



T'ANG HAYWEN ARCHIVES

Extract of **TIME IS A FALCON THAT DIVES** (*LE TEMPS EST UN FAUCON QUI PLONGE*)
Autobiography of **Marc Alyn**, published by **Éditions Pierre-Guillaume de Roux** in 2018

Chinese Venice and the fantastical lagoons of T'ang Haywen

...In the heart of the Venetian lagoon, on the Malarnocco side, favoured haunt of grey heron and kingfisher, I recall with a sense of heightened intensity, the sombre and luminous presence in this world, of T'ang Haywen. Did this alchemist in ink, of Chinese origin, who was my friend from 1960 to his death in 1991, re-appropriate via the watery landscapes of Venice (where he visited so very often, exhibiting in particular at the Rialto Gallery, in 1969) the rice fields of his native Amoy Island, close to Formosa? Utterly discreet, receptive as a mirror to the totality of living beings, he refused to name things so as to leave them free to choose other identities.

“A name, he confided to me, confines and petrifies what it is supposed to signify: I think it advantageous to preserve the secret.” He had forged from the ocean’s rumour a name for himself of absolute beauty: Haywen, a word association signifying *Sea-Scripture* - a reconciliation worthy of Homer!

Born in 1927, Haywen was ten years older than I; when I was still in swaddling clothes, war had forced him along with his family, to flee Amoy and seek refuge in Cholon in French Indochina. He then went on to complete his education at the French school in Saigon. Instinctively fascinated by imagery, his early portraits covered the margins of his French-Chinese dictionary, highlighting words relating to art and more particularly to painting. As a child who was fond of “cards and prints”, he was fortunate enough to be introduced to calligraphy at a very early age by his grandfather T’ang Yian, who was said to have perfected this traditional writing technique from the land of Confucius. He would never forget this period, drawing his assurance from his rigorous but tender apprenticeship. Of a well-to-do family, respectful of the Confucian culture, Haywen could not easily free himself from the guardianship of his father (a silk merchant); who desired his son to marry and run the business while the young man himself aspired to lead the artist's life in Paris. Faced with this paternal policy, he would make use of his personal secret weapon: the *reed system* that consists in opposing one’s adversary with the supple energy of an indomitable resolution. This resistance took the form of a hunger strike... Without once raising his voice, the wayward son abandoned body and soul to starvation. After some time faced with this ever smiling, courteous but mute ghost, the father capitulated and Haywen was able to make it to France with the provision of an allowance sufficient for the young man in the Latin Quarter. It should be added that the aspiring artist, in a form of subterfuge, was forced into a flexible interpretation of the truth: supposedly studying medicine while in fact auscultating the charming models of the artist studios of *Montparnasse*!



T'ANG HAYWEN ARCHIVES

From 1948 to 1958, T'ang in Paris led a studious and solitary existence just on the margins of the real world. I imagine him in the guise of *Rilke's* unforgettable character *Malte Laurids Brigge*. He attended a course of studies in French civilization at the Sorbonne at the same time as taking lessons of the National School of Oriental Languages, curious about everything, systematically benevolent towards others, reserving the best of himself for a concerted approach in art. Did he, I wonder, go so far as to sporadically attend the amphitheatres of the Faculty of Medicine to reassure his father? A nomad always ready to strike out for pastures new, he could never reside long in the same place, lodging in turn in various hotels of the rue des Saints-Pères and the quai des Grands-Augustins, he occasionally met with *Picasso*, at Villa Seurat where the spirit of *Miller* hovered still inseparable from that of *Anaïs Nin*, and on up to Meudon, before finally settling in a dark and inconvenient two-room flat on rue Liancourt, close to Denfert-Rochereau and the Montparnasse cemetery. He cared little for comfort: beauty would always matter more to him than material amenities; he consistently favoured his spiritual journey to the detriment of his personal well-being and, in the longer term, his health. His oldest and dearest French friend, *Raymond Audy*, spoke of him, just before our meeting, as an “*always good-humoured*” ultimate searcher.

I mentioned previously the affectionate closeness that, since Algiers, had attached me to Raymond Audy, also a former *Bled*. Once the uniform had been thrown away, our contact, always warm, remained ever unbroken and, outside of our festive reunions in Paris, I had the pleasure of frequenting the Audy family home on the banks of the Loire, an exquisite domain that had been - if I remember correctly - the ultimate retreat away from Paris of *Rodolphe Salis*, the creator of the cabaret *Le Chat Noir* (*Black Cat* cabaret). An enlightened lover of the arts and an avid reader of poetry, Raymond burned with desire to introduce me to T'ang Haywen, whom he loved and admired. The initial interview took place in 1960, on a café terrace by the banks of the Seine near Notre-Dame. In the blazing light of summer, the river rolled a glitter of gold in her loose Lorely hair - while a dry white wine mirrored all in our glasses. T'ang had dipped into the poems of *Délébiles* and he evoked them with delight. For my part, I identified him with one of those sumptuous felines, of a rarity bordering on the imaginary, designated under the title *Chat écrit de Chine* (*Cat wrote in China*), truly a living manuscript: an apparition...

Rue Liancourt, between the walls of his capharnaum, I weaved through disorderly piles of pictures and drawing boards, jumbles of books, suitcases avidly awaiting departure, and various utensils intended for the tea ceremony. For me T'ang's elevated abode merged in my mind with the tombs of the Valley of the Kings where he resides, amidst a dusty jumble of furniture, bric-à-brac, a mummy and the treasures of Pharaoh. Immediately, empathy bristled between us. Do not we each belong in this family of minds that favours being at the expense of having? Confronted with this mass of sketches on paper coated with gouache, watercolours or China ink, the glory of the Middle Kingdom, both indelible and *divining*, I wondered about the nature of this fragile and indestructible bird-catcher. Who could rival his solitude? But then who was ever less alone? Immobile traveller, T'ang remained on the edge of the visible, like the insect that adopts the colour and shape of its environment, passing unnoticed for the sake of safeguarding its irreducible singularity. Art of the edges, the borders, the frontier, a territory delivering a breath-taking view of the beyond. A levitating scribe bent over his colours, brushes and



T'ANG HAYWEN ARCHIVES

reveries, Haywen captured the sky through the trap of his eyelashes. Initially figurative, he would gradually evolve towards an abstraction favouring, not the thing, but its shadow, without denying the light: thus these lagoons would emerge from the end of the world where, under the whirl of maritime winds, black reeds tremble.

"A calligrapher by instinct and a meta-physicist by taste," as Jean-Paul Desroches would later define it, T'ang paints the instant as if it were eternity. He takes his time, or rather it is taken by him, quickening slowly before unleashing the stroke; in a single jet, the work is fired towards the goal, the target. No trial and error; Haywen destroys rather than corrects: as the potter gives back to the earth the amphora condemned to never contain living water.

In 1966, I had the opportunity to provide concrete support to Haywen by creating an exhibition of his works in the Tallyrand Gallery in my hometown of Reims. I wrote on the invitation card a *"Portrait of T'ang"*, a first homage of a contemporary poet to the painter destined to become one of the three great Chinese creators of modernity along with Chang Dai Chien and Zao Wou-Ki: *"On the flower corollas born from his hand, bees come to rest."*

Unknown outside a small circle of often disillusioned enthusiasts, the artist struggled to establish himself. In the hope of seducing patrons, he sometimes favoured the figurative even as his approach tended more and more towards abstraction. In fact, he mixed the two genres with his usual subtlety. It was thus that we could admire in Reims the delicious 1955 *Autoportrait au chat (self-portrait with cat)* as well as various still life studies and calligraphy works. This appearance of the *Signe* was a momentous event: the alchemical fusion of Chinese tradition and Western avant-garde. A rope-walk was thrown over the abyss: a whirling space where cascading water torrents are crowned with rainbows. The voice of *Tao* joins there with *Rimbaud's Illuminations* and *Nietzsche's l'éternel retour*. The change of scale proved formidable, as if the whole of nature was manifest through it without lingering, outside of the contingencies of space and time: *"I am not what I do,"* confessed the artist, defining the fruit of his research as *"a possible work that could have been a thousand years ago and in a thousand years will still be"*. When I departed Paris in the mid-60s to settle in Uzès, in an isolated farmhouse on the outskirts of La Garrigue, dear T'ang became a regular guest: he would drop in for a night, then linger for a couple of days to sketch out portraits of trees or studies in Virginia creeper. At the wheel of his rather battered, but yet valiant 2 CV, the eternal nomad criss-crossed the limits of all the possible geography with the obstinacy of the wandering Jew, everywhere at ease and received as the Messiah. In Uzès, we exhibited his work at the mas des Poiriers for the pleasure of a few connoisseurs, such as *Pierre André Benoît*, grey eminence of *l'art novateur*, and confidant of *Braque*, *René Char* and *Picasso*, for whom he edited rare works. Pierre André Benoît contemplated at length our friend's ink prints and then pronounced the following eulogy: *"It is in the use of black that one measures the true mastery of an artist: T'ang instinctively possesses this faculty, a true gift from the heavens which allows him at all times to draw us into his flight."*

We shared, Haywen and I, the same veneration for *Balthus* with whom he had been associated during his stays in Italy. We know something of what Balthusian spirituality owes to Asia, a spirituality that would inspire two masterpieces: *La Japonaise au miroir noir* and *La Japonaise à la table rouge* where



T'ANG HAYWEN ARCHIVES

he rivals the indisputable masters such as *Takanobu (Portrait de Shigamori)*. Another point of resemblance: the passion for cats and for *Rilke*, the inspiration of Balthus' first collection of drawings in Chinese ink, at thirteen years of age! Beyond our memorable conversations by the monumental fireplace of the farmhouse where a fire of olive wood crackled, we undertook common creations: poems-pieces (paintings / manuscripts), some of which appear in the Marc Alyn Donation to the Arsenal library in Paris. With a view to a collection of my poems entitled *Mémorial de l'encre* (still unpublished), he created a series of dreamlike landscapes from which emanated a poignant music:

Si longue soit la mort	However long is death
Dans le jardin de nuit	In the night garden
Où le rosier couve ses braises	Where roses brood
Jamais nous n'aurons le temps d'oublier	Never time enough to forget
La seconde - une goutte -	The instant - a drop -
Où nous fûmes vivants.	Of our living selves

Whenever he would go back on the road, after be it just a few hours or a few days' stay in Uzès, Haywen would leave behind an empty space in the place he had occupied in the hearts of his hosts. Of an exemplary discretion, he always seemed to emerge as from a light mist: an exquisite ghost giving notice: "*You know, I'll just make an appearance!*" His most faithful friends seldom knew one another; he himself stood back from his own image. Reality slipped from him like water from the plumage of a swan: he was oblivious. Perhaps his serenity was only apparent, concealing a fundamental wound from the obscurity of his past? Some hint of this anxiety appears in the 1968 diptych entitled *D'où venons-nous?* (Where are we from?), which takes up the theme of *Gauguin*: three women sombre and nude on a beach at sunset, scrutinize the horizon.

At the moment of his departure, standing near the gate, beneath a fig-tree dripping with bluish fruit, Haywen remained motionless, gesturing with his hand as if signing the space. His regard, palpitating the grain of things, took in façades, the old pear tree leaning over the well: he was impregnating himself with the scene one last time in order to let it live within the eternal present of his interior time. Then, the embrace and the moment of ultimate sharing: "*Death does not end our dreams,*" he confided with a smile before sitting behind the wheel of the 2 CV and disappearing down the road.

In Paris, where my duties as director of the "Flammarion/Poetry" collection drew me every month, I rarely failed to visit him in rue Liancourt. Whenever we did not choose to lunch in a nearby creperie, he would prepare something for me. Chinese cuisine is like a doll's tea party - but holds all the subtle flavour of the universe! His day-to-day life remained precarious, but he never complained; on the contrary, he never ceased to give thanks to his stars for this unhindered destiny in harmony with the demands of his vocation. His most valuable possession was immaterial: all his eyes beheld became his Kingdom. A true citizen of the world, he travelled in every direction (from India to Japan), divesting himself for new landscapes with which he elaborated his art.



T'ANG HAYWEN ARCHIVES

Following my return to Paris in the late 80s, we saw each other more frequently, delighting in the sharing of bread, image, and poem. In his eyes I assumed the form of lifelong friend, as he pointed out to me in the dedication of a precious catalogue; for me, I esteemed him as one of those bearers of secrets that invisibly haunt certain existences dedicated to the imaginary - thus light moves within stained glass windows. My romantic wanderings through war-torn Lebanon sharpened his curiosity, and his joy was intense at the announcement of my marriage to Nohad. How could we have foreseen at that time, that the executioner had already tightened his noose around both our frail necks and that our meetings in the hermitage of the rue Liancourt were already approaching their end?

In June 1991, following a lunch around the Audy family table, Haywen suffered a malaise. Hospitalized at Saint-Joseph, subjected to minute examinations, it was revealed to him that he had a terminal illness, which left him with only a few months to live. At the same period, I was experiencing a parallel tragedy: laryngeal cancer with its infernal cycle of surgical procedures. For this reason, therefore, I was fighting myself to survive and was unaware of the hopeless situation of my friend. When he passed away on September 9th, 1991, I was in intensive care in the Otorhinolaryngology department at Bichat Hospital; the fatal news did not reach me until much later.

Nevertheless, it seems to me today that I remained mysteriously close to the painter though agonising deep in a coma at the time. Arriving at the boundary of the living world, I wandered in the heart of landscapes in every respect analogous to the vegetation that sprang from T'ang's brushes. Shadows of foliage writing a calligraphy of indecipherable messages in the sand. The spirit of water hovered over the rice fields, carried by air become visible. Did time exist? Cries of unknown birds confused hearing. Everywhere, forms were waiting to awaken in the hope of reaching some dazzling transparency. A black sun, like the 1978 *Disque du Ciel*, radiated, dishevelled, over expanses devoid of human silhouettes. Towards the end of the final voyage another shore appeared dominated by a perspective of jumbled black mountains; the scene evoked the view of Lake Como (*Ravenna*, 1967) with its portal opening onto a watery void - from beyond... Is not shadow the great invention of China?

Hunched over a tiny wooden table (the same on which we had just dined), rue Liancourt, T'ang lets his brush run forever, covering one of those unassuming Kyro cartons that served as his chosen support. And here arrives *L'Autre monde (The other world)*, a lagoon at dusk when the dark moves with a sleepwalker's step. I contemplate, enthralled, these twilight territories traversed by unspeakable presences that are born before my eyes in the light of a humble lantern. All the energy of the cosmos is present in this vertiginous operation at the end of which a bird traverses the illuminated portion of the sky before disappearing into the darkened regions. "Where are we going?" wondered Gauguin. At this instant, I hear Haywen's voice reciting verse from the poet *Li Po*: "Gold that you throw to the wind, the wind will return".

English translation by Brendan Payne