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Richard Berengarten

李道

CHANGING

with a preface by
Edward L. Shaughnessy

and calligraphy by
Yu Mingquan

Shearsman Books
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Edward L. Shaughnessy

Preface

The locusts’ wings abuzz abuzz:
Properly made for progeny,
Praying that they will find a cause.

The locusts’ wings sound and resound:
Properly made for progeny,
Predicting that their purpose be found.

The locusts’ wings stirring a cloud:
Properly made for progeny,
Would that they read this poem aloud.
(inspired by the poem ‘Locusts’
Zhong si 螽斯] of China’s Classic of Poetry)

I beg the reader’s indulgence for beginning this Preface to Richard Berengarten’s splendid new collection of poetry *Changing* with a poem of my own. I have no intention of competing with Berengarten in terms of literary merit. The reader will soon turn to *Changing* and will find that this collection of poems – or perhaps I should say, this single long poem, composed of many parts – easily withstands even an affront such as this. He has invited me to write this Preface so that I might say something about China’s *Classic of Changes*, which has inspired his work.

Many readers will know of the *Changes* as the *I Ching* (regardless of how it might be pronounced) and will know both that it is the first of the Chinese classics and also that it began its existence as a divination manual. They probably will not think of it as poetry, except in the loosest of senses. *Changing* will certainly change that.

As indicated above, my little poem is inspired by the *Classic of Poetry* poem ‘Locusts.’ As does that poem, and many other poems of the *Classic of Poetry*, it features three stanzas that repeat incrementally, changing only the rhyme words. Each stanza begins with an image drawn from the natural world, and then goes on to relate this image to a topic in the human realm, the rhyme words driving the poem’s development toward a desired conclusion. This three-stanza structure allows me to introduce a relationship between prayer, prophecy, and poetry, which I propose
to explore a little further by way of preface to Changing. Many readers may recall the divine inspiration Plato attributed to poets. In the Ion, he compared poets to “diviners and holy prophets” as people who speak the words of god.

God takes away the minds of poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that god himself is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us.

Plato, Ion

Changing provides us reason to hope that it was not only in antiquity that the gods spoke through the poets – as also the diviners and holy prophets – but that they may continue to do so today.

Having had the temerity to quote Plato, let me hasten to retreat to my role as a student of ancient China and hope that I can find support there for my understanding of Richard Berengarten’s Changing. One of the unusual features of the Chinese language is that verbs of communication were originally bidirectional. “Buy” and “sell” were both written with the same word and may even have been pronounced the same, as were also “give” and “take,” “explain” and “understand,” “offer” and “enjoy,” and countless other such words. Still today in modern Chinese “lend” and “borrow” are expressed with the same word, the direction of the transaction determining its sense. I do not wish to turn this Preface into a lesson in Chinese grammar, but it seems to me worth considering the bidirectionality of communication when we read Plato on poetry and divination. The gods speak to us through the poets, diviners and holy prophets, but the poets, diviners and holy prophets also speak to the gods for us. Some of the words they utter may be “in a state of unconsciousness,” but other words are uttered in a state of full consciousness. Our poems and our prophecies are also our prayers.

Before going on to consider the I Ching or Classic of Changes, let me return briefly to China’s Classic of Poetry, a younger sister to the Classic of Changes. The poem in that collection immediately following ‘Locusts,’ which inspired my own little poem at the beginning of this Preface, is entitled ‘The Peach Hangs Heavy’ (Tao yao 桃夭). This time let me simply translate the poem (and do so without attempting to replicate the rhyme scheme, which would rhyme on the last word of each couplet).
Heavy hanging is the peach tree, Glistening fresh are its blossoms. This is the girl going to marry, Fit and proper for house and home.

Heavy hanging is the peach tree, Ripely swollen is its fruit. This is the girl going to marry, Fit and proper for home and house.

Heavy hanging is the peach tree, Its leaves thickly enveloping. This is the girl going to marry, Fit and proper for home and man.

桃之夭夭，灼灼其華。之子于歸，宜其室家。
桃之夭夭，有蕡其實。之子于歸，宜其家室。
桃之夭夭，其葉蓁蓁。之子于歸，宜其家人。

It is easy enough to see that this is a simple wedding song, employing the image of a peach tree to suggest the success of the wedding. The glistening freshness of the peach blossoms attracts us to the girl, while the shape of the fruit surely predicts the swollen belly that the singers hoped she would soon have. If the symbolism of the enveloping leaves is perhaps less immediately intelligible, a walk through any peach grove would quickly show that the leaves of the peach tree wrap around the fruit, protecting the peach until it is mature enough to separate from the tree. Surely we are to see in this envelopment the mother protecting her “home,” which is to say her children.

I think it is also easy to see that this poem is simultaneously a prayer and a prediction. Sung as the girl was going to her wedding, the singers were not just congratulating her, but praying that she would be fertile, and indeed through their song helping to ensure that she would be so. On the other hand, we know that not all prayers are answered, and not all weddings are successful. One of the most poetic lines of the Classic of Changes vividly evokes the emptiness of marital failure. The top line of Gui mei 归妹 hexagram (#54), the name of which can mean either the “marrying maiden” or the “returning (i.e., divorcing) maiden” – another example of the bidirectionality of Chinese verbs of communication – reads:

The woman raises the basket: no fruit; The man stabs the sheep: no blood. There is nothing beneficial.

女承筐无實，士刲羊无血。无攸利。
Perhaps the image of a man stabbing sheep is distant from contemporary man’s everyday life (though most of us could easily understand the significance of there being “no blood”). For a modern adaptation inspired by this line, Berengarten offers the following poem:

6. Her sudden mood switches

Her sudden mood switches,
in his eyes for no apparent reason, but always in hers

his fault, locked him out of her bed and, eventually numbed his mind when-

ever he was in the house at the same time as her. So if she was in he went out

and vice-versa. When her complaints about him boiled, she said he never saw her

for herself, only for what he could get out of her or use her for. And he never

took a blind bit of notice of what she really was, felt, thought, believed, wanted.

Berengarten has taken more than a blind bit of notice, and through him we are able to feel, think, believe and want.

In China, the Classic of Changes is thought to encompass every aspect of human experience, from the beginning and end of heaven and earth back to the beginning again. True to its title, Richard Berengarten’s Changing is similarly all-encompassing, with 450 poems corresponding to the six lines of the 64 hexagrams of the Classic of Changes, each poem changing perspective with each line, with each page. As is true of the hexagram and line statements of the Classic of Changes, these individual
道可道非常道

***

Μεταβάλλον ἀναπαύεται.

***

Omnia in omnibus & singula in singulis.

***

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

***

All the world is full of incape and chance left
free to act falls into an order as well as purpose.

Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard

***

Why not venture a dialogue
with a book that purports to be animated?

***

un système où tout se tient

***

αὐτὸς ὁ κόσμος δὲν εἶναι ὁ δικός μας, εἶναι τοῦ Ὁμήρου

***

it coheres all right

***
SAMPLER
Initiating

heaven over heaven

heaven under heaven
Heaven

Heaven over heavens
heaven under heavens
when and where do
you ever stop? Breath
fails, mind can't conceive
your blazing blackness

your white dark
your black brilliance
your inhering glory

your endlessness
in beginninglessness
each in each other

beauty-filled
wisdom-filled
universe

nothing everything
destroying generating
everything nothing

元 sublime 亨 accomplish 利 further 貞 persevere
1. Bending light

Stars pull and bend
light like archers. Which our
astronomers claim holds
good in all wherewhens.
As I lie in bed pondering this,
a nocturnal cat climbs
a willow onto my shallow-
sloped roof. What things we
may see up there, roof-cat
and I, are events’ shards
objects no longer occupy.
The further we gaze, the
further we peer back. Pushed
and pulled by gravities, things
rumbling eventfully across
skies eventually whirl
into nothings, into holes of
sheer nothing.
2. What Zhang Zai thought

Out walking alone as an autumn sun was going down and a yellow ball of a hunter’s moon coming up,

Zhang Zai sat on a tree stump and quietly forgot about time and mortality and himself awhile as he soaked himself into and through things. Not much of a life, he thought, if you can’t

or don’t get a chance to see patterns and images of heaven and earth as merely sediment of marvellous transformations. And not much of a view if you’ve forgotten it. Better be poor and remember this than have power and wealth and forget heaven is text and context for all wisdom.
3. Cohering, Inhering

All day long and
all night long it starts
now now. To

keep everything
(every thing) in mind
in its entirety, and

still focus entire on
this? As the universe
keeps all measures

and all in measure,
and each thing main-
tains its own seams,
stains, marks, patterns,
edges, pleats, horizons –
may the same quiet
patient appetite for
order cohere, inhere
in this, in here.
4. Oscillating

From endless
beginninglessness, dawnless
and duskless

energy arises
forming and informing *this*
whose matter and

pattern arose, arises
and will arise – and sank
and sinks and will

sink again. From
nothing oneness both
one and the same

and from oneness,
two then one then nothing.
This constant flow

between *notness*
and *isness* becomes and is
all ways key.

leaping from

an abyss, skywards
5. Absolute

Absolute beginning
and final end of all ends
and beginnings

‘behind’ space-time
clap tight together, as
one, indissoluble –

as hands open
in greeting, as a bracelet
bands a wrist, as gems

encrust a necklace, as
a crown sets on a head,
as hair fastens in skin,
as concentric light-
domes surround living
trees, as angles and
sides of an egg –
incessantly changing
yet changeless.
6. Light fills and fails

Light fills and fails. It hovers, spills away.
Dark narrows path and yard. Night smothers field.
How foil this overflow? How stall the day?

Out there, against the cliffs, beyond the bay,
a ship is sinking, caving in, unkeeled.
Light fills and fails. It hovers, spills away.

The mast has split in two beneath salt spray.
Crushed like an egg, it sinks. Its sides must yield.
How foil this overflow? How stall the day?

No hoop of faith or stave of hope can stay
the chaos that this dark flood has unsealed.
Light fills and fails. It hovers, spills away.

Our ground itself unhinges. Rock, mud, clay
swirl as vast spools of shadow are unreeled.
How foil this overflow? How stall the day?

Terror has been unleashed. We’re easy prey
to swirling hordes of phantoms day concealed.
Light fills and fails. It hovers, spills away.
How foil this overflow? How stall the day?

powerful dragon

meets his match
Endless beginningless
heaven holds everything
including astronomical
creation and demise
of universes into and out
of nothing. How

many dimensions can
you imagine? Well, heaven
has more, folding in
and out of one
another, replicating,
self-swallowing,
interbreeding. In this
part-perceived and part-
undiscovered cosmos
lie still and always
more unemptiable fecund
sources overspilling.

Supreme Ultimate

a group of dragons

太極

uncommanded
SAMPLER
Responding, Corresponding
Earth

You paradisal particle of star
you panoramic green and yellow maze
you mother of particularities

you centre folding in upon yourself
with cloudy blue and grey circumference
unfallen and revolving around fire

you crusted ball of lava balanced on
one invisible axis, indiscernible strings
keeping your modest place, your

rolling pace, as doing nothing, you
revolve and spin – you tabulated. Each
terrible and wonderful and ordinary

you grounder of primordial glory
which you absorb and increase billionfolds
in every-each inseparable moment

you seething and proliferating surface
you forested and river-fed and windblown
time-space of human origins and ends

元 spring 亨 summer 利 autumn 贞 winter
1. Fields frost

Fields frost. So no talk
now of rest or sleep. That
dour music is the wind

blowing down from
northern deserts. Not even
rats peep out. Now we

follow season as guide
and master. Soon snows
will arrive, last all winter.

You think this place
paradise? Perfect gardens
need patient cultivation.

So fetch buckets. Boil
water from broken ice.
Put on lined boots and
gloves. Start chopping.
Keep blocks dry. Light
slow smouldering fire.
2. Walking, in a garden

The flower’s scent spills.  
The bee, its instrument, pursues  
its destiny. Aware how  

beauty’s song pierces  
this quiet, how could I fault such  
treasure, such abundance?  

All summer long I shall  
stay here and be – this being just  
what being is and for,  

when nothing left or else need  
be pursued – this also being when  
this garden thrusts  

its whole sustaining glory out –  
so richly I breathe summer in entire  
as summer breathes me also in  
itself. Flowers’ scents, spilling,  
track and trawl their bees. Each  
instrument obeys its destiny.
3. Change

How shall changes let alone Change itself be understood and measured? The one immeasurable law that governs all things, at least in this universe, is that everything everywhere is constantly on the move throughout spacetime just as reciprocally spacetime itself is always on the move through things. The one common inhering condition that never changes is Change.
4. Tie up a bag

I looked down in my bag of selves and made this. It wasn’t enough. It never is.

I opened up pockets in bags in bags. I breathed in and out of them, and with, from, through them. I waited without waiting, absorbing whatever lay ready, already, here. But what found its way here wasn’t what I saw thanks to my bags, but what saw and found me. All I had sewn I unsewed, to get it right as could-be, no longer bothering with bags, pockets or an I.

tie words and actions in cloth of caution
5. A yellow lower garment

This light playing
swaying, straying, spraying
across these

clouded hills, over
these pleasant flowing
waters – so palpable

you could almost
touch it, though you
know it can’t be

captured, however it may
streak, stroke, strike you –
light one and all,

all one, everywhere –
yes, you flow and cohere
all right, very right,

as do these notes, in
white light, black light,
alternating, oscillating.

can't 'ou see

with the eyes of turquoise
6. The force that fills and empties

The force that fills and empties things of day
and straddles stars with particles and waves,
holds all our love, yet wipes that love away.

See, night’s obsidian floors in rich array
lie strewn with light. Each single one engraves
the force that fills and empties things of day.

Stirring breath, blood and bones, it spurs my clay
to build the buttresses and architraves
that hold our love, yet wipes it clean away.

While all things pass, and children run and play,
each atom matter holds connected paves
the force that fills and empties things of day.

Staining the sky in blue, and the blue bay,
sifting clear waters into rills and caves,
it holds our love, yet wipes that love away.

Come, friend, sit with me. Drink this wine, I pray,
and break bread, though around us chaos raves.
The force that fills and empties things of day
holds all our love, yet wipes that love away.

dragons fighting
across wild skies
7. Being simple

This is where we start
every time – in purposeless
potential, in a before so far

‘back’ ‘behind’ all other
before, it can’t really be counted
as being in time of any kind,

let alone pertaining to or
belonging to time. Its isness –
meshed so tight and sheer

into its notness that neither
is extricable from the other –
yields a pointless point

neither passive nor active,
neither this nor that but both –
point of departure and

eternal return – and if an
image at all, then one that is
not-an-image, a not-image.

unhewn block  樸  uncarved wood