

Swordsman Poet Phantom

Odyssey of a Chinese Mind

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Preface

Life is a manifold existence. We live at once in the past, present and future. Swordsman, Poet and Phantom, the three parts constituting the Chinese soul on which this book centers, can be considered both living in trinity and having their separate lives.

The book is exclusively about one character. If there are other characters, they are only reflections in the mirror of his mind. The book is exclusively about the internal world of the character. If there are happenings of the external world, they are only the embodiments of his ideas or feelings.

Bearing the above in mind, you will be able to enter the labyrinth of the book and find the way out. And if you already have some knowledge of China, it will be helpful.

Chapter One: Lotus

1

Pink, white, golden, dreamlike musical notes. Meditating, rippling, drifting, on a blue lake, the lotuses arrested his eye. The world was reigned over by the lotuses, holy, pure, mystic, like numerous lives free of earthly contamination....

Blood trickled down his arm. A sword was lying by his hand. The lotuses gazed at him as if at a wound received by them. Rain was falling on this melancholy night when the sword and the lotuses silently met....

Above waves of lotus fragrance he fluttered his noiseless wings, recalling and dismissing past events of his previous existences. When the material world was soundly sleeping, he opened the door to a transcendental labyrinth....

2

He lived in a riverside town; murmurs of a river were the first music he heard.

This is the sun, this is the moon, when they come together it means bright, said his father, pointing to some pictorial words on the paper.

Presently a spell was cast over him when he regarded with wide-open eyes the strange characters, each of which crystallized a live thing or a vivid picture.

He closed his eyes. Like some twinkling spots, the words played chase in his mind, running, capering, chirping....

3

Peach Plum Spring Wind One Glass Wine

River Lake Night Rain Ten Year Lamp¹

Reading these two lines of poetry he thought he was reading the essence of life. Joy and sadness, ambition and disillusionment, friendship and solitude, were fused in these fourteen ideograms.

A sunny spring day. Peach and plum blossoms. Cheers. Cheers. Smiles. Success hovering above the two friends' heads. Ideals. Dreams. Miracles.

A cold autumn night. Rain tapping a lonely boat. Years of wanderings. Dust. Tears. White hair in orange lamplight. Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow....

Magic of language.

4

Through the mists of time he marveled at the world evoked by ancient Chinese poems.

Bidding farewell at a tavern in Chang-an². Rain gently patting fresh green willows. Westwards. Westwards. The music of River Wei³ accompanying the trot of the departing horse. Vast deserts. Lofty snowy peaks. Rising above and falling below the horse's neck a setting sun. A white moon over the battlements. Glittering weapons. Contemplating faces. War-frequented frontiers. Generals' feats. Soldiers' homesick dreams. Circling, circling, a sorrowful tune circling above the sands bathed by moonlight, filling enchanted ears and souls....

Facing the glistening waterfall. Listening to its confidings. A gift from Nature. Looking back to your thatched house half-veiled in amorphous clouds. A simple palace. When night comes, your soul will visit the pine trees, the herbs, the dewdrops, flying with the taciturn bats....

Tranquil is your mind when you place your hands on the

¹ A word-for-word translation of two lines of an ancient Chinese poem.

² The capital of China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) .

³ A river near Chang-an.

*koto*⁴, wild geese alighting from the air. Subtle. Ethereal. Magical. Petals falling. A mystic finger is feeling my heart. Up. Down. Left. Right. Voices. Soundless voices. In the intervals between the successive notes visions are traveling....

Waiting. Waiting. Her almond eyes waiting for a red carp⁵ to come in which a reassuring letter is hidden. Emerald waters mirroring her face. Labyrinthine corridors winding her lovesickness. The moon lighting up her secret dreams....

In the afterglow who is pondering over the ancient tombs, his hair streaming in the west wind? Visitors' laughter is dying away. He stands alone, confronted by the setting sun, round, pale, silent, witness of changes of dynasties, of wars, of floods, of vanished cultures....

Before me, unseen are the ancients; behind me, unseen those to come. Thinking of this infinite universe, alone, in my sorrow, I shed tears⁶....

5

The life of a swordsman is what I want, he thought.

Swordsman novels⁷ held a special appeal for him: not for their mysterious settings, nor for intricate plots, nor for gory fights; he found kindred souls in those lonely heroes.

Free of ambition for wealth, power or fame, they roved the world like a cloud, indifferent airs concealing a compassionate heart.

Defying the strong, protecting the weak, they lived a life of blood, shadow and liquor. Hounded by their enemies. Duels. Plots. Escapes. Executing laws in a lawless society. Living in a narrow space between life and death, they valued faith over their lives.

⁴ A zither-like traditional Chinese instrument.

⁵ Reference to a Han (202BCE-220CE) ballad; here the red carp is a carp-shaped box.

⁶ "Upon Ascending the Parapet at Youzhou" by Tang poet Chen Zi-ang, translated by Bruce M. Wilson and Zhang Tingchen.

⁷ Swordsman novels have a long tradition in China, whose heroes are mostly geniuses at kungfu.

Few friends, but true friends. Rivers and lakes were forever their homes.

6

There was a very old tree in the primary school he attended; a ghost was said to be living in this tree. Fear, joy and suspense filled his heart every time he stood wondering at the inscrutable existence.

Darkness was settling. He sat by the tree, calling back to mind his exploration with his brother through a dark corridor the other day.

A long corridor it was, pitch dark except for the window at the far end faintly lighted by the moon. His brother kept trying to frighten him, making eerie sounds and telling creepy stories. He was frightened yet extracted a pleasure out of his fear: Perhaps, who could tell, he would not have been changed into another form when he finally gained the end of this magic passage?

Forebodingly the tree stirred: a form in a white robe appeared, weightless, noiseless, slowly approaching him. Trembling he reached out his hand to the form; a subtle touch acknowledged his greeting....

A dream? He opened his eyes and looked about in puzzlement. Was what he saw in dreams real, or what he saw in the real world only dreams?

7

Buddha: Pilgrims are gone. No incense is burning now.

Lotus: Can YOU feel lonely?

Buddha: Why can't I?

Lotus: You're the Buddha. No desire can ruffle you.

Phantom: How can you be so sure? Is it itself not a desire trying to quench all one's flames of desire?

Buddha: Friend, you're a man of insight.

Phantom: Do you have any faith?

Buddha: Don't forget I'm the founder of Buddhism.

Phantom: But how many advocates really believe in what they advocate?

Lotus: I don't understand.

Buddha: Because you're too holy. Friend, what about you?

Phantom: I used to believe in humanity.

Buddha: Then...

Phantom: I came to the same conclusion as you did: desire is the source of all suffering. But unfortunately, it's also the source of all happiness.

Buddha: That's why I'm unhappy.

Phantom: Now I believe in nothing, but I know one of my close friends worships beauty.

Buddha: Is he a poet?

Lotus: I'm eager to see him.

Phantom: But he can only see you in poems or dreams.

Lotus: Why?

Phantom: Once you enter the secular world, you'll die from thirst.

Buddha: And once the poet wakes up from his dreams, he'll fall into confusion.

Chapter Two: Moon

1

A nightmare. He looked about: everything was still, silvery moonlight flowing through the window onto his face, licking the remnants of the frightening dream.

Recently some strange forms had driven out of his dreams peaceful visions cherished by him; sometimes he would dream that he was sitting in a grave, time coldly creeping down his arm.

He was only fourteen. He could not understand where all these things had come from; he perceived that there was something waking in his soul.

Those ancient poems began to recede to the background though he knew that they had melted into his blood and molded his mentality, and he began to hear another echo in him to pessimistic modern poems.

2

Streets. Sentimental songs. Preset moods. Infectious groans. Modern times. No more new feelings. Withered hearts. Hurrying shades. Destinations unknown. On the Earth. Tiny planet. A blue pear. Rivers. Mountains. Learn by heart their names. Exams near. Disasters Everyday. Miracles never. Dull politics class. Drew a caricature of the teacher on the book cover. Sniggered. Distorted truth. Truths of the past can never be found in history books. Vanished ancient China. Skull relics. Floods. The Book of Poetry. Warring states. The Great Wall. The Silk Road. The Grand Canal. Porcelain. Invasions. Opium. Wars. Famines. Woe-stricken nation. Dreams of utopias.

A group of students passed by. Obscene words. Naughty jokes. Girls chasing boys. Pretended coyness. Puberty. Wet dreams. Bombarded by bathing-suit magazines. By bed-centered

novels. By sensually tantalizing movies. Aroma of roast yams. Childhood. Simple life. Primary school. The old tree. The dark corridor. Changes. Leaves falling. Already autumn. Sick autumn. My sick Muse. Symbolists. Bridge between two worlds. *Déjà vu*.

Fate. Man proposes. God disposes. Poor friend. Incurable disease. A languishing face. Comforting words. Future who knows. A whirling wheel. Amoral wheel. No one could control. The moon. A cold stone. The goddess⁸. Stole the magic medicine. Abandoned her husband. Abandoned the earth. For an eternal life. Eternal solitude.

A dark corner. A basket. A deserted baby girl. Lingering tears. Yearning eyes. A little girl stopped. Doll in arms. Let me be your mother. Her mother dragged her away. People watching. Speculations. Condemnations. Sighs. Mind your own business. Poor little thing. I have to be another hypocrite. Good luck.

3

Many centuries went by.

On a half-deserted river a few yachts were aimlessly floating.

I sat in the grass by the river, my sword reflecting moonlight, a chill closing in on me. I gazed at the sword reading my past. Fights. How many times. With this sword. Spectral faces paraded before my eyes, sorrowful, petrified, malicious, grateful....Let the sad be sad. Let the happy be happy. The world stares at all that is going on with its never-changing indifference.

How many years have I wandered, alone? How many acquaintances of mine have died? And how many disappeared? At least I am companionless at this moment. Would that there were a companion. Would that there were a beautiful view. I stood up, starting to drift weightlessly in my fantasies.

Deserted was the river, but, when I strained my ears, some weak sound of a tune reached me, distant, enchanting.

I did not know how long I had been drifting before I stopped. I found myself in a mountain. No soul was seen, but the tune sounded clearer. While I was hesitating, a female figure came to

⁸ Reference to Chang E, a figure in Chinese mythology.

me, her black dress dancing in the night wind.

You've come at last. I've come at last? I could not understand, but my heart was melted away, melted by her ineffable beauty.

Why can't I hear the tune now? Tune? That's your illusion.

Illusion? Wasn't she, who was before my very eyes, more like an illusion?

I live in a cave of this mountain. Every night I've been waiting here for you. Would you like to stay a while in my dwelling place?

I did not know how to reply, but I had already held her soft hand, years of wanderings fading away like a dream.

Slowly the moon moved above us. Stealthily dewdrops slid down the pathside blossoms. We were walking along a mystic passage to another world. No more sighs, no more yearnings, we were going to a feast that had been prepared for us for more than a thousand years.

This is my home. Pushing the shrubs aside, we came to a stone gate, on which was carved: The Boundary. I smiled; she nodded tacitly as a reply.

Entering through the gate, following a narrow path, we were met by a spacious stone room, a tiny waterfall adding a perfecting touch to its open corner.

She lighted up seven candles; instantly the room was flooded with their warm golden light.

She looked at me enigmatically for a long time.

Suddenly a dark mist slid down: her flawless body was revealed before me.

I'm the *koto*. Please play.

Again I heard the mystic tune resounding in the room, filling my eyes, my blood, my soul....Prehistoric ages.

You're a swordsman?

But I hate the sword.

Because it's a tool for killing?

Not only that, but it's insufficient. Can you imagine how you will feel when you're dying to save those innocent people but your sword fails you?

I can....I'm of noble origin. I used to live in the capital. My father was a courtier. His outspokenness incurred the emperor's wrath. My whole family were ordered to commit suicide and only

I escaped the disaster. Then I took refuge here. How is the situation outside?

War. Fire. Blood.

She fell in silence.

A chill penetrated the stone walls and closed in on us. Her body was as cold as ice.

Deep into the night she woke up embraced me and wept her tears moistened my face I asked her what the matter was she said nothing only that she wanted me to stay I kissed her hair saying that I would accompany her for forty-nine days she smiled a sad smile and took me to the fragrant waterfall....

Another face flickered before me. Embedded in the sword's hilt was the pearl she had given me. She was waiting for me in the hometown. She needed me.

For forty-eight days we lived a carefree life exploring every secret recess of the mountain. For the first time I had found that there could be such a life outside the strife of the world.

On the parting night she was silent.

Gaining the bank of the river, I saw her eyes overflowing with tears, but I did not know what to say.

We stood there hand in hand, a lonely star twinkling in the dark blue sky.

My boat was coming; coming from no one knew where. The strange and familiar tune recurred, circling above the river, above our eyes, fusing into my marrow...

I went on board, submitting my fate to the ceaseless river.

The shadows of the riverside mountains approaching, turning, receding, I reclined upon the railings, water faintly murmuring in the wake of the boat.

A white form appeared, blowing in the cold night air. It whispered: Pearl, my pearl....Ominous. Tragic presentiments began to invade my heart.

Now my hometown came into sight. It's not my hometown! Burnt houses. Broken weapons. Debris. Embers. Destroyed. Deserted. A fox was pawing the ground. Ravens were singing a dirge. I knew I could no longer find her. I dug a grave for her and buried the pearl in it.

The cave. The sword. The world. Returning to the river bank, I resumed the life of blood and wounds.

The third time I saw peaches in bloom I knew it was time for me to go back to her.

A band of beggars stopped me by the river. Skeletons. Maybe once princes and nobles. They reached out their bony hands.

All at once I saw her. Yes, it must be her. There, through the two unmistakable eyes her long languishing soul, suddenly rekindled, shone brilliantly, effecting a halo that consecrated the fragile frame in beggar's clothes.

I rushed to her, took her hand and flew to our holy land.

So even this fairy land couldn't escape the war?

No. Even trees and flowers fell victims to it.

Then you disguised yourself and wandered about?

Waiting or looking for you.

Saying no more I built a fire. Like a bird the mystic tune flew back to us, hiding us under its wings....

The Boundary.

For seven years we lived together.

One day, when wiping the dusty sword I suddenly heard many people weeping: the sound did not come from outside, but from inside of me. I was startled, and then I understood.

I know what you're thinking about. You're a swordsman.

I'm sorry.

No, I've been so fortunate, so blissful to have lived with you through these years.

But now I have to go.

I wish I could go with you, but I detest that world. I can only see you off.

We sat by the river, watching the flickering of a fisherman's lamp in the distance.

The tune, she exclaimed.

The fateful tune, I calmly added.

A chill rose in my blood, permeated through my skin and merged into the air that enveloped the vast world.

In the next incarnation I will be a poet, writing poems for you all my life.

She smiled a sweet smile.

I kissed her and departed.

Care not those things profound
 Which we can never understand
 Or the deep, distant sound
 Made by the wind's cold hand
 There still hovers in this warm space
 A trace of subtle, sweet smell
 At your eyelashes angels gaze
 Listening to your flute tell
 Stories of a riverside place
 Where withered petals fell

What can I devote to you
 Silence, unfading love and more
 Changed by the years that away flew
 Over and over we used to explore
 Each other's puzzling heart
 And now, when we look outside
 We behold a worn-out cart
 Through the frosty road a man ride

He was writing poems for her, an image long hidden in the depths of his mind and now had taken shape.

A melancholy love. An imagined love.

He vaguely realized that he was only trying in vain to construct an airy kingdom compensating for the barrenness of reality.

Am I living now?

A fear seized him. All his connection with the world seemed to have been cut off; he was living in an absolute solitude: no kindred souls, no communication.

Can a soul's journey be measured?

Calendar: Jesus was born today 1989 years ago.

Poet: Merry Christmas, Jesus. Merry Christmas, Phantom. Merry Christmas, World.

Classmate: A card for you.

Poet: Thanks.

Card: Your poems are wonderful. They bring me a pleasant sadness and despair. I'm grateful.

Poet: Fancy that.

Streets: This is not Bethlehem.

Cross: Jesus, why are you in despair?

New-Born Baby: Wah—wah—wah—

God: Another.

Radio: The coup...

Coup: I came to Romania.

1989: I'm defeated by Politics.

Lao Tzu⁹: Why do you call on me?

Poet: I propose you to be Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Thomas More: Not of the United Nations, but of the United Utopias.

Dog: Wow—wow—wow—

Streets: Where are you going?

Poet: Home.

Christmas: Tonight you have no home.

Poet: How about tomorrow?

Christmas: I don't know.

Poet: But I do have a home.

God: Where?

Poet: In a stone. That's my genesis. I was granted forty-nine existences in human form before I return to my original state and this is the last.

God: Who granted you these existences?

Poet: Intuition.

Videotape: Quick—quick—quick—

Poet: Fire.

Zeus: I fear fire. I prefer flood.

God: I prefer fire.

ETs: So do we.

Poet: I'm tired of thinking.

Brain: I'm not.

⁹ The founder of Taoism, a pacifist.

31 Dec: Nice to have met you.

Poet: ...

Last Chime: Arrived!

Poet: Who's done for?

6

April is the cruelest month. When the incense was lighted he directed his eye to the river flowing at the foot of the mountain. Qing Ming¹⁰. Festival of restless ghosts. Of tears. Of rain. I asked where I could find a wineshop. The shepherd pointed to a distant...grave¹¹.

Only fifteen. Poor girl, poor friend. A paper crane on the weeds. That afternoon I was writing an ominous poem two hours before she died. Incurable disease. A classmate combing her hair. She smiling. Metamorphosis. A swollen waxen face. Can't believe it. Can't imagine Death approaching her meter by meter, decimeter by decimeter, centimeter by centimeter, millimeter by millimeter....Why can't the infinite divisibility of a length curb Death's swift steps? Can't imagine Death approaching her day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second....How can Death finally go through the last smallest part of a time which can never be the smallest and thrust open the thinnest film at the very end of life?

Dust. Life. Dust. Circle of life. Anything more? Can't forget the scene. I went to see her corpse. Her photo in a black frame staring at me. *Déjà vu*. A fateful flash. Predestined. The second time. Some part of my soul knew in advance she would die. Why hadn't I realized it before? But now a mystic door has been opened. I know everything around me is happening for the second time, but I can't forestall them. Fate's hand is upon me. Upon me. Upon me.

Where are you now? Already two months. Maybe you've left

¹⁰ A Chinese festival. On this day people visit graves commemorating their dead relatives and friends.

¹¹ Reference to a Tang poem by Du Mu. The last two lines are: Being asked where there was a wineshop, / The shepherd pointed to a distant village in apricot blossoms.

the grave. Fingerprints on the cold grave walls. Fingerprints. Don't ask about me. Squirrels are counting their collected pine seeds, I counting the graves on this mountain. Tonight I'll drink tea under grape vines. With the moon. With my shadow. I must go now. see you.

7

Moon,

Li Po died. Su Shih¹² died. Baudelaire died. Classicism died. Romanticism died. Symbolism died. Artemis and Chang E died the moment you were first stepped on by human feet. Postmodern times. Tonight isn't your festival¹³. No ritual is performed for you. Alone I invite you to my tea party. Alone.

Shadow,

My loyal friend. Noble friend. The only one on earth with whom I share a friendship unstained by earthly cares. Come and join me.

Me,

Worthless thing. Sit down. And drink. And dance. And...if you like.

¹² Li Po, a Tang (618-907 CE) poet; Su Shih a Song (960-1279 CE) poet. Both wrote many famous poems about the moon.

¹³ Reference to the Moon Festival celebrated by the Chinese on 15 August of the lunar year.

Chapter Three: Mist

1

On a
Humid afternoon
We were drinking
Some bitter tea; wet
And sad was the thunder
Emerald leaves, pale blossoms
Quivering, singing, outside the window
You said the room was like a rain-stricken
Cabin: the golden sun, the orange moon
Had both concealed themselves
Before the rising of our souls
Leaving us behind with
Sea-smelled decks, masts
And the haven shut off
By the raging
Ocean

Primeval humans' awe, ancient Greek fleets' glory, reflection of Rome
Rippling Gothic churches, the awakened Aegean, gunboats
Black slaves, opium, missionaries, submarines
Pearl Harbor, the pacific lit by A-bombs

My eyes sailing down your hair

Found no boat

2

She flew down from the seventh floor and came to him like a beautiful cloud. Noticing the mysterious disappearance of his pals, he realized immediately that their meeting was a trick. He could not flee; her eyes had enveloped him in a mist: surely he

had seen those eyes, so strangely familiar, so familiarly strange, drilling, drilling into his soul. Surely he had never seen those eyes in her before, who had been his classmate for more than two years. It must be a sign, he decided; he was fifteen now.

3

It was snowing. Soft flakes falling. Covering the branches. Covering the ground. Covering the umbrella she was holding. She walking alone. He following alone. A rainbow suddenly appeared. Bridging the horizon. A gate to the unknown. She turned back. Came in his direction. Passed him by. No trace of recognition on her face....He dreamed.

It was sodden! His collection of poems was soaked! She wept. Pressing the gift against her bosom. Rain was pouring. She looked through the window....She dreamed.

On a ragged path. He was riding on a horse. Saw a tavern. He tied the horse to a pole. Went in. Surprised. A few people were there. Dressed in Tang costume. Talking about secrets in the Tang court¹⁴. Seemed to be his own experiences. He left the place. Found the horse chewing its fodder. Tears in its eyes....He dreamed.

He came to her home. They shut themselves off in her room. Her mother knocked at the door. She did not answer. They intended to talk of poetry. She could not see his eyes clearly. As if there were a mist. He could not understand her words. As if there were a mist. She was irritated. About to drive him off. He said he would never come again. She swore she had never known him....She dreamed.

He was waiting for her. She did not show up. He went through a corridor. Found a lawn at the end. She was lying on the grass. He knelt down to her. Asked what was wrong. She said they had hurt her eyes....He dreamed.

4

¹⁴ The Tang Dynasty, especially its middle phase, was a period full of court plots and bloodshed.

Your dream was magic, these days I often feel slight pain in my left eye, as if it were soaked in salty water, she said, drawing back the velvet curtain. Outside the balcony he could only see a white mist.

Sometimes I believe there is an inexplicable connection between us; I love your poems, they are part of my life, but don't ask me to love you; if there had been a previous existence, I'd rather believe that we were sister and brother and that I promised then to take care of you in this life.

He regarded her face silently. Unsummoned, the fragments of some ancient poems emerged in his mind....If we were in ancient times, I would be a swordsman, I would rove the world with you, sharing the suspense, melancholy, pain and bliss of a vagrant life, loving the universe in our microcosmic sacred love....

What are you thinking of? She took his hand. Thinking of my family? No, it's only the wreckage of a family. Can you imagine what I was like before the age of nine? Gentle, timid, obedient, carefree.... When my parents suddenly broke up, what could I do to protect myself from loneliness, from the coldness of the family, from people's condescending pity? Life has irreversibly changed me. I'm not the perfect girl you see in your imagination.

Do you believe in fate? He asked.

Yes, review these love letters and you'll find predictions of the fate of your love in them; the predictions have expressed themselves in your own words without your knowledge.

No, I vaguely knew them. What you mentioned is not fate, fate is what determines that I'm unable to change what you called fate.

5

His name was Maple Leaf; hers, Reed Catkin.
When they first met in some autumn, he was dressed in white, and she in red.

His heart was like fire; hers, snow.
That was a long time ago.
They had lived together for many years.
One day she said she wanted to see lotuses in the South.

He did not know if it was because there were Red lotuses
and White ones.

After all, lotuses were beautiful.

Transparent was the sky.

Transparent was the lake.

Not transparent were people.

Lotus leaves graceful, lotus blossoms holy.

He wanted to fly; she landed beside him¹⁵.

I saw an arrest warrant in town; you are wanted.

Tomorrow we'll have to leave for the capital city.

An arrest warrant was an ordinary document.

On it were written ordinary words.

It was decreed by an ordinary man.

She said, the emperor has dreamed an ordinary dream:

He dreamed a man resembling you attempted to kill him.

Therefore arresting you is an ordinary thing.

But why are there tears in your eyes, he asked.

Because you are not an ordinary person, she said.

The Palace was surrounded by such high walls:

A proof that the emperor was afraid to face his subjects.

The stone lions glared at him, grinding their teeth; he
replied with a smile.

Came the emperor. Courtiers kowtowed.

She drooped her eyes; he glanced about.

Why must you attempt to assassinate me?

Because you dreamed I attempted to assassinate you.

Why it was you that I dreamed attempted to assassinate me?

Because you didn't dream others attempted to assassinate
you.

No one dared laugh.

The courtiers' faces were frozen by allegiance.

What else do you intend to say?

¹⁵ There is an art in traditional Chinese kungfu; people who are skilled at it are said to be able to jump up and down the height of several storeys without the aid of any device.

I intend not to say, but to act.
He was like a flying dragon; the emperor, an escaping dog.
The emperor. Son of Heaven¹⁶, son of the Dog of Heaven.
Liable to devour the sun and the moon¹⁷.
He laughed.

Like a sword his laughter thrust at the sky.
In one eye's flicker, a sword was placed on his neck:
Her eyes were like endless tunnels.
Your Majesty, please give your order.
Light a fire. He was in the fire.
So red, red.
A clear *koto* tune rose in the northwest.
He caught a last glimpse of her:
White dress, black hair, seven strings.

Snow fell in June¹⁸.
She buried herself in snow.
It's not the emperor's fault; it's our names' fault:
Maple leaves red, reed catkins white, autumn forlorn.

6

31 March 1991 Saturday

Rainy-Sunny-Cloudy

We had a picnic today. On the school bus I sat beside her. It was raining when we set off. Quietly the bus moved in a light mist. Quietly winds felt her hair. Vaguely I could see some swallows flitting to and fro, busy with their work of making nests. Warm, peaceful, natural. I took her hand, reading the lines on her palm, but failed to decipher any information about her fate. She faintly smiled, like a sphinx. After reaching the river bank, we took

¹⁶ Ancient Chinese emperors called themselves Son of Heaven.

¹⁷ In Chinese legend eclipses occur when the Dog of Heaven devours the sun or the moon.

¹⁸ Snow falling in June is believed by the Chinese to be an indication that some just person has been wronged.

shelter under a tree. Rain was a comforting cloak, gently hiding us, from time, from space.

The rain ceased. The sun looked down to us. She ran to the river and stopped, musing. Then she bared her feet, stepping into the water. There, in the dazzling sunshine, she resembled an illusion, beautiful, distant, intangible.

On our journey back she sat with her boyfriend. I don't know if she loves him. Once she said she doesn't, either. She said he always keeps her company when she is in a low mood. Getting off the bus I walked towards home. I kept looking back. Then she appeared, alone. At the gate to the building she lives in, she fingered my face and said good-bye. Looking up to her balcony on the seventh floor, I murmured in mind: today is special; tomorrow will not be.

7

His love withered. He even doubted if it could be called love. Bitterly he concluded: What you loved was not a human being, but the embodiment of a poetic image invented by yourself which you tried to impose on an innocent girl, whom you intended to be, in Plato's terminology, the reflection of some Form in the other world; you are guilty of being unable to love anyone in the true sense and you are therefore doomed to be imprisoned in your own soul for ever. An astounding conviction. He shuddered. He struggled. He racked his brain to produce poems, but no inspiration flashed in him now. Night after night he looked through his old poems. He knew there was genius in these unorthodox, restrained, subtle creations though they could please neither conventional nor avant-garde critics; he dared not think that his gift should have been exhausted at so early an age of sixteen. I'm dying for a rain, a boundless rain, he exclaimed.

Chapter Four: Rain

1

Phantom: Who made the universe?

Jews and Christians: Jehovah.

Muslims: Allah.

Science: Time.

Lao Tzu: There is a self-contained entity, which was already there before the creation of the world. Soundless and inexhaustible, cyclic and ceaseless, it can be regarded as the origin of the universe. I do not know its name and roughly designate it as Tao or as Boundlessness. It is boundless and moving on end, moving on end and extending to infinity, extending to infinity and returning to its starting point. Tao produced the two forces, Yin and Yang; Yin and Yang produced the elements; the elements produced every object in the world. Against Yin and opposite Yang, every object is harmonized by the reciprocal agency of the two forces¹⁹.

(Slowly the heavenly bodies move in the sky. In the blue starlight an arrangement of signs²⁰ is taking shape.)

Swordsman: Li, Kun, Dui, Qian, Kan, Gen, Zhen, Xun²¹: Fire, Earth, Lake, Sky, Water, Mountain, Thunder, Wind. Yin-Yang Fish²²,

¹⁹ translated from the 25th and 42th chapters of *Tao Te Ching*.

²⁰ This arrangement is called the Diagram of Eight Trigrams (a trigram is a sign used in fortune telling in ancient China). See the classical Chinese work *I Ching*.

²¹ These are the names of the eight trigrams; the next eight words are what these signs respectively stand for.

²² Name given to a Taoist diagram, in which the two colors of black and white symbolize the two forces of Yin and Yang.

mutually opposing, mutually containing. East, South, West, North. Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. A world of symbols: motion, order, harmony.

Phantom: Is it not a wonderful imitation of the universe, which is also in motion, order and harmony?

Swordsman: Humble moons, proud suns, vagrant comets, tragic meteors: what role do we play in this infinity?

Phantom: Meaningful moonshine. The moon no longer shines as the magic mirror in history that drove so many artists into creative madness.

(They land on the barren surface of the moon.)

Swordsman: A huge boring stone.

Phantom: A corpseless graveyard.

Swordsman: But look at that tiny blue grain of dust suspending there in ageless space, so lovely, so peaceful. How can we cope with the facts that on this tiny planet war and strife and trickery have woven a net as boundless as the universe itself and that those microbes who call themselves humans have time and again destroyed their own civilizations on which they had labored for centuries?

Phantom: Compared with the dazzling abiding suns, what is a sovereign's glory and what is an empire's grandeur? Even the suns themselves are trivial in the dimensions of the universe: their illumination is like that of a firefly. Those who immerse their minds in meditations on the universe will only find how meaningless, how absurd people are in their pursuits of what they obstinately believe to be indispensable, blissful even sacred.

Swordsman: But few people would or could philosophize on things so distant from their everyday concerns and we have done this only because we have been temporarily outside of the net. I do find consecration in my life of endless fighting though in the meantime I am well aware of its absurdity.

Phantom: You are fortunate not being a Hamlet.

(They return to the Earth and stand on the stage of a deserted theater. A flash of lightning illuminates their faces.)

Swordsman: It's going to rain.

Phantom: Everything is dark when Lightning closes her eyes.

Swordsman: Everything is still when Thunder holds his breath.

Phantom: Listen.

Swordsman: It begins to rain.

(Poet's face appears in another flash of lightning.)

Poet: Illusory mosses overgrow a human-faced lion-bodied statue in a boundless rain the vast desert extends aimlessly after the feelers of the soul in a prairie where flocks of sheep have fallen asleep the secret whisper of the grasses and raindrops drifts like a mist to the depths of the universe.

Phantom: Before the coming of the flood.

Poet: Rain falls on Xuan Yuan's²³ tomb rain falls on the amphitheaters of ancient Rome rain falls on the sleepless Mediterranean rain falls on the ruins of the Old Summer Palace²⁴ a ruthless net enfolding mountains and plains enfolding cities and villages enfolding caressing lovers and wandering waifs enfolding grand mansions and forlorn huts enfolding the luxuriant hair of youth enfolding the deep furrows of old age enfolding ever tortured but never succumbing ideals....

Swordsman: Will the world be drowned?

Poet: In a flood of blood.

Phantom: If not, it will be devastated by fire. That's the law of the universe.

Poet: So human beings have only been trying to build castles in the air.

Phantom: When the day comes, what can be left except ruins?

Swordsman: Maybe our souls?

Poet: But we are to become a stone when this life ends. Do you think a stone has a soul?

Phantom: Maybe. But why do you so firmly believe this is our last

²³ Xuan Yuan, also called Huang Di (Yellow Emperor), is regarded as the ancestor of the Chinese people.

²⁴ Also called Yuan Ming Palace, famous for its perfect combination of Eastern and western architectural styles, was burnt down by the Anglo-French troops in 1860.

incarnation?
Poet: It's fate.

2

Phantom: Is there a personal god who controls fate?
Poet: No. It is an amoral wheel. (Aside) She died at fifteen.
Incurable disease.
Phantom: Be more accurate.
Poet: Fate is accurate. Anyone being aimed at cannot escape.
Fate is the hidden dominant law of the universe that produces
and controls observationally random but mechanistically
purposeful combinations of possibilities through the agency of
other natural or social laws. Have you read *Tess of the
D'urbervilles*?
Phantom: My favorite book.
Poet: Then you will see my point when you rehearse the plot of
the book and think about this poem I'm going to recite.

1

You have two suitors
Hardy and Fate

2

Come they
From the hazed horizon
To see
The cold sunshine
On your face

3

A lonely halo
Amid the maze of stones
Your eyelashes
Are the last fence
Of freshness

4

You refuse Hardy

And take Fate's hand
Knowing only he
Can bring you home

5
Hardy dare not
Brave Fate
So he contrives
Two scapegoats

6
In the mirror
The black flag
That rises for you
Is white

Phantom: I agree with you on your conception of fate, but I'd like to simplify your definition by describing fate as the programmer.

(He lights a candle, produces a piece of paper out of his pocket and shows it to Poet.)

Poet: A program by fate.

Name: Magic Stone Birth Date: 21/06/1975 CE

0 ORIGIN=4: CHARACTER=7: INTELLIGENCE=1: ...=...

.....

100 IF...THEN DIES
200 ONE OF HIS FRIENDS DIES

.....

300 IF X=2 THEN 1200

.....

400 FOR k=1 TO 20
401 CONTRIBUTION TO A LITERARY MAGZINE REJECTED
402 NEXT K

.....

1200 WINS FIRST PRIZE IN A POETRY COMPETITION

.....

1405 WRITES A POEM ABOUT TESS

.....
2064 END

Wonderful illustration. But how do you explain the fact that some people are able to foretell future events and prevent them from happening?

Phantom: First, they can only forestall personal disasters. Second, this does not contradict fate's dominance, for they only obtain with the help of their unusual ability information in those instructions beginning with "if" and manage to take the alternatives which are also prescribed by the fate's program.

Poet: So it is also by the design of some program that we three have gathered in this one person.

Phantom: Swordsman, what were you doing while we were talking about fate? Brooding over an overwhelming question?

Swordsman: Death.

3

Phantom: Do you fear death?

Swordsman: I don't fear my own death although it's hellish torment to see others die, either my friends or enemies.

Phantom: I know that you once thought of suicide, Poet.

Poet: The fear of the soul's annihilation stopped me.

Swordsman: When you are besieged with swords and arrows, what do you care about? Death and life are just two neighboring doors; which door you should enter is the business of fate.

Poet: What is death? Does it simply mean departing from this world and never returning? Or irreversible separation of the soul from the body? Or complete destruction of both?

Swordsman: Fan Zhen²⁵ argued that the body is like a sword and the soul, its sharpness; since the sharpness disappears when the sword no longer exists, the soul similarly cannot live independently of the body.

Poet: Socrates would explain it this way: Before it combined

²⁵ An anti-Buddhist thinker in the Southern dynasty (420-589 CE).

with the sword, the sharpness was living in the world of Sharpness; when the sword ceases to exist, the sharpness does not disappear but returns to its original world.

Phantom: Do you really believe in the existence of the soul and reincarnation?

Poet: We are willing to.

Phantom: But what is the soul? I imagine the soul is not incorporeal and it is the material container of a spiritual DNA.

Poet: A spiritual DNA?

Phantom: Yes, the genetic DNA, together with the environment, decides a person's physical characteristics and some of the mental ones, but his or her essential mental qualities are determined by the spiritual DNA.

Swordsman: What's contained in this spiritual DNA?

Phantom: A fate's program and information about the previous incarnations of the soul which is presently combined with this person.

Poet: This explains why some people's ideas and behavior seem to have no source in their experience and be influenced by some mystic power.

Swordsman: So birth signifies the entrance of the spiritual DNA into a specific body.

Poet: But where can the soul, the container of the spiritual DNA, stay after separating from one body and before entering another?

Phantom: Not in this three-dimensional space we live in. Where have the words you have just said gone?

Poet: I don't understand.

Phantom: Do you think they have disappeared? I'd rather believe that they have passed into another space which we cannot yet comprehend. Everything happening in this space is immediately recorded in that space and it is also the "tourist resort" for souls that are on their holiday. But don't confuse my concept of that space with philosophers' vision of the Other World. Theirs is a spiritual world, while mine is physical though it has not yet been proven by physicists.

Swordsman: Your idea, once accepted, would put the world into a mess.

Phantom: Why?

Swordsman: First, if the conception of reincarnation were true, what would revenges, murders, wars be? They would be not only absurd but also funny, just like children's games: I kill you in this incarnation and you may kill me in the next if you like.

Poet: Second, the last restraint in people's minds, death, would be removed. They would not consider murder a crime since the victim would soon return to life in another person; they would not be afraid to be executed for it would simply mean the start of a new life.

Swordsman: Third, they would no longer need to account for their evil-doings since everything was prescribed by their spiritual DNA.

Phantom: What a dreadful crime I've committed! But do you have so little faith in humanity?

4

(They light six more candles, go down the stage and sit in three front seats. On the stage a savage is bound fast to a tree, surrounded by his tribesmen.)

Poet: I can't understand their sign language or their utterances.

Phantom: I'll translate for you.

Tribesmen: We have to kill you.

Mencius²⁶: (Rushes onto the stage) Do you hate him?

Tribesmen: No.

Mencius: Why must you kill him?

Tribesmen: He broke the rule.

Mencius: What rule?

Tribesmen: He ought to have shared his game among us all.

Mencius: Why wouldn't you do so?

Savage: You know the reason.

Mencius: I suggest that you spare him: he was only momentarily deluded by a desire of possession. After all, everyone is innately good.

Tribesmen: You rogue! Everyone is innately evil. We all know that

²⁶ The second greatest Confucian thinker (372-289 BCE).

The only difference between him and us is that he is idealistic while we are realistic.

Poet: So their executing him is not based on a moral judgment but is a case of interest since the expansion of an individual's desire threatens the preservation of the whole tribe.

Phantom: Do you believe in the notion of the original sin?

Poet: No.

Phantom: Do you believe that human nature is evil?

Poet: Partly.

(Exeunt the savage, tribesmen and Mencius. A man enters, followed by a group of reporters and Hsün Tzu²⁷.)

Reporter A: So you've saved the girl from being drowned and she is remarkably beautiful—is she a mere stranger to you?

Man: Yes.

Reporter B: Then why did you save her?

Hsün Tzu: Is your heroic deed not against your nature? Is it not a result of culture and education? Did you do it not in hope that you would be praised by the public?

Man: Blasphemy! I'm a human being. I only followed my instinct.

Phantom: Surely the man doesn't believe human nature is evil.

Poet: Do you remember Kurt's pronouncement in *Heart of Darkness*?

Phantom: The horror! The horror!

Poet: It seems to me that Conrad finds evil in the depths of every soul and that he regards human virtue as a mask of restraint. But his cryptic depiction of Kurtz's angelic fiancée perhaps belies his belief.

Swordsman: The sword is cold; humanity, warm.

Poet: Is that your faith?

Swordsman: Presumably.

(Exeunt the man, reporters and Hsün Tzu.)

²⁷ A Confucian thinker (ca. 312-230 BCE).

Phantom: What's your greatest concern?

Swordsman: Justice.

Poet: In your opinion, is there a thing called Absolute Justice?

Swordsman: I'll try to defend it.

Poet: What's the essential quality of Absolute Justice?

Swordsman: Let's say being morally right.

Phantom: By the word "morally", do you mean "in accordance with the ethics of the society you live in"?

Swordsman: Yes.

Phantom: Which ethic do you refer to?

Swordsman: I don't understand.

Phantom: There are different classes and groups in a society and surely their ethical systems are not the same.

Swordsman: I won't follow any of them.

Phantom: Why?

Swordsman: Prejudices and distortions are always found in the ethic of a single class or group.

Phantom: So you will follow an abstract or universal ethic?

Swordsman: Yes.

Phantom: Is your ethic not tainted by any prejudices resulting from the limitations of your class, nation and time?

Swordsman: No.

Phantom: Can you give an instance of absolute justice or injustice according to your ethic?

Swordsman: Murdering an innocent person is absolutely unjust.

Phantom: Let's first ignore the vagueness of your definition. Why are you so confident that there is no prejudice in this statement?

Swordsman: Such a crime is forbidden by the law of Nature.

Phantom: The fact is quite the reverse. Animals' struggle for survival manifests the cruelty of Nature.

Swordsman: It is forbidden by Providence.

Phantom: If God is invented by human beings, this announcement is idle; if there is God, without asking his assent in advance you are being presumptuous. Moreover, what's the definition of "murder"? What's the definition of "innocent"?

Swordsman: I give up. I even can't convince myself. If Hamlet had

read Chinese history he would have dismissed his dilemma as a joke.

Poet: Can we define Justice as acting for the good of the whole human race?

Phantom: This definition is too wonderful to be of any use when in fact there are so many divisions between nations, races, classes and groups. Furthermore, do you mean a subjective motive or an objective effect by saying “acting for the good of the whole human race”?

Poet: Let’s say a subjective motive?

Phantom: Suppose a monarch who is full of enthusiasm to promote the welfare of his nation only plunges the nation into chaos owing to his impotence in administration. Will you say his action is just?

Poet: Hardly.

Phantom: Furthermore, who can judge exactly what other people’s purposes are?

Poet: How about saying justice is an objective effect?

Phantom: Then you are pushing us into deeper mire. Do you know how Wu Zhao²⁸ managed to ascend the throne?

Poet: One of the most complicated figures in Chinese history.

Phantom: She was daughter-in-law to the second Tang emperor but she nearly annihilated by force and trickery the third and fourth generations of the royal family, not to mention numerous courtiers executed or exiled together with their families.

Swordsman: I would say she is a usurper and tyrant.

Phantom: From the standpoint of an abstract justice it seems so.

But let’s consider some facts. First, the third emperor, her husband, was a typically impotent monarch: hesitant, cowardly, childish though kindness might not be denied him. Second, almost all the officials were against her only because she was a woman and it was forbidden by tradition to let a woman be the ruler. Third, during her reign the whole country was prosperous and stable despite fierce strife within the court.

Swordsman: Can you say that her actions are just?

²⁸ The only empress in Chinese history. She was the actual ruler during her husband’s and her two sons’ reigns (660-690CE) and crowned herself empress and changed the name of the empire from Tang to Zhou in 690.

Phantom: Hardly. At least her contemporaries did not think so: after ruling as an empress for fifteen years she was forced to abdicate in a coup without anyone standing on her side.

Swordsman: What's your opinion on this issue then?

Phantom: There does not exist such a thing called justice, and justice is only an invention; however, we human beings need this invention to maintain a state of relative order.

Poet: How disappointing a conclusion!

6

Poet: Stendhal dedicated his *Le Rouge et le Noir* to "the happy few." What is happiness? Can human beings be happy?

Phantom: Buddha says living is suffering.

Swordsman: Then what is happiness?

Poet: Let's avoid questions that lead to definitions. What about considering how we can be happy?

Phantom: By meditating. I call it spiritual travels.

Poet: By creating beauty.

Swordsman: By drinking with a close friend on a spring afternoon, by listening to your beloved playing the *koto*, by feeling the soft tantalizing water in a river, by seeing the grateful tears on the face of the one you have saved.

Poet: How about other people? What will make them happy?

Swordsman: Power? History says no.

Poet: Wealth? I don't know. It's nothing to me as long as I'm able to keep my head above water.

Phantom: Fame? It's interesting that few famous people care very much about fame while those who angle for it seldom succeed.

Swordsman: Let me remind you of a fact: we live in a human society on a tiny planet.

Phantom: What does that mean?

Swordsman: Not only are we threatened by floods, droughts, avalanches, landslides, typhoons, storms, earthquakes, devastating fragments from outer space, but we are also trapped in a net of war, strife, trickery, environmental pollution, energy crisis, food shortage, population explosion....

Poet: A bleak picture you've painted for us. I see your point. In this global village, every individual's happiness is closely

associated with the fate of the whole human race and the planet.
Phantom: But....

7

(Swordsman, Poet, Phantom disappear. The seven candles go out.
He stands alone on the stage. Rain is still falling outside.)

Two years have gone by since my two wings—poetry and love—were broken and I abandoned myself to endless thinking. What is an ideal society like? Has human society really made much progress since our ancestry moved out of their caves? Is a modern citizen happier than a savage tribesman? Plato's Republic is too rigid to be possible, too simple to meet humans' ever-expanding desires. Philosopher-king: when a philosopher has ascended the throne he ceases to be a philosopher. Tao Yuanming's ideal village²⁹ is a literary dream. Confucians' perfect society is one where everyone happily accepts the station assigned them: The inferior (the subject, the son, the wife) willingly being inferior, never challenging the rule of the superior; the superior (the emperor, the father, the husband) considerably being superior, rewarding the inferior for their loyalty: an aesthetic structure founded on a deluded hypothesis of humanity. If you are tired of verbal warfare in the United Nations, of nuclear weapons, of rock n' roll you can visit a Taoist Utopia. There may be a monarch but no one realizes that and even the monarch himself is oblivious of his royal status. No one will argue with, let alone fight you. There is no contest or competition of any kind, no music, no literature, no art, because they are believed to lead our simple nature astray. Will you be satisfied? A society deprived of vitality. Democracy then. You have to doubt the efficacy of democracy when you cool down from the excitement at seeing people of different origins, races, nationalities, classes, religions, ages, sexes, coming to vote. Is there not an invisible force or forces swaying or fighting to sway the seemingly free choice? The essential difference between modern democracy and traditional

²⁹ A poet in the Jin Dynasty (265-420 CE). In one of his famous poems together with its prose introduction he creates a secluded village where people live an idyllic life.

aristocracy is that wealth has replaced lineage as the dominant factor. Communism then? Which one? Communism in practice or communism as an ideal? Think about the ideal one. In that society there is no state or army or police....From each according to one's ability, to each according to one's need—wait a minute—Surely there must be an organization to do the work of allotment. To make the organization operate effectively one or more leaders will be needed. Suppose they are elected and power is accorded to them. Will they use their power properly? They say yes, because everyone in that society has an unerring conscience. Do you believe it? Ask them why. Education? Can education change everyone's nature? Because of the material plenty of that society? How do you measure plenty? Human nature makes it impossible to establish an ideal society. We can only live in a flawed society. It is no use being a daydreamer or a coward.

(A voice speaks.)

Within a system thinking about the system itself, can you arrive at a reliable conclusion? Based on unreliable facts (there is no reliable fact for what we perceive through the senses tends to be illusive and what is recorded by others tends to be affected by their intentional or unintentional distortions) and reasoning by unreliable logic (what is logically plausible is often against the fact), can you ever find the truth?

(He speaks.)

I hate you, skeptical, nihilistic voice!

(Rain speaks.)

Once you leave this deserted theater, try to forget these things if you are to live a happy life.

(He speaks.)

Tomorrow I'll leave for the capital city (it is not Chang-an, but Beijing) to begin my university life.

Chapter Five: Snow

1

The train pulled in. He stood on the platform: no fateful tune, a clamorous silence fell on him. A different life was awaiting him.

Half an hour later, the train was traveling through a long dark tunnel. The corridor in his childhood memory again emerged before him. Who could tell, when he finally gained the other end of the mystic passage, he would not have been changed into another person?

Adieu, Poetry. Adieu, Love. Adieu, Thinking. Tunnel. Tunnel. Tunnel. Rock. Rock. Rock. Mountain. Mountain. Mountain. The train was moving in a labyrinth. Icarus fell with his waxen wings melted. He had flown too high.

Northwards. Northwards. The train was running across the vast land of China. Where is that ancient country of lotuses, poems, silk, porcelain and *kotos*?

2

31 December 1993 Friday

Snowy

I got up and found it was only six. Through the window I noticed it was snowing. I opened the door and walked slowly towards the lavatory. Corpses of beer bottles were scattered on the floor of the passage. Last night we drank heavily and I was the only one who didn't get tipsy. My soul drifting in a state between sobriety and drunkenness, I heard my own voice strangely, clearly ringing in the dorm.

I listened attentively while passing water: so quiet. Besides this sound, only flapping snowflakes were gently whispering. At night this building is like a mental hospital, and a graveyard in the morning. They say the land this building rests on used to be a

graveyard. That's why I find those students so ghostly.

I returned to the dorm; they were still sleeping. I was startled last night when they confided their adolescent experiences after getting drunk. Everyone is a book, but often we only see the cover. It's so hard to communicate. Since the tentative conversations on the first day of our university life we have developed a dorm subculture of sex because it is the only topic that has never caused any unpleasant wrangling.

When we were having the English reading class, our eyes surveyed the houses, trees, flower-beds being covered by snow, paying no attention to the teacher. On hearing the bell they rushed out and began to fight with snowballs. I strolled on the campus. A young couple were making a snowbaby. Snow will melt. So will love. So will life.

I read in the afternoon. Two of my classmates were discussing some political issue. Boring. I suddenly remembered today is the last day of 1993. Four months since I left home. I think I've forgotten my past. It seems to be locked in a faraway castle.

My class held a party this evening.

They turned off the lights and lighted some candles. In so doing they believed they created an atmosphere.

A girl sat beside me, airing her sentimental sentiments about life, I was grateful to her.

Then they went to dance.

I didn't. I only dance for myself, awkwardly, far from the madding crowd.

I had my party three years ago, with the moon, with my shadow.

3

Act I

(In a simply furnished house. Swordsman sits by a stove. Outside of the door, which is open, snowflakes fall.)

Swordsman: The Kingdom of Zhao was conquered. The Kingdom

of Yan is going to be conquered³⁰. Does this concern me? Perhaps not. I'm not a noble, brave hero, nor am I a hermit who despises worldly cares. I'm just idle. An idler. I can drink and play with the sword, and pretend to be profound. That's why Jing Ke³¹ mistakenly looks on me as a friend. (A man appears in the doorway.) I've been expecting you.

Messenger: So you already know my mission.

Swordsman: Certainly. You want me to be a hero, because Jing Ke wants to be a hero. I won't join him.

Messenger: This is not his personal business; it concerns the fate of Yan.

Swordsman: Will it work?

Messenger: Maybe.

Swordsman: What if we do succeed in assassinating or kidnapping the King of Qin?

Messenger: Qin will sink into anarchy.

Swordsman: Then?

Messenger: We, the Kingdom of Qi, and the other four conquered kingdoms may take the chance and annihilate Qin.

Swordsman: Then there will be war again between the remaining six kingdoms. Will Yan win?

Messenger: Maybe.

Swordsman: So Yan might eventually unite the country. But will it make any difference to those farmers, shoemakers and idlers like me whether the country is united by Yan or Qin?

Messenger: We are Yanese.

Swordsman: You're a Yanese, but do you know to which kingdom your ancestors belonged before the founding of Yan? Is it not possible that their realm was destroyed by the very kingdom of Yan³²? Is it justifiable that you are so loyal to Yan?

³⁰ In the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) of China, there were seven major kingdoms vying for the rule of the whole country. By this time four of them had been conquered by the Kingdom Of Qin, and Qin was invading Yan.

³¹ A famous assassin in Chinese history. He was living in Yan at this time and was going to be sent by the prince to kill the king of Qin.

³² Owing to the chaotic politics, people were constantly moving from one kingdom to another in the Spring and Autumn Period (776-476 BCE). Many smaller kingdoms were annexed to the major ones.

Messenger: The prince befriends me.

Swordsman: A hero would die for his alter ego. All right. Please tell Jing Ke I'm going to join him though I'm not his friend. (The man departs.) Why must I give my life for a political murder? In fact, people don't care who the king is so long as he is not too greedy and cruel to make it impossible for them to live on. If I help Jing Ke and we do kill the king of Qin, this bloody tragedy, which has run on for centuries and is coming to an end, will be on wings again. Will that not make me a sinner who can never be redeemed?

Act II

(Several years later, Swordsman stands before Jing Ke's grave³³. A crescent moon hangs behind a withered willow tree.)

Swordsman: You keep haunting me. I don't know if you keep haunting the king of Qin.

Jing Ke: You're not a Yanese.

Swordsman: I'm not a Qinner, either.

Jing Ke: Why didn't you help me?

Swordsman: I did go there and see you off.

Jing Ke: I saw you sitting in a boat near the far bank of the river, pretending to be absorbed in fishing.

Swordsman: I heard you sigh, and I realized I had been wrong in thinking that you didn't understand me.

Jing Ke: I was all in white then. The prince and his men stood around me.

Swordsman: Then you sang, resolutely, forlornly, heroically, in the cold wind, Gao Jianli³⁴ beating his *zhu*, others weeping. I knew your sadness, a sadness of being unable to sustain a collapsing kingdom, but there was also sublimity in your singing, a sublimity of risking your life for a just cause—at least in your eyes it is so.

Jing Ke: I knew your sadness too, a sadness of being excluded

³³ The king of Qin narrowly escaped being assassinated and Jing Ke was killed in the act.

³⁴ Jing Ke's friend, skilled at playing *Zhu* (an ancient instrument made of bamboo).

from the world, from making history, and of not knowing how to act.

Swordsman: I was an idler then.

Jing Ke: You're still an idler.

Swordsman: No. I have a job now. I carry corpses.

Jing Ke: Human corpses?

Swordsman: I don't see many fisherman or farmers nowadays. They've been driven to do hard labor, to build the Great Wall, to defend the frontiers.

Jing Ke: Everyday I see passing my grave people with their ear, or nose, or foot, or hand, cut off.

Swordsman: The king, no, he calls himself emperor³⁵ now, says they are criminals.

Jing Ke: You happy subjects of the emperor.

Swordsman: Gao Jianli died.

Jing Ke: How?

Swordsman: He attempted to kill the one you hadn't killed and I should have killed.

Jing Ke: I understand now. You're setting off.

Swordsman: To assassinate him.

Jing Ke: A double revenge: on the emperor and on yourself.

Swordsman: Had I gone with you, would the outcome have been different? You are dead, anyhow. Perhaps your greatest contribution to history is your tragic death.

Act III

(A few years later. On an early spring day. Before the grave of Jing Ke.)

Jing Ke: Where have you been all these years? Have you become a heroic rebel by killing the emperor?

Swordsman: My sword came a little later than the sword of heaven.

Jing Ke: So he died?

³⁵ After unifying China in 221 BCE, the king of Qin declared himself the first emperor of China, i.e. Qing Shi Huang.

Swordsman: Of disease. Then I went to the capital, where I heard a story. A courtier had a deer led into the court and he called it a horse. Some clever officials understood his intention and followed suit. Those who insisted on calling it a deer were all executed or imprisoned.

Jing Ke: Then?

Swordsman: I spent the next few years in a dreamy state. When I woke up, I found the royal palace all ablaze³⁶.

Jing Ke: The dynasty fell.

Swordsman: The emperor, son to the one whom you failed to kill, was killed. Afterwards the two winners, Xian Yu and Liu Bang, began another war.

Jing Ke: You were still an onlooker?

Swordsman: I suspended my disbelief of the accursed principle of "Might is right." I took Liu's side.

Jing Ke: What's the outcome?

Swordsman: Xiang Yu took his life and the country fell into Liu's hands in the end³⁷. I didn't kneel down when Liu conferred a title on me. I didn't like him. I was driven here by him. No, I was dragged back by your ghost.

Jing Ke: What's the book you're holding?

Swordsman: *I Ching*, a book of fortune-telling. I'm wondering whether it should be regarded as auspicious or ominous if we had foreseen by fortune-telling that Qin was to unite the country eventually.

Jing Ke: Ask those corpses you carried.

(A man comes.)

Messenger: His majesty sent me to ask you just one question: will you fight the Huns³⁸?

³⁶ The Qin Dynasty only lasted fifteen years(221-206 BCE) and was overthrown in an uprising that swept the whole country.

³⁷ After a four-year war (205-202 BCE) Liu defeated Xiang and founded the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220CE).

³⁸ An ancient nomadic people, who fought the Chinese nation for centuries and migrated to Europe after being decisively defeated in the first century CE.

Swordsman: Yes.

(The grave shakes. A sound like a sudden breaking of a river's icebound surface rises from the grave.)

A Voice: Your soul has been murdered by Jing Ke's ghost.

4

Why not step out of this suffocating university and wander about the city? Yes, yes, why not? Your feet have agreed, how about your soul? White snow blankets the capital of early spring. People hurry through Chang-an Road³⁹. The cold face of the Tang Dynasty appears and disappears, the wind traveling through the bare branches of the pavement trees. A cloaked fisherman, sitting high above the city, writes in the air a classical and postmodern poem with his long rod. The same fisherman in that twenty-character poem⁴⁰. Birds have flown to somewhere, anywhere, nowhere. Trees have fallen asleep. Distantly, distantly, his footsteps are heard, faintly, faintly, like a mystic, subtle poem. Suddenly, suddenly, his figure is seen, vaguely, vaguely, like melted, vaporized history. Here is his boat, a lone gull between earth and sky. Here is the wind, visiting the tiny world in the cloak. Deep, deeply, he fishes, deeply, deep. A chill rises from the vast world surrounding him; his body is covered with warm, warm snow.

They don't see the fisherman: so many brilliant smiles on the faces of the stars in the shop windows. Smile producers you call them? Enter. Mirror. I see my indifferent face. If you're a goblin the magic mirror will show you in true colors. Why linger on? You're not a Narcissist? Toothpaste, perfume, cream...clothes: I prefer my birthday suit. Hate shopping. How free in the open air. Snow under feet. The first dream about her. Her umbrella covered with snow. In another city now. Don't recall the past. You destroyer and self-destroyer. For what do you study day and night

³⁹ A major road at the heart of Beijing.

⁴⁰ Referring to the poem "Snow in the River" by Tang poet Liu Zongyuan.

suicidally? Want to die young, like Byron, Shelley, Keats? Wordsworth usurped their longevity. Geniuses die young, but most of them who die young have no genius.

There is a restaurant. To revenge on poverty? Beer or wine? Where is fate? Choose for me. No dice. Have to decide but remember it's not your decision. It's fate's. Unruly letters. Reading through a dictionary is to suppress these letters' rebellion. Dishes. Pork shreds with green pepper. Spicy *tofu*. Eating is pleasant but how do you feel when you're stared at by an audience of empty bowls, plates and dishes? Empty. That's what a swordsman said when he could no longer find a rival in swordsmanship. But he had his voice. Where is my voice?

Full? Fool. Let's go. Video hall. You know some Adam and Eve are wrestling on the bed, naked, panting, groaning, sweating, their limbs entwined. Entwined history or reality? Instinct. Flooding instinct. Drying instinct. First we live by hand, then by head, then by... genitals?

Move on. I see the Forbidden City. Stone lions grinding their teeth. Don't intrude. The 2999 ignored girls⁴¹ are dreaming their dreamed dreams. Move on. I see the closed gate of a Buddhist temple. Don't intrude. The rats are chanting holy scriptures in the worship room. The monks are counting their income out of tourism.

Return. Return. See the sleepy gate guard's strange glance at you? Return. Return. Hear the kissing couple's complaining grunts at you? Return. Return. Feel the afterglow of your roommates' sex discussion? Climb on your bed. Close your eyes. Good night. Good night.

5

I hate, I hate. Tomorrow, life, blind alley. He gazed at the snow on the ground. Snow, ice, glaciers, North Pole, South Pole: melt, melt. Annihilate. Annihilate. I see my head on a platter. I see the coffin. I see the stone walls of the grave. Feel them. Feel them. I see the dark tunnel. I see them weeping. Oh. A black

⁴¹ Traditionally a Chinese emperor was entitled to have 3,000 female companions, including a wife, some concubines and a large number of maids.

flash of lightning has electrified me.

He was lying in bed, stiff and cold. He took up the mirror from under his pillow, peering into it. Ghost. Not me. Parents created me as if they were creating the first baby of the world. I hear the murmuring of my blood. I hear the beating of my heart. Floating, floating, in the warm ocean of the womb, of the universe.

Lonely. His hands traveled over his body. Lonely. You lonely too? Wild geese alighting from the air. Petals falling. Up. Down. Left. Right. Lotuses. Pink, white, golden, dream-like notes. Moonlight. Gentle hand. Transparent. World in the water. Mist. In a mist. Violet curtain. Rain. Rain falls. Wet. Lonely. Lonely.

His eye fell on the clock on the desk. Tick. Tick. Tick. Cross. Cross. Cross. Philosopher. Redeemer. Loser. Female stars smiling on the opposite wall. Chairs standing, meditative. Bare branches stirring in the wind.

Didn't disturb the universe.

6

Here we are! They ascended the steps and reclined against the Yuan⁴² battlements. My nineteenth birthday.

You said you would kill yourself.

This is my ghost.

Rogue!

We are now standing over the clamor of reality and under the silence of history.

Headlights of cars winked listlessly: sleepy eyes.

Forests of buildings stood sinisterly: no life.

Seven hundred years ago, Kublai Khan was riding towards these walls, bow in hand, his followers carrying blood-dripping game.

Did he see us, lethargic young men biting melon seeds and talking about heroes?

He searched about his body for pen and paper.

What came to your mind? They asked.

What did you forget? He answered.

⁴² The dynasty founded by the Mongols in China (1271-1368).

Creation! That's the word. That's the remedy. Can't live without a soul. Can't live without poetry. Can't. Can't. Run. Rush. Fly. Like a lunatic.

Creation! If you've lost magic, look for it in your pen. If you've turned into a dead stone, I'll make you a flint of imagination. Run. Rush. Fly. Like a lunatic.

Creation! It's not an age for poets. It's not an age for swordsmen. But I'll be a swordsman poet, a poet swordsman. My word, my sword! Run. Rush. Fly. Like a lunatic.

Chapter Six: Sword

1

prehistoric prehuman precreation prechaos silence listen
listen to the resounding voice that has broken forth from the soul
of your soul like the dazzling flame of an invisible galaxy darkness
pregnant darkness prophetic darkness groping in the masses of
migrating elements traversing the fields of electricity and
magnetism drifting on the wafts of particles and antiparticles you
search the universe for a vision you can see and hear and smell
and touch and taste a vision that is brilliant melodious fragrant
delicate delicious flash flash flash flee my sun flees⁴³ run rush fly
overtake it westwards westwards Chang-an behind Yangguan
Pass⁴⁴ behind snowy peaks behind vast deserts behind oh my
wings fail me I fall I fall thirsty I on a thirsty land drink up that river
drink up that lake thirst sears me look look ahead the sun closer
closer closer stretch out your hand oh thirst conquers me
tiredness kills me lost lost the vision lost I am in a furnace blazing
burning boiling put the words into the furnace put colors and
shapes into it put sounds odors put feelings thoughts put myths
legends put put I am making a sword a sword of language a
sword formless and multiform a sharp sword that will not kill a
blunt sword that will thrust through the hardest soul let there be
light there is light my sword reflects moonlight in this godless age
what can unbind us from presumptuous humiliation from
licentious captivity from prosperous poverty from knowledgeable
ignorance from lenient cruelty from civilized savagery I am in a

⁴³ Alluding to the Chinese myth of Kua Fu Chasing the Sun.

⁴⁴ The traditional boundary fortress between the Midland in the broad sense and the Western Area (a general name in ancient China for the neighboring minority regimes to the west).

furnace in a purgatory blazing burning boiling melt you withered
life melt you cowardly soul melt you meaningless existence to be
reborn to be reborn to be reborn I am making a sword of spirit.

2

Title: The Orphan's Death

Director: Poet

Characters: a boy of seven, a meteor, a guitar, a cat, a clock, God,
a dressing mirror, a balcony, stairs, a river

Meteor: (cuts a long wound in the early morning sky.)

Cat: (wearily) Meoh— (walks a circle around the boy and snuggles
back at his foot.)

Clock: (shows a sympathetic look behind the indifferent glass
face and raises his shortest hand to two. Dong. Dong.)

Guitar: (pulls at the boy's index finger.)

Boy: (Two big bright tears drop from his eyes.)

God: (turns His head away.)

Guitar: (touches the boy's cheek.)

Balcony: (looks into the distance veiled by darkness.)

Boy: (directs his eyes to the dressing mirror.)

Mirror: (televises a scene in a dance hall. His mother swirls to and
fro, her skirt swelling up like an umbrella. A man comes and holds
her in his arms, his back blackening the whole screen.)

Balcony: (whispers to a visiting wind.)

Boy: (His fingers slide down the waterless river of a string of the
guitar.)

Cat: Me...Oh!

Mirror: (focuses on the face of his father. He sits at a gambling
table, cigar in mouth, rising wreaths of smoke hiding his coldly
angry visage.)

Cat: Now—

Boy: (buries his head in his hands.)

Balcony: (gazes at him anxiously.)

Clock: Tick Tick Tick....

Guitar: (embraces him passionately.)

Boy: (stands up.)

Guitar: (screams.)

Boy: (throws the guitar.)
Guitar: (groans and dies.)
Cat: Me—
Clock: Quick Quick Quick.....
Balcony: (trembles.)
Boy: (rushes out.)
Stairs: Don' Don' Don' Don' Don' Don' Don'
Boy: (rushes through the streets.)
Streets: Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm
Boy: (comes to the bank of the river.)
River: Todo Todo Todo Todo Todo Todo Todo
Boy: (plunges into the river.)
River: Good Good Good Good Good Good Good

3

18 Nov.

Never have I imagined that Chinese poetry should have fallen into such a deplorable state that even poets themselves call the circle a pigsty. Over the decade we've seen so many schools, so many styles, but what has contemporary Chinese poetry achieved? We're still in the third world of world literature. What saddens me most is not that poets are being despised but that our national language is being profaned.

24 Nov.

The ideal poetic language I dream of is natural, fresh, transparent, fluent and connotative. I find it in some of the best ancient Chinese poems. Ancients knew better than we do about the nature of poetry, especially of lyric poetry. Modern poets tend to lose themselves in the excessive play of techniques and to ignore more essential aspects of poetry.

9 Dec.

Classical Chinese is a literary language. Modern Chinese is not; it is a language corrupted by politics. It must be refined if modern Chinese literature is to be great. I hope a Chinese Renaissance will achieve this.

23 Dec.

The haunting complex of history again stirs in me. I see the world's metropolis in the eighth century reconstructed in my vision. I see ships loaded with silk, gold, china and tea sailing to ports of Japan, India, Persia, Arabia and Byzantium. I see mortals with gods and goddesses dancing in the frescos in Dunhuang⁴⁵. But the rebellion in Middle Tang⁴⁶, the catastrophe! Cities looted, villages overrun, millions of people killed, the confident, free-thinking, creative national spirit blighted: the turning point of Chinese history.

4

1)

On dragging himself into the deserted temple, he fell down.
Blood gurgled out, spreading over this blood-soaked Midland⁴⁷.
Outside, rain billowing in a blackest darkness.
The rain darting, the wind cutting.
A dim lantern, however, bravely approaching.
He felt someone dressing his wounds.
But soon he was trapped in a dream fight.
Blood reddened the sky.
When he woke up, the sun was dazzling.
No one was there.

⁴⁵ A place in China's western province of Gansu, famous for the Buddhist scriptures and other cultural relics unearthed there.

⁴⁶ Referring to the An-Shi Rebellion (755-763 CE).

⁴⁷ An ancient name for the area including the Henan Province and parts of its neighboring provinces.

In front of the temple was an empty plot.
On the edge of the plot, a wood.
Above the wood, a blue sky.
Some birds were chirping.
Why were there no crows?
He would rather see those prophets in black.
For, he feared that the beauty of the world would tear him apart.

A host of people stopped him.
They were not his enemies.
They had no enemy, either; he was only the enemy of their
master's.
Even their master had no enemy, he was only the enemy of their
master's lust for power.
The sword had to be drawn; the sun had to set.
No significant difference between the two kinds of sadness.

When his sword drooped, he felt hungry.
The last drop of blood dripped into the dust, a blank in his mind.
A river, embraced by reeds, shining like a mirror.
In the mirror, a fishing boat floated up to him, with a white-haired
man in it, on whose forehead sunlight vibrated.
He wanted to cross the river.

But he couldn't. He couldn't flee.
An accidentally learned secret had burdened him, a lonely
vagrant swordsman, with the load of the whole country.
An Lushan⁴⁸ was about to revolt.
While the capital Chang-an was still a city moaning in wine
fragrance and bodily aroma.

2)

In a mist of rain.
He lightly landed like a bird, cold raindrops on his wings; coldness
came over him.

⁴⁸ A Tang general, who rebelled against the central government in 755 CE.

The royal palace was wreathed in mist and music.
But he perceived a kind of silence, similar to what a dying man feels.
No one would permit him to see Li Longji⁴⁹ unless he, a humble swordsman, gave himself the privilege.

Eyes. Where are your resolute eyes that once put the world under their powerful spell?
You've drunk Yang Yuhuan's⁵⁰ enchanting body to ease your thirst, unaware that it's poison.

Why are you so unfortunate to be the emperor?
You're helpless. Only those officials are around you whose souls are hidden in their boots and on whose faces the shadow of the Dynasty is floating.

He took out an arrow and drew his bow.
Attached to the tail of the arrow was his warning of the up-coming danger.
The pillars were frightened, but no one awoke to it.
Except for two desolate guards who were kept away from the merry feast.
They turned their heads to the noble party.
No expression on their faces.

It's all in vain.
He wandered in the streets of Chang-an.
Above noisy mansions strolling a pale moon.
When he stopped to listen, a weak but stinging weeping came from the distance, like a needle penetrating the merry night.

One tear coursed down his face.
A hero has but one tear, which out weighs his life.

⁴⁹ The name of the then emperor. During the first half of his reign, the Dynasty reached its zenith; in the late half, however, he neglected his royal duties.

⁵⁰ Yang Yuhuan was the emperor's most beloved concubine. Being so absorbed in his love for her, the emperor exempted himself from all state affairs, which led to administrative disorder and political corruption.

Later he departed.
Chang-an was no home for him.

3)

The trodden leaves and petals of peonies.
The overrun city of Luoyang⁵¹.
The eyes of a baby, eyes in which music of water and fragrance of
flowers flow.
He put the baby in his arms.

Debris. A late sun behind the debris. The thin face against the
sun.
The coming noises of horses he didn't hear.
The closing shadows of people he didn't see.
His mind was faraway.

The baby made a slight struggle:
An arrow lodged in his tiny breast.
Bloody afterglow fossilized in his ignorantly happy eyes in this
unhappy era.
When he looked up, a satisfied smile was rippling on someone's
face.

He was surrounded by the rebels.
He sustained the weight of the whole sky with a sword.
He was lost in blood rain.
At last, he stood up from the piles of bodies.

Moonlight was as clear as water.
Fireflies circling around him.
Like the dead baby's eyes.

4)

⁵¹ Soon after the beginning of the rebellion, the rebels seized Luoyang, second largest city of Tang and famous for peonies and its prosperous commerce, and An Lu-shan crowned himself as emperor of the Yan Empire.

It's a rainy morning.
The forest regarded him suspiciously:
What are you doing these days?
A voice fell with raindrops.

He suddenly trembled, like an autumnal leaf.
Another man appeared before him.

Who are you?
To vulgar people, I'm a Zenist⁵²; to a true Zenist, a vulgar person.
Who am I?
A lost swordsman.

He was left in the cold rain.
Without an umbrella.

5)

Li Longji. An Lushan.
Why must the road between them be paved with that many
bodies?
Sword. Blood.
Why are there always blood stains on the sword which can never
be removed?

For whom do those obedient subjects die who are ill-treated but
sustaining the shaking Empire?
For whom do those innocent soldiers die who have been forced to
fight for the rebels and had no alternative?
For whom am I fighting?
What am I doing?

He cut at his arm with the sword.
If the sword were a *koto*, then let my blood be its first tune of
Mountains and Rivers⁵³.

⁵² Zen is a form of Buddhism aiming for enlightenment through meditation, which originated in China and developed in Japan. Zenists are famous for their paradoxes.

6)

A half-ruined cabin. Four cold hands.
He didn't know her. She didn't know him.

In such troubled years,
Would it make any difference if they had known each other?

The night rain moistened wild trails and withered petals.
The four lips buried their past and melancholy of history.
Fires of war still gracefully burning far away.
Time aimlessly roaming outside of the window.

Love is not rational.
Nor is war. Nor is the world.

7)

He returned from the latest fight.
Only flames and ashes waiting for him.
She had disappeared, or died a phoenix.
Anyway, he became alone again.

The sword felt like a cold snake.
Yellow leaves raining.

He dug a grave for the sword.
Then he saw himself disappearing in the distance.

8)

Nothing seemed to have happened.
Luxurious wagons and precious horses shuttled still.
Wild feasts and orgies went on still.
Chang-an was never home for him.

⁵³ A famous classical Chinese tune.

Nothing seemed likely to happen:
The breakdown of the Empire;
The eunuchs' seizure of power;
The catastrophes after this catastrophe⁵⁴.

9)

His weapon was a *koto*.
He only knew one truth:
A *koto* can be turned into a sword.
A sword can never be turned into a *koto*.

Then he roved the country.
No one knew his whereabouts.
Who were killed by his *koto*?
Who were avenged by his *koto*?

Until one night when rain tracked him down as if tracking a specter.
The sky, ground, mountains, roofs, trees, his head, body, hands and feet all wet with rain.
His eyes, nose, mouth, ears, throat, breast, blood vessels and marrow all resounding with rain.
He ran ran ran tan ran ran ran ran ran ran
On dragging himself into the deserted temple, he fell down.

5

A last kite folded its wings and slowly touched down. He alone was left on the royal altar⁵⁵, in the twilight.

⁵⁴ After the catastrophe, military leaders whose power had expanded greatly in quelling the rebellion refused to remain under the control of the central government and became de facto kings. The court was paralyzed by strife within the royal family, between the emperors and eunuchs and between different groups of officials.

⁵⁵ Referring to the altar in the Temple of Heaven in Beijing where emperors formerly worshipped heaven for good harvest and good fortune of the nation.

White steps, green grass, russet walls, azure sky; time's lens floating behind the nomadic clouds.

The concentric circles silently surrounded and closed in on him; he stood within the central one, feeling he was held captive and could never step out of it again. Over the remote horizon, the sun gazed at him, red, round, motionless.

He recalled the goddess who, molding earth into human form, created man and who filled up breakages of the sky with five-colored stones⁵⁶. He recalled the human-faced snake-bodied god who taught people to draw the eight signs for fortune-telling⁵⁷. He recalled the defiant god who was decreed to be decapitated by the king of gods but continued to fight using the abdomen as head and the navel as eye⁵⁸.

How things were different then: a Chinese people in embryo, the Pre-Confucian Age.

In the falling darkness only the altar was illuminated by the moon, like a deserted stage.

The Zhou Dynasty⁵⁹: *I Ching*, primitive science in the form of witchcraft; Book of Poetry, fresh blossoms of the early Chinese heart. The Warring States Period: blood-sodden Golden Era of Chinese philosophy, a contemporary parallel to ancient Greece. The Qin Dynasty: burning books and killing Confucians. Han Dynasty: dominance of Confucianism established. The Three Kingdoms, the Jin Dynasty, the Northern and Southern Dynasties⁶⁰: another freethinking, chaotic era. The Song Dynasty⁶¹: Confucianism fossilized into a religion. The Yuan Dynasty: intellectuals degraded to the lowest class but beggars.

⁵⁶ Referring to Nü wa.

⁵⁷ Referring to Fu Hsi.

⁵⁸ Referring to Xing Tian.

⁵⁹ Here referring to the Western Zhou (1066-776 BCE).

⁶⁰ 220-589 CE.

⁶¹ 960-1289 CE.

The Ming Dynasty⁶²: tight control of intellectuals suspected of being dangerous. The Cultural Revolution⁶³: destroying all traditional culture.

Ruins. The Post-Confucian Age. Spiritual reconstruction. Chinese Renaissance.

Where are our NEW great thinkers? Where are our NEW artists and writers? Where is our NEW elegant Chinese language? Crickets answered him with their singing.

6

A people full of mystery. Can you understand your own nation? Can you find what essential qualities of her culture underlie all the changes this people have undergone?

Five thousand years ago, on the Eastern Asian continent, surrounded by lofty mountain ranges, in the Yellow River Valley, lived your ancestors who were beginning to develop a civilization that was to mold your mentality fifty centuries later.

Looking up, they saw the majestic sky in which the sun reigns over the day and the moon rules the night; looking down, they saw the humble earth; looking around the vast land, they formed a clear impression of the four directions. Spring, summer, autumn, winter, the four distinct seasons visited them in turn. Based on a belief of the correspondence between nature and humanity, they modeled their society upon the universe thus perceived. The sky is high, man resembles the sky, so man is superior; the earth is low, woman resembles the earth, so woman is inferior. There is a sun in the sky, so there ought to be a king on earth. Every star has its appointed position, so everyone ought to play their part. Never question the logic of this order. Obey it. Obey. When one dynasty falls, another dynasty ought to succeed: a nation without a king is like a sky without a sun. Cycles of dynasties.

The unique geographical environment, together with their modes of production, confined their scope to this land. Thus

⁶² 1368-1644 CE.

⁶³ 1966-1976.

the concept of the Central Kingdom was developed, which gradually led to a national arrogance. Until the Qing Empire was forcibly invaded, the nation had never questioned the belief that they were the most advanced people in the world. This national arrogance, when the rulers began to lose confidence, took the defensive form of an isolationist policy.

The conception of nature-humanity correspondence has had great impact on Chinese society. To our ancestors, there was nothing in nature so strange as to be impossible to explain. Even the mystery of the universe's genesis did not baffle them. They confidently, in their artistic language, stated that it was a sexual union of Yin and Yang that had created the world. Since to them there was no supernatural power they needed to fear, the existence of a religion in the true sense was not warranted. The Chinese are generally a religion-indifferent people. To balance this an elaborate ethic was provided.

The quasi-religion of Taoism and the imported religion of Buddhism seemed too profound for ordinary Chinese people and, distorted and misunderstood, formed the basis of an indifferent fatalism: the fate of a dynasty is the rulers' business; individuals' fate is Fate's business; to live means to exist biologically.

Another important feature of the Chinese thought is the reproduction cult, as shown in the Chinese explanation of the universe. This feature has affected the Chinese ethics and politics in two ways. Firstly, it, when combined with an indifference to religion, led to the conception of secular bliss: for a Chinese the happiest thing in the world is to have a harmonious, prosperous, big family; for them the use of their personal success is to add to the glory of the whole family. This conception further developed into a moral pragmatism. Secondly, it resulted in ancestral veneration. In ancient China, one's ancestors were held in the same position as the gods in ancient Greece. This overemphasized veneration was carried into politics as a classicism. One extreme example: During the Reformation of the late Qing Dynasty, some conservative officials claimed that they would rather see the country fall than change the laws prescribed by ancestors.

A concentrated expression of all these features is Confucianism. It stresses the absolute sovereignty of the

king or emperor, the hierarchical order of society, the moral introspection of those who are in power and of the intellectuals, the inseparable connection between the nation and the family, and adherence to ancient political institutions. It is the national loyalty and moral heroism promoted by Confucianism that brought China to her peak; it is the conservatism and the isolationist tendency inherent in Confucianism that brought China down.

But what about this century?

7

Homer. Virgil. Tu Fu⁶⁴. Dante. Shakespeare. Goethe. Baudelaire. Dostoevsky. T. S. Eliot. Joyce. There is light in every great literary work. Read. Read. Illuminate your soul.

When people are suffering on earth, how can you be happy? Being an artist means bearing a cross for all the world. When wars, famines, atrocities, treacheries still haunt the human race, what is your role?

A sense of commitment is burning in me. No matter how poor a writer I might prove, I have resolved to devote myself to the future Chinese Renaissance. No matter how trivial a thinker I might be, I have made up my mind to reconstruct a spiritual home for the human kind.

Behind the nomadic clouds time's lens are waiting to see—
My sword.

⁶⁴ The greatest representative of ancient Chinese poetry.

Chapter Seven: Star

1

IN THE DESERT VAST AS POETRY AS ART AS HUMAN WOES

WHO
SITTING ON
THE PYRAMID'S TOP
CHANTING THE BIBLE ALONE

RISING THE NILE

MOONLIGHT SINKING

TRACES OF AFTERGLOW
IN HIS EYES

SLAVES' FACES
MIRRORED ON THE WATER
OVERFLOWING
WITH FROTH
THE PAIN-STRICKEN FERTILE
LAND

GREEK MYTHS
TWINKLE IN MOONLIGHT
LYRE AND NIGHTINGALE
SLIDING DOWN A VINE
INTO THE RECESSES
OF HISTORY

IN THE GLOOMY GRAVE
FLUTTER BATS' WINGS

LIKE A SANDSTORM

THE PHAROAH'S CURSE
WHIPS THE INNOCENT SKY
THE SILENT RIVER
FLOODING TO THE PYRAMID
LIKE A HUGE PROPHECY

A VAGUE DARK SHADE
GRADUALLY PERVADES
THE WHOLE PANTING
WHY IS THERE
A WOUND
IN THE MOON

WATER AND LIGHT
BURNING HIS EYES

THE NILE
WHIRLS UP
BESIEGING
THE PYRAMID

HE LOOKS INTO THE SKY
WATER REACHING
HIS KNEES ABDOMEN
CHEST

MOON'S BLOOD CREEPS
ON SKY'S DUSKY FACE
MOONLIGHT
WITH TREMBING PALMS
DESPERATELY RESISTS
THE REBELLING RIVER

FAR AWAY
STARS SHOUTING
PLAINS SLANTED
THE POLES SHAKING
BATS FLEE GRAVES
BIBLE DRIFTS AWAY

THE PARASOL MADE OF STONE
KEEP SHIM UP THERE
SYMBOLICALLY

IN THE DESERT VAST AS POETRY AS ART AS HUMAN WOES

2

Swordsman made no attempt to resist or avert the thrust when one of them stabbed at him:

What is life if you are forced to use your weapon upon people who are not your enemies?

He stood there, blood oozing out; all of them were petrified at his statue-like bearing.

We were not willing to do so.

He smiled weakly and beckoned them to leave.

Not a mortal wound; at least there is mercy in that man, which has blunted his stab.

It is dark now. Where can I have a rest?

His legs failed him; he had to crawl along: a blood trail was seen in the starlight.

At last he saw a wooden house lit up by a candle; he fainted.

When he woke up, he found himself lying on a bed sucking at a woman's breast.

He cringed but the woman stopped him: You have lost too much blood.

I hear a baby crying.

Yes, look, it is in that cot.

It is hungry.

But you are in danger.

He gratefully gazed at her, feeling that he was the happiest infant of the world.

Do you live here by yourself?

I am a forsaken prostitute.

You are kind.

3

The horse's eyes mirror the rosy morning light; dewdrops course down its musing face. In the familiar circle of seasons, we share with birds of passage an ever fresh joy. The friendly sun, through haze and faint fragrance, touched us with its serene breath.

In the ancient battlefield, daisies wake up from a thousand-year dream; a blue sky hangs beyond the edge of the distant wood. Bells chiming, visions of swords recalled, we pass history by, relieved of our soul's load by the carefree green grasses.

No one is here, squirrels and deer stealing across the tranquil wood. We enter and stand in the old temple, the statue of Buddha covered in dust. Departing and moving on, we encounter a river, there, its music reveals to us a simple truth.

4

When the Earth is at last captured by aliens, Phantom has been wandering for many years. No pity is aroused in him as he travels among devastated cities and villages, corpses and bones of animals and humans; no fear seizes him when hurricanes, earthquakes, eruptions, nuclear explosions or comet collisions torment the planet.

Then he settles down in a cavern, where he finds some primitive frescos undamaged by time. A voice speaks to him: you are to be the last preserver of the abiding treasure of the race. Being the only man alive, he sets out to write a book on art. When aliens find him, he says: kill me, but spare my work.

5

God: Believe me or not.

Socrates: An unexamined life is not worth living.

T. S. Eliot: HURRYUPITSTIME/HURRYUPITSTIME

Sphinx: I am baffled by my own questions.

Lao Tzu: The highest wisdom is the simplest.

6

13 April 1996

Sunny

What impresses me about *Ulysses* more than Joyce's techniques is the fact he discovers divinity in an ordinary man. What is vulgarity? Beneath the seemingly vulgar surface of Bloom I see a heart that transcends many professedly holy minds. I've been too idealistic and cynical, which has bound me fast to my own thought and prevented me from immersing myself into real life. That's why my creativity has been wilting.

7

He stepped out of the university library and walked silently on the campus. A warm spring night it was.

Looking up to the stars twinkling in the ageless sky, he seemed to have forgotten the date and the year.

Can a soul's journey be measured? He had come back from a place as remote as another planet.

He used to pray to some mystic power by writing his wishes on his palm. He used to have many superstitions about natural signs and numbers.

He used to meditate: watching the lotus breathe in his abdomen, letting his soul levitate, bathing in the mysterious starlight, and imagining himself to be an incorporeal universe.

We may reject superstitions, but we need to pursue divinity in the world.

The lofty stars shone into his eyes, like the first characters he learned when he was a little boy.

The End

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