux* (Daston and Park 2001: 273–274). In the Jesuits’ letters the medieval language of beauty and terror has been replaced by impressions of delightful multiplicity. The Yuanmingyuan was transformed into a rococo palace: a vast cabinet of curiosities filled with lifelike *automata* and *trompe l’œil* effects.⁸ It was a cornucopia that

⁸ On the cabinet of curiosities, see Daston and Park (2001: 255–290) and Benedict (2002: 134–135).

constantly produced things at the same time overwhelming and surprising. There was, says Attiret, an unsurpassed fecundity in the spirit of the Chinese. "I am tempted to think that we are poor and sterile by comparison" (Attiret 1819: 399). In an earlier era, such fecundity would have served as proof regarding the location of Paradise. After all, Paradise too was a garden where everything constantly and effortlessly rejuvenated itself. In a later era, the same fecundity would become a sign of the productivity of the Chinese soil and the riches of Chinese markets that were waiting to be tapped by European merchants (Markley 2006: 79). But for the Jesuits themselves it was above all a feature in which to take a curious delight.

THE SUBLIME OF THE POETS

Attiret's account of the Yuanmingyuan had a far-reaching impact in Europe. Fitting perfectly with the already well-established fashion for chinoiserie, Attiret helped inspire the creation of Chinese-style gardens and garden features across the continent.⁹ Only a few years after the publication of his account, Fredrick the Great built a *Chinesisches Haus* at Sans Soucis; Catherine the Great a Chinese palace at Oranienbaum; and Adolf Fredrik, king of Sweden, built a *Kina slott* at Drottningholm. In 1761, the architect William Chambers erected a fifty-meter-tall pagoda in Kew Gardens, as well as a "House of Confucius."¹⁰

In contrast to his colleagues, Chambers had actually been to China.¹¹ As a young man he visited Guangzhou twice in the 1740s, on board ships of the Swedish East India Company. Here he had studied Chinese architecture and garden art, and once back in Europe he published, in 1757, a short pamphlet, *On the Art of Laying out Gardens among the Chinese*.¹² There are three different kinds of scenes in a Chinese garden, Chambers explained, the "pleasing, horrid, and enchanted" (1772: 35–40).¹³ While the pleasing and the enchanted corresponded to categories already discussed by the Jesuits, his emphasis on the horrid was

⁹ For a survey, see Sirén (1950).

¹⁰ The *Chinesisches Haus* dates from 1755; *Kina slott* from 1753, and the Chinese palace at Oranienbaum from 1762. On Kew gardens, see Chambers (1763).

¹¹ In 1743–1744 and 1748–1749. See Harris (2004).

¹² Originally published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, May 1757, and reprinted in Chambers (1762; quotations from pp. 129, 144).

¹³ On Chambers, see Porter (2002: 155–162, 175–181; 2004) and Liu (2008: 6–10).

something quite new. These horrid scenes, Chambers (1772: 131–132) insisted, were filled with ill-formed trees torn by tempests, impending rocks, impetuous cataracts, and buildings half-consumed by fire. They were, in short, designed to elicit feelings of the sublime.

The sublime was an aesthetic discovery of the eighteenth century (Nicolson 1997: 271–323). Originally defined as a rhetorical device—a certain “heightening” of language—it gradually came to be applied to natural features: in particular to high mountains, and to vistas seen from high mountains, but also to other dramatic, obscure, or mysterious sceneries. Traveling in Italy in 1688, John Dennis discovered “horrid, hideous, ghastly Ruins,” but was surprised to find that they gave him a “delightful horror” and a “terrible joy” (Nicolson 1997: 279). Developing the concept, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury and Joseph Addison described the sublime as the awe that fills us as we contemplate supreme beauty or the infinite powers of God.¹⁴ The concept was on everyone’s lips in the spring of 1757 when Edmund Burke published *The Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, only a few weeks before Chambers published his pamphlet on Chinese gardens. As Burke (1757: 41–43) explained, the sublime astonishes us, overwhelms our senses, and suspends our power of reasoning, but the effect is pleasurable, not scary, since we know we never will come to any actual harm. The sublime is a game we play, and as Addison (quoted in Nicolson 1997: 316–318) pointed out in his praise of its irregular aesthetics, a Chinese garden is a perfect setting for it (Lovejoy 1955b: 113–115). Chambers emphatically agreed.

In a subsequent and longer work, *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening*, 1772, Chambers returned to the garden of horror, and used the Yuanmingyuan as an illustration. After describing the pleasures induced by its many meandering paths and enchanting vistas, he turned to the “scenes of terror”: “gloomy woods, deep vallies inaccessible to the sun, impending barren rocks, dark caverns, and impetuous cataracts rushing down the mountains from all parts.” “Bats, owls, and every bird of prey flutter in the groves; wolves, tigers and jackalls howl in the forests; half-famished animals wander upon the plains; gibbets, crosses, wheels, and the whole apparatus of torture, are seen from the roads; and in the most dismal recesses of the woods, where the ways are rugged and overgrown with weeds, and where every object bears the marks of depopulation, are temples dedicated to the king of vengeance, deep caverns in

¹⁴ On Shaftesbury and Addison, see Nicolson (1997: 289–323).

the rocks, and descents to subterraneous habitations, overgrown with brushwood and brambles” (Chambers 1772: 37).

Chambers had clearly overdone it (Sirén 1950: 102). The *Dissertation* was mercilessly mocked by the defenders of the classical English garden, who refused to believe that anything of value could be learned from the Chinese, and who objected to what they saw as Chambers’s defense of pointless embellishments and the excessively decorative.¹⁵ Chinese gardens were too cluttered, the critics argued, and this gave them a contrived and unnatural feel. And of course Chambers’s outlandish account of the “garden of terror” was an easy target for ridicule. “In the Emperor’s garden of Yven-Ming-Uven, near Pekin,” William Mason noted sarcastically, “fine lizards, and fine women, human giants, and giant baboon, make but a small part of the superb scenery” (1773: 3–4).¹⁶ Hurt by such attacks, Chambers inserted an apologetic “explanatory discourse” when the *Dissertation* was republished, and there was absolutely nothing Chinese or ornamental about his next major commission, the classically Neoclassical Somerset House in the center of London (Bald 1950: 307–310).¹⁷

And yet the sensibility of which Chambers’s account was an expression could not easily be held back. To Romantic writers of the turn of the nineteenth century, the wonders of the Orient were a source of exotic reveries and, once again, the palace of the Chinese emperor was a favorite topic. In October 1797, Samuel Taylor Coleridge took a few grains of laudanum, read a few pages from *Purchas His Pilgrimage*—a collection of medieval travelers’ tales—and promptly fell asleep. When he woke up, he wrote a poem, describing a sublime paradise that inspired both longing and dread:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
a stately pleasure-dome decree,
where Alph, the sacred river, ran
through caverns measureless to man
down to a sunless sea. . . .
A savage place! As holy and enchanted

¹⁵ See the discussion in Bald (1950: 287–320), Lovejoy (1955b: 120–122), Porter (2002: 175–177), and Liu (2008: 6–10).

¹⁶ As Burke’s *Annual Register* noted in an obituary: “The horrible and strange devices described to exist in the Chinese gardens have been much ridiculed, but are no more than had been before published by father Attiret, in his account of the Emperor of China’s gardens near Pekin” (Burke 1796).

¹⁷ As Lovejoy (1955b: 151–152) points out, sudden switches between neoclassicism and the neo-Gothic were also common.

as a'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
 by woman wailing for her demon lover.
 And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
 As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
 A mighty fountain momentarily was forced: . . .
 And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
 Ancestral voices prophesying war! . . .
 And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
 Weave a circle round him thrice,
 And close your eyes with holy dread,
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,
 And drunk the milk of Paradise. (Coleridge 1907: 276–279)

Coleridge is clearly moving in the same poetic territory as Chambers. It cannot be very far from his “caverns measureless to man” to Chambers’s “deep caverns in the rocks.”¹⁸ But it is equally not very far from the account that Marco Polo once had given. What Coleridge had seen in his dream was the palace of Kublai Khan, which Polo had visited, and Polo’s account was reprinted in *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, which Coleridge read before he fell asleep.¹⁹ Coleridge is unashamedly medieval in his references, relying on dreams rather than on empirical observations, and the violent, intoxicating images are, much like the descriptions of medieval travelers, combining the marvelous with impressions of overwhelming might.²⁰ Subjected to a neo-Gothic transfiguration, the wonders of Polo’s palace have become sublime. What has been added, that is, is a Burkean aesthetics of the vicarious frisson: the intense pleasure that comes from a knowingly unjustified fear of imminent and grievous bodily harm.

The contrast with the Jesuits’ accounts is most clearly brought out by the sexual references implied. While Attiret’s emperor may have been a wide-eyed *petit prince*, ignorant of the desires of grown-ups, the world he inhabited was constantly rejuvenated thanks to its joyous, unrestrained fecundity. By contrast, the palace described both by

¹⁸ Nicolson (1997: 289–290) would see them both as sharing a number of eighteenth-century commonplaces.

¹⁹ “In Xanadu did Cublai Can build a stately palace, encompassing sixteen miles of plain ground with a wall, wherein are fertile meadows, pleasant springs, delightful streams, and all sorts of beasts and chase and game, and in the middle thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be removed from place to place” (Purchas 1614: 415).

²⁰ On the written sources of the poem, see Lowes (1927: 356–425); on the natural sources, see Holmes (1999: 164). As Lovejoy (1955b: 159) shows, Chinese and Gothic references were often invoked by the same author.

Chambers and Coleridge is a location of sadomasochistic orgies. It is a place of devastation and fear, where women “wail for demon lovers” and “close their eyes in holy dread.” Ruled by the orgiastic and the Dionysian, the imperial palace is the source of an unstoppable life force that simultaneously both creates and destroys. Yet its destructive effects are more obvious than its regenerative, this world is more barren than fecund, and the sexual encounters that take place, like the futile coupling of eunuchs, leave no issue. Like rape fantasies, these Orientalist visions are less about sex than about power.

THE PICTURESQUE OF THE DIPLOMATS

In August 1793, a British diplomatic delegation led by George Macartney arrived in Beijing with the aim of opening up the enormous Chinese market to trade in British-made goods. Arriving at the imperial palace, clearly expecting a sublime experience, the diplomats were sorely disappointed.²¹ “From every thing I can learn,” Macartney (quoted in Barrow 1817: 133) concluded, “it falls very short of the fanciful descriptions which father Attiret and Sir William Chambers have intruded upon us as realities.” John Barrow, the comptroller general to the mission, who spent five weeks at the Yuanmingyuan, agreed: Chambers’s descriptions were “extravagant,” and the Jesuits had their own motives for presenting the place in the most favorable light.²² Their task, Barrow concluded, should be to “divest the court of the tinsel and the tawdry varnish with which, like the palaces of the Emperor, the missionaries have found it expedient to cover it in their writings” (1817: 2).

Their own descriptions make a clear distinction between the buildings, their content, and the gardens themselves.²³ With the buildings, the British visitors were far from impressed. The palaces, said Aeneas Anderson, were too small, too heavily decorated, and “not only destitute of elegance, but in a wretched state of repair,” giving “an appear-

²¹ There is a parallel here with eighteenth-century English travelers who came prepared for sublime experiences when crossing the Alps (Nicolson 1997: 355).

²² By exaggerating the power and magnificence of the Chinese, “their own triumph would be all the greater” once the country eventually was converted to Christianity (Barrow 1817: 123).

²³ On the separate development of the aesthetics of gardens and of architecture in eighteenth-century Britain, see Lovejoy (1955b: 157–158). As Nicolson (1997: 318) points out, although Addison defended irregular garden art, his view on architecture was perfectly neo-Classical.

ance of neglect" (1795: 111). "These assemblages of buildings," said Barrow, "which they dignify with the name of palaces," are "more remarkable for their number than for their splendour or magnificence." "A great proportion of the buildings consists in mean cottages. The very dwelling of the Emperor and the grand hall in which he gives audience, when divested of the gilding and the gaudy colours with which they are daubed, are little superior, and much less solid, than the barns of a substantial English farmer" (Barrow 1804: 124).²⁴ And while Macartney (quoted in Barrow 1804: 136) himself was more positive—calling the buildings "perfect of their kind"—what he appreciated were not the structures themselves but the way they were arranged in the landscape, creating a pleasing comprehensive view.

As for the imperial collections, the diplomats were more impressed. Macartney (quoted in Barrow 1804: 129) praised the "stupendous vases of jasper and agate," the "finest porcelain and Japan," and spheres, orreries, clocks, and musical automatons of "exquisite workmanship." And yet, overall, the visitors were far from enchanted. Valuable and rare though the items may have been, they were "sing-songs" and "toys."²⁵ To the British, the imperial collection was a cabinet of curiosities, filled with assorted exotic *bric-à-brac*, designed to astonish rather than enlighten. Children could be amused this way, and people of no education, but it was not of much interest to men of learning. And men of learning were precisely what the members of the Macartney mission considered themselves to be. Educated in the latest advances of European science and technology, they had little interest in exceptional cases and gaudy displays.²⁶ The gifts they had brought along to give to the emperor reflected their outlook. The emperor was to be presented with a planetarium, celestial and terrestrial globes, telescopes, an air pump, a hot-air balloon, a microscope, and a burning lens (Schaffer 2006: 217–246). As the British diplomats were at pains to point out, these were scientific instruments, not automata or sing-songs.

In Britain the fashion for chinoiserie had peaked in the 1740s, and by the 1790s things Chinese were often regarded as vulgar, at least among men of neoclassical tastes.²⁷ From a neoclassical perspective,

²⁴ Barrow's assessment was echoed by James Mill, among others (see Mill 1809: 425).

²⁵ "Sing-song" was the generic European term for mechanical gadgets and automata sold in Guangzhou. See Braga (1961) and Cranmer-Byng and Levere (1981: 509).

²⁶ Cf. the discussion of "the Enlightenment and the Anti-Marvelous" in Daston and Park (2001: 329–363).

²⁷ The rise and fall in the fad for chinoiserie is traced in Porter (2002: 133–192; 2000); on the Continent, however, the fashion peaked only in the 1780s. See Harris (2004).

the Chinese style, much like French rococo or neo-Gothic architecture, was considered to be overbearing and false. This was art for fops—exotic, effeminate, clutter—to whose seductiveness real men succumbed only at their own, emasculating, peril. Chinese art had no balance, no order, no perspective, and no truth. Its very undecipherableness was an insult to man's intelligence and a threat to one's sense of propriety and, more generally, to peace and social stability (Porter 2002: 166–172). “A simple, naked statue, finished by the hand of a Grecian artist,” as James Mill put it in 1809, in a comparison between Chinese and European art, “is of more genuine value than all these rude and costly monuments of Barbaric labour” (427).

It was only for the gardens and the grounds of the imperial palace that the British diplomats showed real enthusiasm. “It is one of the finest forest-scenes in the world,” said Macartney (quoted in Barrow 1804: 134) of the gardens at the imperial summer retreat at Chengde. Reaching the summit of one of the hills, a twenty-mile vista suddenly opened up below him, “and certainly so rich, so various, so beautiful, so sublime a prospect my eyes had never beheld” (pp. 134–135). What particularly attracted the British visitors was the sense of balance and proportion offered by the gardens. As they discovered, all of the Yuan-mingyuan was made up of scenes, well-composed *tableaux* designed to be contemplated from designated points along a meandering path. A given building, Barrow (quoted in Davis 1836: 266–267) noted, should be “seen at a certain distance through the branches of a thicket,” and a particular sheet of water is purposely “hemmed in by artificial rocks.”

In terms of aesthetic categories, the imperial gardens, to the diplomats, were examples of what by the 1790s was known as “the picturesque.”²⁸ First made popular by William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye*, 1782, the notion of the picturesque was in subsequent decades enthusiastically employed by English gardeners, architects, and aesthetes. It denoted a landscape that was framed to look “just like a picture”—with some objects in the “foreground,” others in the “middle,” and “some trees in the offskip” (Macartney quoted in Barrow 1804: 128). And while nature naturally was capable of producing such pictures on its own, it often needed help from an artist. At the hands of the skilled gardener, different colors, textures, and materials were combined in irregular, undulating, and jagged patterns. Perhaps a tree, or the ruins of an abbey, would improve a composition, or, as in China, a pagoda.

²⁸ The seminal statement is Gilpin (1822); lampooned in Combe (1848); for an overview, see Hussey (1967) and Klinger (1949).

The notion of the picturesque achieved an ingenious compromise between the idea of the beautiful and the sublime, and this, no doubt, explains its popularity. Portraying nature in all its diversity, and not hesitating before the dark, the tempestuous, and the irregular, the picturesque tapped into sublime, neo-Gothic, sensibilities. And yet, while the truly sublime defied and overwhelmed all boundaries, the picturesque always contained its subject matter within a perfectly self-contained frame. By balancing contrasting elements against one another, and creating order among diverse objects, the overall impression was peaceful, pleasing, and not in the least terrifying. The landscape was made, and perfectly controlled, by human beings.

In Britain, by the end of the eighteenth century, the natural was no longer equated with neoclassical geometrical ideals. In fact, as far as garden art was concerned, the British had fully embraced what looks suspiciously like a Chinese aesthetic. After all, the quintessential English garden too is irregular, meandering, and picturesque. The French were quick to pick up on this similarity, referring to it as the hyphenated aesthetic of *le jardin anglo-chinois*. In 1793, the visiting diplomats too were constantly struck by the similarities. "In the course of a few hours," said Macartney (quoted in Barrow 1804: 130), after riding around the imperial garden at Chengde, "I have enjoyed such vicissitudes of rural delight, as I did not conceive could be felt out of England, being at different moments enchanted by scenes perfectly similar to those I had known there, to the magnificence of Stowe, the softer beauties of Wooburn, and the fairy-land of Paine's Hill."

The question is how this similarity best should be explained. The inclination of English writers has always been to ascribe the picturesque aesthetic to an indigenous "genius," often associating the freedom of the English garden with English political liberties, and contrasting both with the *étatisme* of the political system and the gardens of the French.²⁹ Non-English writers have been quicker to point out that the first discussions of the new aesthetics always made explicit references to Chinese gardens. After all, it was only once Chinese antisymmetrical ideals became known in Europe that English gardeners abandoned their geometrical layouts (Lovejoy 1955a: 99–135).³⁰ Yet questions of influences are, as always, difficult to settle. As Macartney (quoted in Barrow 1804: 134) himself put it in 1793: "Whether our style of garden-

²⁹ For a defense of the English origin of *le jardin anglo-chinois*, see Jacques (1990: 180–191).

³⁰ A more recent discussion is Liu (2008: 98–100).

ing was really copied from the Chinese, or originated with ourselves, I leave for vanity to assert, and idleness to discuss.”

THE POLITICS OF WONDER

Let us step back for a moment and consider the larger pattern that these various reactions produce. Invoking a more comprehensive conceptual category, we realize that the marvel of the medieval travelers, the curiosity of the Jesuits, the sublime of the poets, and the picturesque of the diplomats all can be understood as variations on the notion of wonder. Wonder was always the most basic way in which Europeans related to a culture as different and as strange as the Chinese. Yet wonder is far from a precise analytical term, and, as we have seen, it includes many different, even contradictory, reactions.³¹ Moreover, the vocabulary of wonder varies over time, forming a cultural history that the different descriptions of the imperial palace allow us to retrace.

Bringing a semblance of order to this permutating terminology, the language of wonder can be divided into two radically different, yet related, usages. Or, differently put, wonder makes the wonderers take up two quite different postures.³² The first is an inquiring attitude. “Wonder,” as Aristotle (quoted in Daston and Park 2001: 14) put it, “is the beginning of philosophy,” that is, the beginning of thought (cf. Bynum 1997: 7). Here, to wonder about something is to ask what something is, how it came to be, and how it has, and will, develop. To wonder is to ask questions about causes and consequences; it is to conduct investigations and pursue science. Thus understood, wonder is an active passion, and often as imperative as the desire for food or sex. Like these kindred passions, wonder is strongly associated with a need for control. It is only by controlling the object we wonder about—by isolating it in a laboratory, by holding and manipulating it in our hands—that it can be properly investigated. This is the connection between wonder and colonial appropriation. Arriving in a marvelous land, encountering marvelous things, the Europeans first wondered, then they took the land and the things.³³

The second, radically different, posture is one of imposed passivity.

³¹ On this cluster of meanings, see Daston and Park (2001: 15); cf. Bynum (1997: 1–7, 23–25); cf. Greenblatt (1991b).

³² On the physiological reactions associated with wonder, see Darwin (2009).

³³ This is the function of wonder emphasized by Greenblatt (1991a: 52–85) and Todorov (1991).

We wonder at the “wondrous,” and the wondrous is best understood as a force that *strikes* us with wonder, *makes* us marvel, and *fills* us with awe (Daston and Park 2001: 14–15; Bynum 1997: 3–6). Here the wonderers are caught off guard; their senses are overwhelmed and they temporarily lose the use of their faculties (Burke 1757: 53). Like thralls, they are enthralled by an all-powerful external force that they have no option but to obey. First their jaws drop, then they fall to the ground. The sensation may be one of sheer amazement or one of terror, but the experience may also be pleasant. Indeed, as John Dennis was the first to notice and as Edmund Burke affirmed, the experience can be pleasant *because* it is terrifying (Nicolson 1997: 276–289). This is the rape fantasy of proverbial Victorian women, where the thing we fear the most also constitutes our most secret desire. Politically speaking, these wonderers make no claims to colonial appropriation, they do not manipulate anyone, and they are not in a position to impose their will.³⁴

How wonder strikes us depends on the objects we confront, but sometimes the same object can result in either posture. To a considerable extent our reactions depend on our expectations, conditioned by the culture in which we live. This explains the variation in the reactions we have surveyed. It was the aesthetic presumptions of their time that made European visitors to China take up one posture rather than another. But postures also depend on the distribution of power between the wonderer and the thing wondered at, and, importantly, a given distribution of power will be reinforced or undermined depending on the posture we adopt. This is why wonder in China never had the same political consequences as wonder in the New World. In the Americas, the Europeans met little organized resistance, and wonder, more often than not, resulted in appropriation. In China, by contrast, the Europeans could not simply take what they wondered at, but had instead to ask for an opportunity to buy it. Very frustratingly, the requests for trading privileges were usually rejected by the Chinese authorities.³⁵

As we saw, the first European travelers to China were asked to assume a reverential posture. The power of the emperor overwhelmed them, they were struck by awe, and obligingly they quickly prostrated themselves. The European visitors were utterly powerless, but this was

³⁴ “Medieval theories of wonder,” Bynum (1997: 24) insists, “made the point that wonder is non-appropriative yet based on facticity and singularity.”

³⁵ Greenblatt notices the difference between Marco Polo and Columbus, but basing his account on European relations with the New World, he exaggerates the role of wonder understood as appropriation. Wonder is treated by Greenblatt (1991a: 53) as a discursive rather than a political relationship.

not a great concern since they had no illusions regarding conquest or control. Although they were at the mercy of the emperor, their reactions expressed amazement rather than fear, and amazement was also what their tales conveyed to their listeners back home. The relationship between the emperor and the Jesuits was always quite different. The Jesuits ingratiated themselves with the court by providing unique services for which there was no ready substitute. As their letters make clear, this made the emperor their benevolent, if somewhat unpredictable, friend. And while the Jesuits certainly *koutou*-ed before his throne, this was done as a matter of courtesy and not in awe. The posture of the Jesuits was instead one of unashamed curiosity (Mungello 1989: 13–14). Steeped first in the Hermeticism of the Renaissance and, by the seventeenth century, in the creeds of the Scientific Revolution, the missionaries were keen to learn the language, and as much as possible about Chinese customs, philosophy, and religion (Mungello 1989: 13–14). In addition, the Jesuits wanted to show that they were doing good work and that they made progress advancing Christianity. Through their well-publicized *Lettres* they recruited curious readers across Europe who shared their interest in China and their conviction regarding the importance of their mission.

Next, compare the wonder expressed by poets and by diplomats. Clearly it was quite impossible for someone of Coleridge's sensibilities to be satisfied with picturesque descriptions. Having no interest in a place that looked "just like Kew," he preferred medieval traveler tales to the accounts of the Macartney mission.³⁶ Coleridge's version of the imperial palace is a perfect example of the sublime, as defined by Dennis and Burke. It is a dream of the pleasures of transgression, intoxication, and sexual submission. Subjecting ourselves to the power of an Oriental ruler, we relinquish all claims of our own. Politically speaking, "Kubla Khan" can be read as a renunciation of "the white man's burden" and a plea for colonizers and colonized to trade places. Chambers, by contrast, was not so quick to abandon himself. He praised the Chinese not only for the terror, but also for the delight inspired by their gardens. On both accounts, however, he met criticism back home. Enchantments were effeminate, and to be struck by terror was unworthy of a brave Englishman. Chambers, the critics suspected, was too quick to *koutou* to royal power, English as well as Chinese.³⁷

³⁶ See, however, Leask (1998).

³⁷ On the traditional connection between English monarchists and apologias for imperial China, see Markley (2006: 76).

This was a line of criticism developed by the British diplomats in their accounts. Making few distinctions between real Chinese art and cheap chinoiserie, the imperial palace was given the same treatment that rococo aesthetics was given by all Englishmen of neoclassical tastes. This was art for children and fops, people easily taken in by gaudy displays. But to slavishly follow Chinese fashions was unacceptable also on political grounds. The British should stand up for their own achievements, and this was never more important than in relation to the obscure forces of the sublime. The diplomats insisted that Britain be treated as equal with China, and, breaking with the etiquette of the Chinese court, they refused to *koutou* before the imperial throne. What they wanted were trade concessions, but the emperor that the poets had described—with “flashing eyes” and “floating hair”—was clearly not the kind of ruler with whom you conclude commercial agreements. In the end, although the British never got their treaty, the pretensions of the Chinese were exposed. The palace, they discovered, was nothing but a brightly painted barn. In the best tradition of British empiricism, the diplomats pointed out that the emperor was naked.³⁸

The idea of the picturesque had far more benign implications. In the picturesque landscape, every plant, brook, and grove was free to take on its own preferred form, yet the whole was always appropriately framed and maintained in perfect balance. Indeed, according to the picturesque aesthetics, balance *requires* the coexistence of highly diverse and irregular entities: a large tree needs a large rock, and only a meandering stream can hold both together. There is a perfect analogy here to the market mechanism advocated by Adam Smith in which balance was achieved through the free interaction of radically diverse interests. In both cases, what looked perfectly natural was actually a product of art. The “hidden hand” of the authorities that regulated the market corresponded to the hidden hand of the master gardener who pruned his plants and prodded his trees.³⁹ Not surprisingly, the British aristocrats who made up the Macartney mission of 1793 were both landowners and government officials.

³⁸ In these respects the British diplomats reacted much as the little boy in H. C. Andersen’s story “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” That Andersen had read accounts of the Yuanmingyuan is evident from his story “The Nightingale,” which is set in the imperial garden. There is, however, no direct evidence that the naked emperor was modeled on the Chinese. See Andersen (1900); cf. Oxfeldt (2005).

³⁹ The garden is of course a common metaphor for the state. See Daniels (1989: 45–46).

DESTROYING A WONDER

On the morning of 7 October 1860, French and British troops made their way into the Yuanmingyuan. Despite orders from the commanders, the compound was looted by the French, while the English, quick to spot a business opportunity, put the remaining articles up for sale. On October 18, the buildings and what was left of their content were burned to the ground by British troops. There is, we said, a political and military context to this vandalism: the lack of discipline in the French army, miscommunication between the allied commanders, and, in the case of the final incineration, a British desire to take revenge for the brutal treatment a group of hostages had received at the hands of the Chinese (Stanmore 1906: 349–355; Knollys 1875: 214–225). Yet when it comes to objects that hitherto have featured mainly in dreams, a political and military context is not sufficient. We also need to understand the status that the imperial palace had in the minds of the people responsible for the destruction. These reactions can be divided into three groups: those of the British officers, those of the French officers, and those of ordinary soldiers. Depending on how they reacted, they justified their actions quite differently.

Like their countrymen before them, the British commanders in 1860 made a sharp distinction between the gardens of the Yuanmingyuan, on the one hand, and the buildings and their content, on the other. The gardens were picturesque, but the buildings were unimpressive and the art collections expensive but excessively decorative. In a letter home to his wife, the British commander James Bruce, the eighth earl of Elgin, described the “numberless buildings with handsome rooms, and filled with Chinese *curios*, and handsome clocks, bronzes, etc” (1864: 220). Wolseley mentioned “a mine of wealth and of everything curious” (1862: 224), which reminded him of the antique shops of Wardour Street in London. But it was only in the gardens that the British commanders felt truly at home. They reminded them of Richmond, of Kew, of Stowe; “it is really a fine thing,” Elgin reported to his wife, “like an English park.” Overall, however, the palace was nothing like they had expected. “Taking Yuen-ming-yuen all in all,” said Wolseley, “it was a gem of its kind, and yet I do not suppose there was a single man who visited it without being disappointed” (1862: 237). There was “an absence of grandeur” about the place “for which no amount of careful gardening and pretty ornaments can compensate.” “Everything upon which the eye could rest was pretty and well designed, . . . but there was

nothing imposing in the *tout ensemble*." "Both in landscape gardening and building, the Chinaman loses sight of grand or imposing effects, in his endeavours to load everything with ornament; he forgets the fine in his search after the curious. In their thirst after decoration, and in their inherent love for minute embellishment, the artists and architects of China have failed to produce any great work capable of inspiring those sensations of awe or admiration which strike every one when first gazing upon the magnificent creations of European architects" (p. 233).

In the rest of the world emperors and kings built imposing structures to impress their subjects, yet the Yuanmingyuan was smaller, not larger, than life. When given a choice, Chinese architects opted for the miniature. As a result, said Wolseley, the palace "resembles more the design of a child in front of her doll's house than the work of grown-up men" (1862: 233–235). The reaction of the British commander, Lord Elgin, is particularly interesting. Elgin was a Conservative, skeptical of money-grubbing imperialism, and, moreover, he was a Coleridgean. At Oxford, according to his brother, "his intellect was attracted to high and abstract speculation"; he read Plato, Milton, and Coleridge, and the philosophy of the latter "he had thoroughly mastered" (Walrond 1872: 3, 8). Yet when confronting the Yuanmingyuan he did not recognize it as the palace which Coleridge had described. He did not "close his eyes in holy dread" and he drank no "milk of paradise." Instead he burned the place down.

The French commanders made no similar distinctions, and their praise for the rococo aesthetics of the imperial collections came with few reservations. "Nothing in our Europe," wrote General Montauban (quoted in Cordier 1906: 354), "can give us an idea of such luxury." Yet Montauban (1932: 310) does not go into much detail, and Baron Gros, the leading French diplomat, gave no description at all of the palace in his report to the government. Clearly, too much detail and too much praise would have created problems of presentation. After all, it was French troops who carried out most of the looting. Officially, however, the French commanders denied any involvement and blamed instead the ragtag band of Chinese marauders who accompanied the European armies (Gros 1864: 125, 133). It was only once *their* loot was confiscated by French troops that it ended up in the French camp. When it came to the burning of the palace, the French commanders refused all participation. We are constantly talking to the Chinese about "our civilization" and "Christian charity," said Baron Gros (1864: 149), and to destroy the palace would be a hypocritical act of barbarism.

As for the ordinary soldiers—British as well as French—once they

walked through the gates of the Yuanmingyuan they seem to have entered a dream.⁴⁰ This was a magical kingdom full of all the treasures, enchantments, and sensuality that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, constituted the required props of tales of the exotic East. Less worried than their commanders about being held accountable, they owned up to their actions and appealed instead to the fantasies of the reading public. “I was dumbfounded, stunned, bewildered by what I had seen,” wrote one, “suddenly *Thousand and One Nights* seem perfectly believable to me”; everything was “*féerique*”—“like a fairytale” (Lucy 1861: 95; d’Hérison 1886: 318; see Wolseley 1862: 280). “I felt like Aladdin,” wrote another, “filled with wonder in his enchanted palace, paved with gold and diamonds” (Negroni 1864: 51). In order to describe it, I would need to “dissolve all known precious stones in liquid gold and paint a picture with a diamond feather whose bristles contain all the fantasies of a poet of the East” (d’Hérison 1886: 306). A Corsican adventurer, Jean-Louis de Negroni (1864: 45–50), even claimed to have rescued the emperor’s favorite courtesan from the marauding troops, and she, gratefully, had given him both a kiss and a box of jewels. Clearly, these are not descriptions of the Yuanmingyuan as much as summaries of mid nineteenth-century works of cheap Orientalist fiction.

The final destruction too took place in a sort of delirium. The soldiers, including many officers, ran from room to room, “decked out in the most ridiculous-looking costumes they could find,” looking for loot. “Officers and men seemed to have been seized with a temporary insanity”; “a furious thirst has taken hold of us”; it was an “orgiastic rampage of looting,” “the dream of a hashish eater” (Wolseley 1862: 226–227; Lucy 1861: 226–227). It was as though the war once prophesied by the “ancestral voices” in Coleridge’s poem finally had arrived, and the Europeans were the demons carrying it out. Ruled by the orgiastic and the Dionysian, they represented the unstoppable life force that simultaneously both creates and destroys. The Europeans promised a new beginning for China—a bright future of “progress” and “free trade”—but first the old world had to be laid in ruins. Only through acts of barbarism could civilization be spread.

Yet this too was a conceit. Through their encounter with the Oriental other, the European view of themselves had been transformed.

⁴⁰ This is the theme of Ringmar (2006).

The relationship of power had shifted. China was the last major non-European country to openly defy their supremacy, and now its pretensions too were crushed. "The destruction of the emperor's palace," said Wolseley, "was the strongest proof of our superior strength; it served to undeceive all Chinamen in their absurd conviction of their monarch's universal sovereignty" (1862: 281). With this victory, the Europeans had finally emerged as the uncontested rulers of the world. The marvels of the palace, and the orgy of destruction in which it disappeared, served to glorify their victory. The frisson of wonder was no longer caused by an unknown Oriental other, but by a new, previously unknown self. If the palace of the emperor had been less magical, and its destruction more matter-of-fact, their newfound powers would not have been half as marvelous. It was only by first defining, and then defeating, the wonders of the East that the Europeans could come to take their place.

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