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ASLEEP, OR AWAKE? THOUGHTS ON LITERATURE AND REALITY

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For a generation, we have lived in times skeptical about, if not hostile to, the idea of "reality." I speak, of course, of intellectuals, especially my fellow college professors of the humanities. Within this cohort, a "critical mass" at least if not an absolute majority have appeared to take for granted that all "reality" is "constructed," while they continue to act in their everyday lives as if there were indeed an actual, objective reality: assuming, for example, that when you turn the key the ignition of your car will go on. I have wondered the whole time whether they really believe their own doctrine, or rather, embrace it out of mere willfulness: only if reality is denied does space seem to be opened up for every individual to *define* reality for himself. Distinctions seem oppressive to such a mentality.

It has been easier for such an attitude to flourish in the humanities than in the sciences, because for the practitioner of the latter, an unavoidable and, presumably for today's intellectual, nasty *reality* keeps intruding itself, even after one has had recourse to "quarks" and "waves" to make it seem less disturbingly *solid*.

I have never subscribed to this fundamental doctrine of self-designated "postmodernism" because it has always appeared self-evident to me that yes, there *is* reality. And it has equally appeared to me that underpinning this reality is something mysterious, wonderful, awe-inspiring, and, yes, beautiful. What is more, I have been especially drawn to poetry as the supreme attempt to articulate this reality, especially in its "inscape," to borrow Gerard Manley Hopkins's term. It has never occurred to me that I was *reading in* the inscape but rather that I was *discovering* what was in fact there.

The Zen Buddhism that inspired Shinkichi Takahashi (1901–87), translated by Lucien Stryk in his book *Afterimages* (always for me a masterpiece of literary translation), while appearing to deny apparent reality as illusory, always does so against the foil (Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God./It will flame out, like shining from shook foil . . .") of an underlying substratum so *real* that only the term *Śūnyatā* (Skt., "voidness") seems adequate to describe it. But, as Kawabata Yasunari strove to show in his extraordinary Nobel Prize in Literature acceptance speech (1968), this "voidness" needs to be distinguished from mere emptiness. It is, paradoxically, a fullness so replete as to defy ordinary terminology.

That is where the poet steps in. "In these things there lies a deep meaning;/I would express it, but have already lost the words." This is how T'ao Ch'ien (Tao Qian; 365–427) puts the great paradox, drawing upon the Taoist wisdom of philosopher Chuang Tzu (Zhuang Zi; fourth century BC).

The reality that only poetry seems adequate to capture and convey is not only that of the external world but that of the internal world as well and, of course, the intersection between the two, often described in modernity as hopelessly impossible to define or distinguish, but which nevertheless seems to be an essential part of the human experience.

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This truth was driven home to me recently when I stumbled upon a website called "Poetry Nook." I have learned that the proprietors of this site have been posting Chinese poems as translated by myself in *The Columbia Book of Later Chinese Poetry* (1986), including one called "Autumn Night—Sleepless," by the great early-Ch'ing (Qing) Dynasty poet, Wu Wei-yeh (Wu Weiye; 1609–72), also a respected painter:

Autumn Night—Sleepless

Autumn burgeons, sounds rise everywhere;
I lie sleepless, the night sinks deeper, deeper.
Time of chaos—plans to stay secure;
Fragile life—fears about its end!
The neighbor's rooster, dream-fragment cut off;
Window rainfall, one lamp in the depths.
In cutting chill, I pull on clothes and rise:
Dawn crows already fill the trees.¹

Having done this translation nearly thirty years ago, I had forgotten it utterly. And yet here it was, a near-perfect description of a recent series of sleepless nights I myself had been spending because of a phobic level of anxiety kicked off in me by plans to move house after twenty-two years in the same beloved home. This acute anxiety has hounded me my entire adult life, usually taking the form of a fear of flying but now apparently expanding to include any sort of important change. And yes, for me too, lying there rendered sound more important than sight ("sounds rise everywhere; The neighbor's rooster"), and the deepening night seemed to drive me deeper and deeper into the darkest recesses of my soul, where lurked the key anxiety of them all, fear of death. (Hopkins: "It is the blight man was born for,/It is Margaret you mourn for.") . Chinese? American? Seventeenth century? Twenty-first century? All constructed? Or are these human commonalities? And then I recalled—when I was translating Yang Wan-li (1127–1204), much earlier still. It would have been in 1972, when I was preparing my book, the first collection of Yang's poetry in any Western language, *Heaven My Blanket, Earth My Pillow* (1976). I was particularly struck by his poem "Sleep," which I found at precisely the moment in my life when I was undergoing therapy for the first time because of a depression I was going through and, at my therapist's suggestion, writing down dreams, which he would then analyze for me . . .

Sleep

Only a little high, as if I had drunk no wine at all—
The chilly night seems to last a year.
I woke up at midnight and wrote down a dream
But couldn't go back to sleep.
Thousands of things rise from the depths of my mind
And appear before my eyes.
This lucid depression is unbearable—
A single wild goose crying in the cold sky.

It was this translation I read out loud at a party in Binghamton, in 1973, the party at which I met the woman who has been my wife now for forty years. All of us were reading from our work,

mostly original poetry but in my case, translations of Yang Wan-li. My future wife loved this one, and had some things to say about it that played a role in bringing us together . . .

Sleeplessness. When Japanese poets began, in the eighth century, to write poems in Chinese, it might be thought that they were bringing to bear yet another level of "construction": working in a language linguistically unrelated to their own, even having to master the very concept of rhyme, as Chinese poetry all rhymed, while Japanese poetry did not, and rhymed with sounds and *tones* (not present in Japanese) foreign to the Japanese authors! But they diligently mastered every nuance of this difficult poetics and were soon producing works that, like great poetry everywhere, continued to reflect *in some manner* the reality they were experiencing. Hattori Nankaku (1683–1759), one thousand years after the introduction of Chinese poetry into Japanese letters, wrote this poem in Chinese:

Chanting a Poem on an Autumn Night

On the trees at courtyard's edge, crows caw at night;
 Before my bed, invading the floor, moon colors shine low.
 Autumn feelings—for whom?—the night so long, can't sleep.
 All night, chilly, chilly, dew congeals to frost.
 "Please, don't vie in aging this mournful man's hair:
 Tonight, long since, more than half has turned to white."

Here the sleeplessness has been, at least partially, inspired by thoughts of someone—wife? lover? friend?—now no longer a part of the writer's life. Autumn is traditionally the season of mourning in East Asia, here as in Wu Wei-yeh's poem, but the additional factor of missing or yearning for one now gone adds immeasurably to the pain. So it was for a man of the West as well:

. . . my soul's imaginary sight
 Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,
 Which, like a jewel hung in ghastly night,
 Makes black night beauteous and her old face new.
 Lo! thus, by day my limbs, by night my mind,
 For thee, and for myself no quiet find.

Thus Shakespeare in Sonnet 27. Or again, the perfectly lonely nights spent by Wordsworth and conjured up in his own sonnet on *Sleeplessness*:

. . . I've thought of all by turns, and still I lie
 Sleepless; and soon the small birds' melodies
 Must hear, first uttered from my orchard trees,
 And the first cuckoo's melancholy cry.
 Even thus last night, and two nights more, I lay,
 And could not win thee, Sleep, by any stealth . . .

For him, too, the sounds of night and dawn trump what is visual. Wordsworth admits to a string of sleepless nights, and his vain attempts to trick Sleep into descending, including counting sheep!

Sleeplessness, just one aspect of reality sung by poets past and present, East and West, in languages their own or another's, their visions conveyed sometimes as well in still other languages, through translations: The great power and poignancy of these poems derive from a *combination* of linguistically artistic gifts and skills on the one hand, and inspired observation of reality on the other, and so allow the poet, and his readers, an awakening. This is neither "postmodernism" nor modernism; it is a perduring truth about humanity and the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Chaves is Professor of Chinese at The George Washington University, Washington, DC. Born in Brooklyn in 1943, he obtained his PhD in Chinese Literature from Columbia University in 1971, and went on to publish articles and books on traditional Chinese poetry and poetic theory. His work has emphasized the relationship between poetry and painting (and calligraphy as well) in China, and in 2000 he was invited to guest-curate an exhibition on this subject, *The Chinese Painter as Poet*, at China Institute in New York City. Chaves is also one of the few scholars in the West today to study and translate kanshi, Chinese-language poetry written by Japanese authors down through the centuries. Together with J. Thomas Rimer, he co-authored the first Western translation and study of the world's first bilingual (Chinese and Japanese) poetic anthology, the *Wakan rōei shū*, compiled in the early eleventh century by Japanese courtier Fujiwara no Kintō, *Japanese and Chinese Poems to Sing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), which won the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature. His book, *Pilgrim of the Clouds* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1978), was a finalist for the National Book Award in the translation category. Most recently, his book *Every Rock a Universe: The Yellow Mountains and Chinese Travel Writing* (Warren, CT: Floating World Editions, 2013), was the winner of the Lucian Stryk Prize.

NOTE

1. Wu Wei-yeh, "Autumn—Sleepless," translated by Jonathan Chaves, <http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/autumn-night%E2%80%94sleepless> (accessed January 20, 2016).