

'Mansfield' by Xu Zhimo

TRANSLATED BY SHIFEN GONG

This joy in the inner recesses of my heart,
This vast realm of my feeling,
If Paradise itself should fall, or Hell open its doors,
The treasure within me will never be destroyed.

*Dusk on the River Cam*¹

The remembrance of beauty is the most precious possession in life.
The ability to perceive beauty is a magic key to Paradise given us by God.

Some temperaments, mine, for example, fluctuate like the weather. There may be sunshine one moment and cloud next, a raging tempest may be followed by a radiant spring day. Sometimes disillusionment makes me profoundly cynical and pessimistic, it oppresses my heart like a leaden weight, like a gloomy winter fog, surrounding me with a frozen, lifeless landscape. I become sceptical about everything: the universe, life, myself. They are all illusions. Human feelings, hopes, ideals, they are all mere vanity.

Ah, human nature, how,
If utterly frail though art and vile,
If dust thou art and ashes, is thy heart so great?
If thou art noble in part,
How are thy loftiest impulses and thoughts
By so ignoble causes kindled and put out?

Sopra un ritratto di una bella donna

The above is from a poem by that most profoundly pessimistic poet Leopardi. On the tombstone of a deserted grave there hung the portrait of a lady, who lay buried within. Its beauty caused the poet to start searching for the answer to this essential question: if life is rational why should it contain so many contradictions? If beauty is an illusion, why should it excite such an intense response in the human heart? If beauty is real, why should it decay like common things? Leopardi's vision was like the beam of a lighthouse. He tore the veil from the illusory phenomena of this material world; he even stripped religion bare and revealed it as a mere dream. Yet he could not deny beauty.

This article was originally published in a Chinese journal *Short Story Magazine* in 1923, and was influential in drawing attention to Mansfield and her work in China. Xu Zhimo (1896-1931) was a well known Chinese poet and critic.