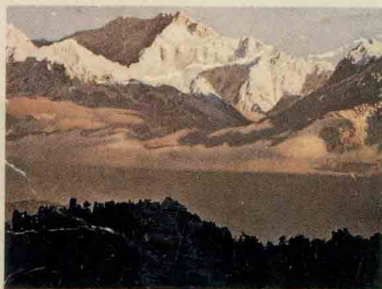


20TH CENTURY CLASSICS

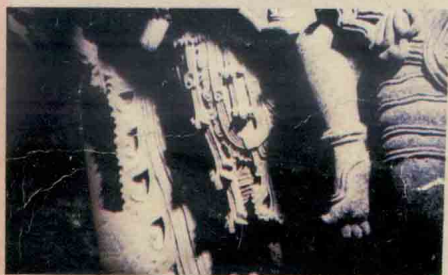
The Root and the Flower

L. H. MYERS

Introduced by Penelope Fitzgerald



THE NEAR AND THE FAR



PRINCE JALI



RAJAH AMAR

*'An exciting exotic adventure story . . .
A remarkable work of imagination.'*

IRIS MURDOCH



THE ROOT AND THE

L. H. MYERS was born in Cambridge in 1881 into a distinguished and scholarly family. He was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, with a brief interlude in Germany. Though he travelled widely after his father's death and mixed in many literary circles both in England and abroad, he refused to commit himself to any single movement, and wrote his major works in self-enforced artistic isolation. These include *Arvat* (1908, a verse-play), and his novels *The Orissers* (1923), *The Clio* (1925), *Strange Glory* (1936), which showed his sympathies for Russian communism, and *The Pool of Visnu* (1940), which was intended to complete the story told in the books of this trilogy. The philosophical content of his novels shows his growing idealism, but this was matched by a sense of personal despair, and in 1944 he committed suicide.

PENELOPE FITZGERALD was born in 1916 and educated at Wycombe Abbey and Somerville College, Oxford. She has written several biographies, including *Edward Burne-Jones* (1975) and *The Knox Brothers* (1977), and a number of novels, of which *Offshore* won her the 1979 Booker Prize.

ALSO AVAILABLE IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY CLASSICS

- Nigel Balchin* THE SMALL BACK ROOM
H. E. Bates MY UNCLE SILAS
Adrian Bell CORDUROY
Adrian Bell SILVER LEY
Adrian Bell THE CHERRY TREE
Hilaire Belloc THE FOUR MEN
Arnold Bennett RICEYMAN STEPS
Hermann Broch THE DEATH OF VIRGIL
John Collier HIS MONKEY WIFE
Ivy Compton-Burnett A FATHER AND HIS FATE
Ivy Compton-Burnett MANSERVANT AND MAIDSERVANT
Cyril Connolly THE ROCK POOL
Walter de la Mare MEMOIRS OF A MIDGET
Peter de Vries THE MACKEREL PLAZA
D. J. Enright ACADEMIC YEAR
Ford Madox Ford THE FIFTH QUEEN
Robert Graves SEVEN DAYS IN NEW CRETE
Patrick Hamilton THE SLAVES OF SOLITUDE
A. P. Herbert THE SECRET BATTLE
Patrick Leigh Fermor THE VIOLINS OF SAINT-JACQUES
Sinclair Lewis ELMER GANTRY
Rose Macaulay THEY WERE DEFEATED
Seán O'Faoláin BIRD ALONE
William Plomer TURBOT WOLFE
Rainer Maria Rilke
THE NOTEBOOK OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE
Saki THE UNBEARABLE BASSINGTON
Osbert Sitwell BEFORE THE BOMBARDMENT
Lytton Strachey ELIZABETH AND ESSEX
Rex Warner THE AERODROME
Denton Welch IN YOUTH IS PLEASURE
H. G. Wells KIPPS
H. G. Wells LOVE AND MR LEWISHAM
Edith Wharton ETHAN FROME and SUMMER
Leonard Woolf THE VILLAGE IN THE JUNGLE

L. H. MYERS

The Root and the Flower



INTRODUCED BY
PENELOPE FITZGERALD

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1985

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York Toronto

Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo

Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town

Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in

Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

Introduction © Penelope Fitzgerald 1984

First published 1935 by Jonathan Cape

First published with Penelope Fitzgerald's introduction 1984

by Secker & Warburg

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback 1985

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Oxford University Press

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Myers, L. H.

The root and the flower.

I. Title

823'.912[F] PR6063.Y4/

ISBN 0-19-281911-9

Printed in Great Britain by

Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd.

Bungay, Suffolk

INTRODUCTION

BY PENELOPE FITZGERALD

L. H. Myers (Leopold Hamilton Myers, 1881–1944) was born into a distinguished scholarly family. His father, F. W. Myers, was one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research; their home in Cambridge was a centre of hospitality and intellectual discussion, but it was also rather an odd place to be brought up in. Frederic Myers was set upon demonstrating the immortality, or at least the survival, of human personality by acceptable scientific methods, and his children were half frightened and half fascinated by the procession of mediums and ‘sensitives’ who came to the house to give evidence. Leo’s mother was passionate and possessive, his father expected rather more of the family than they could give. When he died Leo had to cut short his time at university to take his mother abroad; F. W. Myers had made an appointment to manifest himself after death, and had named a time and place, but the meeting failed. Leo lost faith, but only in his father’s methods. He saw now that though reason must always be distinguished from intuition, it should never be separated from it. They must work together.

He was educated at Eton and Cambridge, and although he was always as popular as he would allow himself to be, he bitterly hated both of them. He rejected, in fact, every social structure to which he belonged, including the literary circles which London offered him. To Myers, all of these fell grotesquely short. ‘Just as an individual cannot live for himself,’ says the Rajah in *The Near and the Far*, ‘so society cannot live for itself, but must keep a self-transcendent idea before it.’ In holding this ideal, and in devoting his writing career to it, Myers was unflinchingly sincere, but his life was not consistent with it. He was neither an ascetic nor a revolutionary. Between his seduction at the age of sixteen and his marriage he had a number of affairs, some, he said, ‘very squalid’.* When in 1906 he came into a legacy he moved through society as a generous patron

* Some of these details are from G. H. Bantock: *L. H. Myers: A Critical Study* (1956). Myers began to write an autobiography shortly before his death, but he destroyed it.

INTRODUCTION

of the arts, but also as a detached and elegant young man, with a taste for racing at Brooklands. Even when, after running through every other political solution, he became a Communist, he still had a part-share in an expensive French restaurant, Boulestin's. Myers, of course, noticed these discrepancies, since he possessed (in the words of his friend L. P. Hartley) 'an exquisite wry sense of humour, of which he was half-ashamed'. But Hartley has also described how, with the close of the 1930's and the threat of war, Myers' self-knowledge darkened into pessimism. A slow and scrupulous writer, he had always depended greatly on the advice of his friends. Now he quarrelled fiercely with most of them. As a young man he had asked himself the question: 'Why should anyone want to go on living once they know what the world is like?' On the 7th April 1944 he answered it for himself by taking an overdose of veronal.

Myers left his great trilogy, *The Root and the Flower*, to speak for him. Like his other books, it has an exotic setting, in this case sixteenth-century India under the reign of Akbar. He did not pretend to accuracy and indeed he had never been to India, though he visited Ceylon. His motive, as he said in his 1940 Preface, is to give us a clearer view of our own social and ethical problems from the 'vantage-point of an imaginary world'.

This world, though anything but safe, is a very seductive one. The slow rhythm of the palace, the desert and the river are like an audible pulsation of the Indian heat, but at any moment we may be asked to look at something as small as a mark in the dust or a dying moth, or stretch our ears for a minute sound. We do not, however, do this for nothing. The descriptive passages hardly ever stand still, they give the sense of something about to happen:

At the door he paused again; from the roof there hung down wisps of dry, grey moss; ants had built a nest against the threshold and the droppings of wood-pigeons whitened the window-sills. Contrary to his expectations the latch came up when he tried it; the door opened and a curious smell spread upon the fresh air. (p. 71)

The absence of the moon and stars made the night intimate and earthly; dry leaves, lifted from the ground, were swept across his hands and face. It seemed as if the earth's secret energies were working upon him, and he yielded to a process which he felt to be

INTRODUCTION

beneficent. His spirit lay still in a quiet excitement; a sense of expectation gathered; it was like that of a woman who is awaiting the first pangs of her first childbed. (p. 214)

She showed him the place where the young man was buried. There certainly were some suspicious marks upon the ground. The soil was cracked, having swollen up in a blister, and this seemed to indicate that the work was not the work of Thugs, for Thugs always drove a stake through the body to allow the gases of decomposition to escape without a sign. (p. 207)

Myers wants us to look at his world of appearances and beyond it. Appearances cannot be dismissed as an illusion, for no illusion can be created except by reason. On the other hand, the life of the spirit is just as real as the pigeon dung and the bloated corpse. 'I am' has no meaning without 'There is'. How can the two be reconciled? On this problem depend the three great questions of the book. First, how can an individual be sure that he has found himself? 'If everyone is pretending to be like others,' says Prince Jali, 'who is like himself?' Secondly, if each individual is a solitary heart, how is he to unite with other human beings? Thirdly, if he does so, how can he be sure that the society he lives in acknowledges 'the supremacy of the spirit as the guiding principle of life'?

Reading a long book is like living a long life, it needs an adjustment of pace. Myers is asking us to slow down, and so to deepen the consciousness. At the beginning of the trilogy, a story of war, betrayal, torture and political power, we have to consider what seems a very small incident. The little prince, alone on the palace balcony, sees a snake crawling along the gutter. The wind stirs a twig, and Jali, watching, 'entered into the snake's cold, narrow intelligence and shared its angry perplexity'. It strikes, loses its balance, and falls to its death on the roof below. The snake shares 'the terrible numerousness of living beings, all separate, all alone, all threatened. It could not tell that the twig was not an enemy. It was deceived by appearances. But a little earlier Jali had been gazing at the serene desert horizon, which had looked so different when they made the six days' hot journey across it. 'He clung to the truth of appearances as something equal to the truth of what underlay them. Deep in his heart he cherished the belief that some day the near and the far would meet.'

The first book of the trilogy gives a sense of the imperial war

INTRODUCTION

game which will decide the fate of India. Akbar is the ruinous tyrant or 'great man' of history. His dream of uniting India's religions – the Din Ilahi – is folly, and he himself is at heart commonplace. His inheritance is disputed between his two sons, Selim, the brutal soldier, and Daniyal, the perverted intellectual. It is the duty of Rajah Amar, in his small kingdom, to decide where his allegiance lies before he withdraws, as he wishes to do, to a monastery. Almost perversely, he favours Daniyal, because he has always disliked him, and he wants to stand uninfluenced by the affections. Sita, the Rajah's wife, is a Christian who prefers, for good or ill, to stay with the rest of humanity. These two, husband and wife, are far apart, and yet they are both searching for perfection. 'The gulf is not between those who affirm and those who deny but between those who affirm and those who ignore.' The man whom Sita eventually takes for a lover, Hari, is a wild chieftain who relishes life as it comes, but all through the first book we can see him gradually driven, step by step, to concede that he cannot after all live through the senses alone. His love for Sita 'seemed to play not upon the nerves of the flesh, not upon the machinery of the brain, but upon the substance of the very soul . . . and he said to himself, "What is this?"' On the other hand, the Rajah's adviser Gokal, the Brahman philosopher, is caught in sensuality's trap. He is enslaved by a low-caste girl, Gunevati, who in turn is guided by sheer animal instinct.

Myers, of course, saw the danger of all this. 'The impression may come into the reader's mind,' he wrote, 'that what he has before him is a philosophical novel.' This, he knew, would mean neither good philosophy, nor a good novel, nor, before long, any readers. But his characters are not representatives of ideas, they are an invitation to think about them, which is a different matter. And in spite of Myers' detached and elegant manner, they are all human beings. Gunevati, for instance, has been taken, I think quite wrongly, as standing for pure evil. Certainly she resorts to poison, and passively accepts the position of fetish to an obscene and forbidden religious sect. But at other times we are asked to pity her, as Hari does, when he realises what a low price she puts on herself, in spite of her beauty. Beauty has no particular rights in the world as it is. Jali pities her, too, when she turns pale and ill as a captive in Gokal's house. The truth is that she has no way of knowing herself. To destroy her is not justice.

INTRODUCTION

Book 2 is a *Bildungsroman*, the education of Prince Jali, the Rajah's son. This, in a sense, is the simplest part of the trilogy, and, in terms of action, the most exciting. Jali's ordeals are of the flesh, the mind, and the spirit. As a young adolescent he finds, under Gunevati's tuition, that women are easy enough and he can get into any bedroom he likes. But he wants to understand life, or at least to see it clearly, and his passion for knowledge leads him to explore the secret cults of the Valley and to discover how they connect with the spying and counter-spying of the court. But Jali – for he is only a learner and a searcher – does not know enough, not enough, at least, to outwit his enemies by himself. And after his escape from the Valley he is in greater danger still, as he approaches the neighbourhood of the Camp.

Here, perhaps, Myers let his prejudices run away with him. The Camp, or Plesaunce, is, as he admitted, a monstrous version of the world of Cambridge and Bloomsbury by which he had once been deceived. It is the stronghold of Daniyal, the artificial paradise of the aesthetes, and to Myers the aesthetes, were 'trivial', a word which for him meant the denial of life. They were the sterile self-regarders and self-indulgers; sterility leads to cruelty, and self-regard to the death of the spirit. The Camp, then the travelling court of Prince Daniyal and his entourage, entices Jali with the most degrading materialism of all. If we are in any doubt as to how dangerous it is – dangerous rather than merely absurd – we have only to follow, as Jali does, the fate of Gunevati. It is at Daniyal's orders that this girl, who can express herself only through her body and her senses, has her tongue cut out; after that she is forced to learn to write. 'She opened her mouth wide. Jali found himself looking into a cavern – black, swollen, horrible.' It is this which recalls Jali to himself, so that he will never again be mistaken as to the nature of the Camp.

Jali will be the ruler of the future, but for the present power still rests with Rajah Amar. Book 3 returns us to the problem we set out with. Is the Rajah justified in giving up the near for the far, or is his longing for detachment only another name for the refusal of responsibility? In the face of Gokal's misgivings, he still prepares to withdraw from earthly concerns. But on the very point of leaving he is summoned to the Camp; there the whole nature of evil is brought home to him by another of the book's apparently unim-

INTRODUCTION

portant moments, the horrible incident of the white cat. Now Amar has to decide, at his own risk, whether in the face of recognized evil a man can ever be absolved from action. The Rajah does not choose what happens to him, but Myers has shown that though there are strict limits to the human will, there are none to human vision. Amar sees what is to be done.

When Gokal brings his fallen body back across the lake, we do not even know whether Amar is dead, or what effect, if any, he has made on Daniyal. Like the relationships of the characters, which have been, all along, subtle and ambiguous, the story never yields a conclusion. 'There is no illusory sense of understanding,' Myers said, 'only the realisation of what is.' But the trilogy unmistakably ends with a return to life. The thought had come to Gokal that if the Rajah were to die without recovering consciousness, it might be as well. 'But he condemned that thought,' and as he goes up the path towards the house on the farther side of the lake, he hears Hari, Sita, and Jali talking together on the verandah. With these quiet everyday sounds Myers concludes his strange masterpiece, which, it has been said, 'brought back the aspect of eternity to the English novel'.

To
IRIS

THE ROOT AND THE FLOWER

I

THE NEAR AND THE FAR

THE NEAR AND THE FAR

LITTLE Prince Jali stepped on to the balcony and looked down upon the plain in awe. It was true that from the tower of his father's palace at home there was an even wider view; but that view was familiar, this one was full of mystery. The wall of this strange palace went down and down, until it merged into the sweeping side of the fort; the fort itself crowned the summit of a hill; and the bare rock of the hill continued a precipitous descent down into the River Jumna. The red glitter of sunset lay upon the river; across the water shady groves alternated with sun-swept patches of millet and corn; beyond stretched the desert.

For the last two years of his life — and he was now twelve — the desert had held Jali under a spell. Nearly every evening at home he would climb up into the tower to gaze upon it. Beyond the roofs, beyond the green of irrigated fields, beyond the glistening palms and the dark clumps of citron, cypress, and mango — beyond the little world that he knew there stretched that other world which his eye alone could reach. There it lay, a playground for the winds, a floor for the light of evening to flow along, the home of mirage and coloured airs.

It was a region that seemed to promise him a disembodied nimbleness, an unearthly freedom. Its very boundaries were unsubstantial — lines of hills pencilled so lightly along the horizon that noonday melted them into the white-hot sky. Only at sunset did those hills become real. Then it was that they emerged, serenely yet with melancholy, out of nothingness into beauty. Cliffs, battlements, ranges, then took on a substance just solid enough to catch the tints of gold and rose that streamed through the air. The watery glitter of mirage was withdrawn from about their feet. They gave, in their remoteness, a measure of the desolate space in between. But this lasted for a few minutes only. Swiftly rising, the dusk submerged them, and what had been hidden day-long under the glare from above was now drowned in a darkness from underneath. Night rolled across the plain, sharp stars pricked the blue; in a moment nothing was left but the twin darkness of earth and sky.

THE NEAR AND THE FAR

For the last six days Jali had been travelling over the desert and disappointment had befallen him — disappointment, but not disillusion. He clung to the truth of appearances as something equal to the truth of what underlay them. There were two deserts: one that was a glory for the eye, another that it was weariness to trudge. Deep in his heart he cherished the belief that some day the near and the far would meet. Yes, one day he would be vigorous enough in breath and stride to capture the promise of the horizon. Then, instead of crawling like an insect on a little patch of brown sand, swift as a deer he would speed across the filmy leagues; the wind would be singing on his ears, the blood tingling in his veins, his whole body would be a living arrow. Almost, already, in his imagination he could foretaste that joy — of seizing in his grasp, of clasp to his heart, the magic of things seen afar. To fling himself into the distance in one bound, to flash into the visionary scene before it had had time to transform itself — almost he knew how!

Now, however, leaning against the warm marble of the balustrade, he was staring before him dejectedly. And soon the voice of his nurse sounded in the room behind, calling him in to the terrors of a lonely night in a strange room in a vast and shadowy palace. Obeying, he went and stretched himself out upon his couch, and even closed his eyes. She asked if he had said his prayers, and then left him.

Alone, he gave a sigh. His life, alas! was much less simple than she or anyone else supposed. He was a Christian, yes; but those simple prayers to the simple Christian God did not satisfy him. There were other deities, less gentle. The most exacting he had discovered for himself. It had to be served with secret propitiatory rites. For instance, before going to sleep he had to touch with each of his five fingers each of the four walls of his room, and it was necessary to count up to five each time. This ceremony had to be repeated three times, nor could he allow his attention to stray for a single instant, otherwise sleep would be banished by the fear that he had made a slip. The business was so unpleasant that he always put it off as long as he could. A few minutes after his nurse had gone he got up and returned to the balcony.

There, what at once caught and fixed his attention was a kite balancing in strained immobility, immensely high in the blue. What was the kite thinking about? What held it, motionless and intent, in that particular place? Beneath was the palace with its