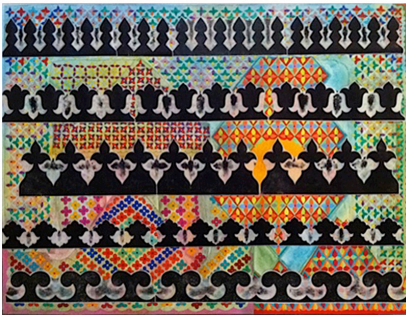


# Colm Tóibín

## PHILIP TAAFFE

1.



*Large Panel with Row Ornament, (2012)*  
Mixed media on linen.  
24 x 36 inches (60.9 x 91.4 cm)

I have in mind a dream-time in a dream-city. The city is on water and may once have been a great port; there is a wide, slow-flowing river and there may be old disused canals and perhaps in the distance cranes and gantries. The port may be still busy, or the trade may have gone elsewhere; it may have been rebuilt after a war, or even had its name changed as history moved. Ismir, Gdansk. It is probably in Europe, but it could also have elements of Buenos Aires, Tangiers, Calcutta, Wellington. I imagine winding streets and a hill, perhaps a military outpost of some sort, a wide-spanning bridge and old stone warehouse buildings, and a great square with an equestrian statue and a plaque commemorating a colonial war. And a covered market or bazaar. And nineteenth century buildings that housed great banks and insurance companies and shipping companies. And a sense of islands, maybe, in the distance to which pleasure boats, or tourist boats still go, islands which have resisted the lure of the city's culture, with towns, once walled, heavily fortified, which still stand alone and apart from Naples, Genoa, Barcelona. If the dream city were in Europe it could also be Cork, Lisbon, Hamburg, Trieste.

An historian of the city could explain things that are both mysterious and clear. The layers and patterns which made their way into streetscape, for example, or into ceramics, or earthenware pots, or iron works, into how stone was cut or wood painted or glazes created. Or how certain words are still in use, or how certain street names came into being. Or how the narrow streets on one side were once Jewish or Arab, or Byzantine or African; how the wider streets and boulevards were made by the French or the

English. How the railway system was built by the English, but the canals were created by French engineers. How the city's wealth came first from salt or spices, wine or cotton, cod or cloth, plunder and war. How the city was bombed or burned and then rebuilt.

How the Greeks were here, or the Romans, or the Moors, or the Vikings, or the Normans, or the Visigoths or the English or the Germans. How certain dishes still cooked have elements which came from elsewhere; how flowers, or plants, or vegetables were brought to the city at a certain time, the same time as a new-shaped coffee pot, or a way of brewing tea. Or musical instruments, or certain tones and systems in music. Or a type of art deco or art nouveau.

The dream-cities are filled with cafes and churches, mosques and synagogues; the dream-cities are filled too with long empty mornings and shadowy afternoons when the light lurks and lingers and nothing seems to move much. Some of the churches are permanently locked; others on display because of the layers within – the Romanesque side chapel, or the Moorish arch, or the Baroque statues, or the Byzantine cupola, or the onion-dome, or the coffin in a vault, or the vast brave Gothic battlefield of a central nave. The mosques are busy. In some of the dream-cities the synagogues are part of the dream, and those who once went to them haunt the dead streets on the Sabbath.

In the market, food is on display as though it were a sort of fabric you might weave or wear. The spices piled up could easily be dyes, their colour beguiling, fascinating to the eye. The fruit and vegetables are displayed as though beautifully and intricately manufactured – the black-purple of the aubergine skin could easily have been made to order by a specialist, and so too the porous orange of the tangerine. The seafood curls in elemental shapes, dark patterns, like something which had emerged from the imagination itself after a long gestation in its cavernous dream-time. The skin of each fish has been stencilled, the colours muted and exact, almost worn down; the surface of each fish has come to look like a silkscreen print of itself.

At the edge of the market there are shops which sell fabric. It is rolled to make a sort of pillar, and stored standing up or on its side. The patterns are pure repetition, abstract shapes, lines and angles, some adapted maybe from Islamic art, or shapes from nature, from clouds, or flowers, or plants or birds in flight. And close by are the shops that sell tiles, some of them austere in their single glaze, others with swirling shapes or angled patterns, some of the patterns burned into the tile, others standing out in relief. They are waiting to be placed beside each other, the pattern of each becoming part of the larger pattern.

These seem now like designs, work done to decorate and delight the eye, distract the mind. But, in the ambiguous hour which comes to these dream cities with sombre memories of a time when large questions loomed, it is easy to remember that these patterns and colours and designs and hints of calligraphy once had a sort of sanctity.

In the Christian world, god could be painted or sculpted or set in mosaic; he could have eyes and a face; his son could have a bruised body and outstretched arms; his son's mother a blue gown. In the Islamic world it was the job of artists to suggest rather than portray or depict; the tiles in mosques in their intricate angles and intimations of infinity and eternity, movement and intersection, natural forms and flows, roots and branches, managed to prepare the mind for life moving inexorably towards the end of life, the body moving towards air and emptiness. Using line and colour, ornament and decoration, relief and exquisite carving and patterning, there is a suggestion of a beauty that came before earthly beauty, and a beauty which will survive beyond it.

There are museums and antiquarian book-shops in the old city, open maybe only in the morning, or closed during the long shadowy time after the bright noon. The city and the land around are havens for archaeologists and geologists, and the first rooms of the museums have glass cases that seem themselves to have been found and preserved. In them are stored the flints and fossils, insects and shells, early shapes in culture and nature which curl or end in sharpness. Other museums specialise in natural

history – underwater life and strange stuffed animals. Still other museums display cloth and fabric, old tiles and wall hangings.

In some of the cities there is a bright new building, like a bunker; or an old market building that has been restored. And this is the Museum of Contemporary Art where a new set of dreams, all sleek and expensive, adorn the high concrete walls or are hung in the inner sanctum, the white cube. Here there are flashes of sheer colour, or fearless patterns using primary colours. Or rooms where the exotic has been given tame space. There is much whiteness too, and black and grey. And shiny steel. It would be easy to tell the students of the future that these high rooms became the churches of the contemporary, places to visit on Sunday for easy contemplation, with a café on the top floor offering the best view of the old port, the plate glass windows pulling in the light from the sea. This also is part of the dream, although it might look too new to belong fully to the dream's dark rules. But this work on display by contemporary dreamers has its own rules, its own purity, its own hybrid connection to ancient sources. It belongs to the city as much as the tiled roof, or the cut stone, or the skinny cats that skulk and flit, or the ironwork on the roof of the market, or the glazed pots with plants in them, or the figure of a woman in a bright patterned apron standing on the balcony staring down into the street.

She is watching the old bookseller on his way to open his shop. If it is Calcutta the old bookseller remembers Tagore; if it is Buenos Aires he remembers Borges; if it is Cork he remembers Corkery; if it is Lisbon he remembers Pessoa; if it is Hamburg or Gdansk he remembers the bombing; if it is Ismir, he remembers the fire; if it is Tangiers he remembers Paul Bowles; if it is Trieste he remembers Svevo. His shop is piled high with things. He still buys whole collections from nieces and grand-children. On Sundays in some cities he used to have a stall, but he does not like competing with cheap DVDs and remaindered books. He knows what he has.

From floor to ceiling, on one whole wall, he has large-size books about art, about pottery and ceramics and architecture and jewellery, about famous gardens and great old cities. Many of the plates in these books are in black

and white and he has little time for browsers who want everything to be in colour. On another wall, he has books about nature and science, with reproductions of photographs of fossils and fish, wild animals, plants, flowers, seeds. There are medical books with diagrams of what the body looked like in a time before x-rays. And manuals of early dentistry, or early surgery or early printing. And old postcards and early pornography and old advertisements for Bacardi and old packets of cigarette papers. He is in touch with collectors, and is a secret sharer in an old pre-internet world of stamps, timetables for ships and trains, letters written in ink, colour plates, signed black and white photographs in old frames, dust jackets, coins, share certificates, Baedeker guides.

## 2.

This idea of the word or the phrase as palimpsest, as something which comes to us bearing the hallmarks of many layers and much travelling is an essential element in the poetry of the twentieth century. This idea of a dream life nurtured gloriously by what is hybrid and impure came to poetry in the early part of the twentieth century as something new and essential and modern as much as it came in painting and music. In these years also a poem came as pure, unfettered, unadorned statement, or as a vast reference library, packed with images, layered with borrowings and rubbings and quotations. The poem was as pure as a single note from a tuning-fork or as chaotic and dynamic as a port city in the first hours of business. For some poets, the single image in all its fierce eastern mystery was enough if it could be rendered with sufficient articulate energy. In his two-line 'In a Station of the Metro', Ezra Pound wrote:

'The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.'

In 'Spring and All', William Carlos Williams wrote:

'so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens.'

In 'Ferry', Louis Zukofsky could begin:

'Gleams, a green lamp

In the fog:

Murmur, in almost

A dialogue

Siren and signal

Siren to signal.'

And in longer poems a strange haunting and exacting simplicity could break through as though it were a hidden shape found inside stone. Robert Creeley, for example, could begin his poem 'The Rain':

'All night the sound had

come back again,

and again falls

this quiet, persistent rain.'

In the background, haunting these chiselled images as a conflagration might haunt a candle, entering its dreams as a vast warning, were a number of long poems which attempted to capture culture in all its complexity, taking phrases and cadences from the history of poetry in order to make a poem new. These poems included T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and Ezra Pound's 'The Cantos'. And there were other poems such as Hart Crane's 'The Bridge' or Lorca's 'Poet in New York' which sought to re-create urban experience and the fierce gleam of the self using fragmentary tones, and jagged, difficult music.

In American poetry after Pound and Eliot, a number of figures continued to work towards creating a poem or a book of poems as something organic, elemental, dynamic. They sought to establish their own authority, as a planner will look at a part of a city ready for renewal, and call first for a bulldozer. These poems built their own autonomous structure out of a voice and a tone which were deeply personal and uncompromising; these poems cleared the ground, but are filled too with strange echoes from the history of poetry. Also, in the work of poets such as Robert Duncan there was a fearless sense of the beauty of phrases and textures in poetry, a sort of

restrained wildness, a willingness to see and hear both ordered pattern and chaotic yearning for possibility and transcendence.

In poems also by poets such as Charles Olson and A.R. Ammons, there was the idea of playing with the line and the page itself. They made the poem both patterned and open; patterned by the repetition of sounds or words, and open by the refusal to operate within the rules of the iambic beat or the pentameter line. But open also by the sense of the poem as a sort of gesture, a way of releasing energy and allowing energy to work as both order and disorder, as both pattern and struggle. The poem depends on the intensity and beauty of the image against the immediacy and high-voltage sound of the voice.

### 3.

Philip Taaffe's studio in New York unfolds in a building which seems very drab and ordinary if observed from the street. It is as though the outskirts of the dream-city had faceless roundabouts and streets created in an anonymous, international style. It is only when you come inside the door into a warren of high rooms, some large and bright and others dark and hidden, that you realise that the dream-city has actually been recreated as an artist's studio, or set of studios, complete with reference library.

Philip Taaffe moves around, explaining the work in progress – the techniques he is using and the source material he has available. He talks about culling images from many sources and discovering connections between these sources that attract him, releasing a hidden power within images that will become an aspect of the narrative of what he is working on.

He is working with dream shapes from history, from natural history as much as art history. He works with many different techniques to fuse the images and create an idea of the picture as a place rather than, say, an object. His job is to activate a space, test the boundaries to see how much a picture can take. He moves between the austerity of making decisions to



bringing a sense of fullness to the work. Many things fascinate him, delight his eye, and he goes through some of them now as he weaves through the rooms of this place where he works. He talks about the wooden churches of Northern Russia; the history of marbling; early Buddhist sculpture; a convent and church in Portugal from the second half the sixteenth century; he talks about masks; the shape of fish, sea urchins and bats; Italian painting; the work of film-makers such as Pasolini, Bergman and Ozu; years he has spent in the city of Naples and the amount of layering in that city; the work of Barnett Newman and Brigid Riley whose work he has riffed on.

Some of the rooms we move in have a strange order within the untidiness. It is as though the work waiting to be finished is seeking to pull in some of the images that are piled up uneasily in books on tables and on shelves, or images that live restlessly in the dream-places in his mind. His dream-city has a bank of images and hieroglyphics; they come to him now in New York in the way images in dreams come, or life under water seems to us – floating, without the ties and limits of history, or precise time. It is as though these images came to him distorted, without context, gorgeously jumbled together. His job is to separate them, take what he needs, create pattern, fusion, allow certain images to dominate in a context he has created for them.



In a room at the back is a library which the old book-seller would have been proud of. It is as though the essence of the dream-city has been captured and brought here – the strange old churches, the modern art museum, the natural history museum, the layers of archaeology, the objects that ships carried here from Africa and the Orient, the colours and textures of fruit and seafood in the market, the history of medicine. He has made in his work a new history of the world from the images the world has left to him, using the energy and the sense of the autonomy of the imagination which the American poets, and some of the painters, of the past century have used. He allows his work to be ‘born very young in a world already very old’, in a phrase from Louis Zukofsky which Robert Creeley quoted to him in an interview. (1) In the same interview, Philip Taaffe offered a quote from Robert Duncan which fits the work which is resting against the

wall, waiting for completion: 'The work is shaped by its own energies.' His dream-palace in New York gathers in these energies, the energies that have come from all over the world, the energies which Robert Creeley distils and releases in his short poem 'Here':

'What

has happened

makes

the world.

Live

on the edge,

looking.'

Philip Taaffe IVAM Centre del Carme, Valencia, 2000

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