
DU

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Cities are remembered by symptoms of the minds that made them. The traveller enters them weary from the long descent from mountains, or unsteady from a rough sea voyage, or even, as he enters Du, sun-, wind-, and dust-burned, giddy in the sudden welter of scent and colour and cooling air. He does not realize that he becomes at once an instrument, first tuned and later played upon by the ancient makers of the place, the generations of builders, merchants and craftsmen who moulded its stones and have polished and worn them with the constant flow of their lives. Each cornice, should he stay so long, each step, lintel and well-curb will be found to contribute to an under-music, the eddies and ripples of which will be recalled, years later, as salve to the spirit's soreness, as counterpoint to some new measure in the time- and space-defying music of the mind, so that the present resounds, the past leans again into substance.

And yet the city of Du had seemed at first so different. I had been there many weeks, plying its streets and alleys, asking of the lives of its people questions which even now seem strange to me, before I began to understand why my past would not avail me -- why, for all the beauty of such an oasis, the harmonies it awoke within me seemed so much to turn about a centre yet withheld. And still I do not know when first it was that its mysterious influence affected me, when first, blinded by exotic surfaces, I slipped unsuspecting into the undercurrent of that city and began my drift toward its secret centre, its still-ineffable source. I can only say that, after an illness left too long neglected during months of desert travel, I arrived, and was almost a year recovering in Du. It was like a child's slow and gentle seduction into literature or music, beginning with a street-vendor's cry, a lullaby, and ending with Goethe, Each, or Mozart.

One day I was sitting on a second-floor balcony overlooking the market with its dusty cornucopia of brass- and stone-ware, dried fruits and meats, livestock and withered vegetables, all now glimpsed and as rapidly obscured as the tide of arabs and westerners, africans and orientals washed over it. My coffee was strong and bitter, and the morning's heat enervating. As I sat I became intrigued, almost mesmerized by what it was that determined the placement of stalls, the flow of customers below me. One day, another day, I found myself far from where I was living, lost amongst streets into which only dogs and dusty pigeons would venture in the heat, and I realized that an urge unknown to the citizens had again driven me abroad, again marked the distance I had yet to travel to an understanding of this place. I was walking, another time, through the ungrassed, ungardened palm-groves by the wide canal when I realized that the old men who play chess in parks, cafes and piazzas the world over played here a game which, though no different to the casual eye, could be seen on closer inspection to be remarkably unlike.

In each of these places my journey could have begun: in each, it now seems, it was already under way. In the City of the Game all things bear upon the stranger to the same effect, the dance of streets, the dance of customers, the dance of pieces on a board all linked, all governed by rules as deeply graven as topography itself.

In the old cathedral on the Beggar's Hill I found, in the tiled floor of the transept, a familiar pattern - or rather, beheld its possibility. In the Great Mosque, in a different part of the city, I saw, in the mosaics and the arrangement of the arches, its complement, its negative inversion. Day after day, as I walked the city or travelled in its ancient buses, I noticed the game increasingly, became more and more aware of its quiet popularity. People shrugged off my inquiries, joked as I observed to them its extraordinary hold: it was a game for older men, the city's self-advertizing, a provincial embarrassment. Yet, in their own game in the streets, children hopped over fragments of its pattern. Yet the arrangement of cemeteries, the lay of so many private gardens, strongly conformed. Yet the city itself, when seen from certain angles from the hills outside it, faintly suggested, in its long boulevards, in the pattern of its blocks and parks, a strangely distorted playing-board, the domes and spires and battlements of its public buildings curiously like those of its major pieces, arranged in what positions of dance or conflict only the oldest and greatest masters of the game might guess.

I began to play. It was no easy task. While there were citizens enough of that place willing to tutor me once or twice in the simpler rules, the sub-culture of the devotees was so deeply bound into the city's life that all seemed to have a regular circle of serious opponents, a circle as unacknowledged as it was unbreakable, and which relied, as if by some unspoken pact, upon laconism and neglect to disenchant the newcomer. When I did find partners they were outsiders like myself, and no matter how much we played together there remained strange stalemates, inexplicable fluctuations in the board's terrain, to remind us of borders as yet uncrossed, of angles of vision as yet unattained. While our interest in our object did not wane, we grew tired of our repetitions and ourselves moved on, hoping that some new partner might have found some further fragment of the lore. I learnt in this way a great deal of the game, I learnt manifold purposes for almost every piece, I learnt to exploit somewhat its strange, asymmetric geometries, the cul-de-sacs its patterns could create, and my tenacity in pursuit of its principles made me, at last, something of a master amongst its outcasts, yet always there was within me the ironic certainty that the greater my acquaintance with the rules became, the keener would be my sense of my own ignorance.

There were, in this game, both black and white pieces. While I did not always win when I played them, my luck seemed tied to the latter, and I never won when playing the black. Although they would smile as if this observation but confirmed my naivety, even some of the citizens, when I pressed them, admitted to a like affinity. Such, doubtless, is common to any game of skill or chance, yet in this city its hold, *where* it held, seemed absolute: those who discovered it in themselves became henceforward either Players of the White or Players of the Black, their abilities ruled by the colour, their judgments unsound when led by circumstance or curiosity to play from the other side. I was soon to learn that even for supposed scions of that city, such

predetermination was by no means certain, and that many of those who had shut me out had not themselves discovered their colour, had been in their own way shut out by some deeper law of the game. Although the stirrings of my first interest in the game are now so hard to locate, it is quite clearly from this discovery of a mystic connection with its deeper roots that I date my true and secret initiation.

It marked at once a greater involvement and a distancing. The popular history of that city, I was to find, has it that once, at a time soon after its legendary founding, there had been rival factions engaged in long and bitter dispute, and that throughout the subsequent millennia those who have considered themselves its truest citizens have claimed descent from one or the other of these lines. Could it be, as some have claimed, that the modern game is a ritualization of the ancient conflict, a refinement of all its subsequent eruptions? Perhaps, although experience since has led me to believe that such a legend, like so many others, is itself but a formulation of some deeper wisdom of the tribe. Always, it seems, and even in cities far from Du, there have been Players of the White. Always they have loved or befriended, conquered or succumbed to Players of the Black.

The game I found in Du was not, at last, the game I most sought explanations of. Although while there I never ceased to play, I became, within months of my beginning, at once dissatisfied with its intractable mysticism and ever more preoccupied by the differences between the boards which the populace now employed and those I saw on the floors and walls of the mosques, the churches, the old public buildings and palaces. Slowly, from these, and from what books I could consult in public and private libraries, I began, by rules and intuitions that the game itself had given me, to assemble something of its unwritten history. Although its beginnings, like those of the city itself, can only be matters of vaguest conjecture, I found isolable certain periods of the later history in which there seemed close correspondence between maps of the city, the interrelation of its principal families, and the manners in which the designers, builders and decorators of the time had incorporated elements of the game into their structures. Yet history did not simplify the questions that I took to it. I found myself tracing, not merely the variations of the board, but the lineage of its pieces, the evolution of their uses. I found the cities of the past, the cities under the city of Du, to offer not merely permutations of the game's topography, but positions, interrelations that seemed formulae, encoded messages from an earlier time, what they said less important than that they existed to say, than the message behind their message, of a people intensely preoccupied with images of itself -- a people who, throughout history, had so entered the life of their own messages that any separate identity was as impracticable as it was indefinable. The *gnosis*, the core of secrets that had so obsessed me as I walked the boulevards or haunted the palmgroves, began at last to seem a prison I might only narrowly escape.

My recovery by this time almost complete, I left Du by one of the desert-lined canals that join that city to the sea, and within weeks had returned to my former life. The freedom is not total. I could not leave the game so easily. It has become a part not only of the under-music of my mind, but of my understanding of the world about me.

In this I do not know whether I am tainted or at last truly liberated. Sometimes my mind seems to rail at the bars of a cage; at other times that cage seems so large as to cast doubt as to whether it is a cage at all, and not, instead, of the order of things that define us. Several times since my return I have driven, late at night, up through the smog of my city into mountains that surround it, where one can have a clear view of the stars. Always I can see in them configurations of the game. The code changes with the ages of the board and pieces I envision, and yet, it seems, the pieces and the board are always there, and always in pattern. Sometimes it is easy to think that I impose this pattern upon an otherwise orderless disposition in the meaningless dark. At other times I do not know whether it is my own mind or the sky that is the mirror - whether there is not, perhaps, an eternal interchange of reflections, my own mind shaping the sky which shapes my mind. Always I receive, magnified a thousandfold, a feeling that I have down here daily that I am playing a strange, yet familiar role, my moves limited yet still mysterious, my victories ambiguous, my partners dominated by forces far beyond them, the ground shaped by the constant flow of generations, and all around me the rambling boulevards, the cryptic buildings, the markets and the palmgroves and the obsessed, sad citizens of Du.