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TAO YUANMING

(365—427)

An English Translation by

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Part Two

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(423 A.D.)

On assuming office,

Nothing scared them so much as falling behind the time

Year in, year out at their duties away they ground,

Anxious to improve their service.

To the duke's notice came their unflagging zeal

And they, into his good graces.

At his side, on the gilded coach they rode,

Access they had to his inmost rooms.

His grace heeded their every remonstrance,

All their counsels he embraced.

When he should pass away one day,

Into his tomb they would follow:

Unforgettable were his favours,

His orders, inviolable.

Without a wince before the vault they stood,

Intent on honouring their pledge²⁾.

A gravemound looms up, overgrown with brier,

A finch rolls out a dirge³⁾.

Beyond recall are the Noble Three,

My robe is stained with tears of grief.

- 1) At the death of Duke Mu of the Qin state (reigned 659-620 B.C.), the three Ziju brothers were among the hundred-seventy-seven to be buried alive with their deceased ruler. The three were believed to have lived up to a previous pledge, taken at the duke's request, by which they committed themselves to partaking of his joys in this world as well as his sorrows in the next. This act of inhuman cruelty on the part of the duke was bitterly resented by the people of the Qin state. Popular outrage found expression in the immortal poem, *The Finch*, which was later incorporated in the *Book of Songs*.

(It was a practice among Chinese poets of the past to seize upon a historical event either to extol the virtues of a contemporary who could not be safely referred to by name, or to lash out at inequities current in their own times-- a circumstance which accounts for serious inaccuracies and distortions of historical facts, as is the case in this poem, where the sinister sacrifice of human lives is represented as a voluntary expression of loyalty on the part of the innocent victims. With their historical knowledge firmly grounded in authoritative works, the readers in the past do not seem to have been overly bothered by such authorial liberties.)

- 2) See note 1.

- 3) Referring to the elegiac poem, *The Finch*, which mourns the death of the three Ziju brothers.
(See note 1.)

To the Memory of Jingke¹⁾

(423 A.D.)

Prince Dan was good at winning the hearts of his men,
Bent on avenging himself on the powerful Yin²⁾.
Those rallied around him were of society the cream,
By the year's end Jingke joined their ranks.
As it befits a man to die for a friend³⁾,
He set out from the Yan capital sword in hand.
White steeds neighed, thundering down the highway
With horsemen rushing to see him off⁴⁾.
Tall caps lifted under bristling hair,
Manly vigour sent the tassels flying.
By the Yi River⁵⁾ was held the farewell ceremony,
An occasion graced by the flower of the nation.
Whimpering notes streamed forth from Jianli's⁶⁾ lute.
Song Yi⁷⁾ broke out into a sonorous tenor.
The wind rose to a moaning wail,
Lashing the limpid river into chilly ripples⁸⁾.
Doleful tunes drew tears from the dauntless warriors
High-keyed strains braced up their darksome spirits.
Well he knew it was a one way trip,
Well he knew to posterity will go down his name.
His chariot he mounted without looking back,
As swift as wind he reached the Qin court.

Boldly he advanced ten thousand li⁹⁾,
 Spinning his way through a thousand cities.
 The moment came when the map rolled out¹⁰⁾,
 Stunned was the tyrant, then panicked.
 Alas, the swordsman's art was flawed,
 In failure ended his heroic attempt.
 Dead he is, but
 Cherished will be his memory.

- 1) (See Nine Poems in the Old Style, no. 8, note 2.)

The memory of his intrepid valour and loyalty to his friend and benefactor is to this day enshrined in the hearts of many a Chinese. All the prince's followers, whom he lodged and boarded, were men far-famed for their bravery, devotion, and professional skills.

- 2) The name of the line of Qin kings, with specific reference to Qin Zheng, who became the first emperor of China in 221 B.C., after overrunning the rest of the warring states.

- 3) From the ancient saying:

A man of honour lays down his life for a friend;

A woman makes up for him who loves her."

- 4) The prince and those who came to see him off, along with their horses, were all in white--colour of mourning.

- 5) A river in the state of Yan with its source in today's Yi County, Hebei Province.

- 6) Master musician and devoted friend to Jingke. After the Qin king proclaimed himself emperor of the Qin Dynasty, Jianli was blinded and forced to entertain the emperor with his consummate playing, an opportunity he was quick to seize in order to avenge his unfortunate friend. He made a desperate attempt to dash his lead-filled instrument (a zheng-like instrument with thirteen strings) at the emperor. Missing his target, he was put to death.
- 7) A house-guest of the Prince, and an accomplished vocalist, renowned for his high, projecting voice.
- 8) These two lines remotely echo Jingke's famous song at parting:
The wind wails, chilly is the river Yi,
Here goes the dauntless warrior; no return
there's for him.
- 9) The plural form of "li", which is a measure of distance of half a kilometre.
- 10) Jingke was dispatched to the Qin court with the head of the Qin king's runaway general and a map defining the territory the state of Yan offered to cede to the Qin king. Rolled up in the map lay hidden the poisoned blade with which Jingke was to deal the lethal blow.

(426 A.D.)

Used up is the old crop, the new has lamentably failed. Old farmer that I am, I've fallen upon evil days. Many are the months ahead; no end of privations I anticipate. With the new crop blighted, so far I've barely managed to make ends meet. For the last ten days, I've begun to feel the sting of hunger and a growing weakness in my limbs. As the year wears off, strong feelings well up in my heart. If I should fail to give them utterance, how could my children and theirs ever know of my plight!

I grew up in want;
Now that I'm old, hunger has become a constant curse.
A diet of crude cereals more than meets my need,
Heaven forbid that I should covet dainty food.
Few are my meals and far between,
The summers I pass in winter clothes.
Now that my strength is ebbing away,
Must my distress grow?
Well I think of the alms-giver
But frown upon the poor starveling²⁾.

Why resent crudely administered charity?

No point I see in making light of life³⁾.

And yet I am not without scruples,

All my life I've cherished honest poverty.

Never mind the hunger,

Before me are the shining examples of past sages⁴⁾.

1) When the governor of Jiar-zhou, Tan Daoji, came to see the poet with a generous gift of savoury meats and victuals, he found the emaciated poet in bed, sick and starving. Contemptuous of the Song officialdom, the poet declined the life-saving present and waved the caller away. This incident, occurring a year before his death in 427 A.D., must have increased his awareness of the threat hunger posed to his integrity.

2) According to the Book of Rites, "When a severe famine had broken out in the state of Qi, Qian Ao provided relief by giving out food at the road-side. A starveling came trudging along and halted with his face concealed behind his sleeve. With solid food in the left hand and porridge in his right, Qian Ao called out: "You there, alms!" At which the starveling revealed his face and stared the alms-giver squarely in the eye. "Know that it was my refusal to take 'You there!' alms that has reduced me to my miserable state," whereupon he turned away with dignity and was starved to death.

Up to the present day, men of dignity will reject demeaning charity or favours by remarking

"I take no 'You there!' alms."

- 3) These four lines reveal the poet's conflicting motions.
- 4) First and foremost, that of the proud starveling.

Begging

(426 A.D.)

Hunger drove me out of home,
I knew not where to go.
Halting at length before a village house,
I knocked, then faltered out some lame excuse.
My host perceived the motive of my call
And made my visit worth the while.
Like-minded, into the night we talked,
No sooner were the cups refilled than drained.
Delighted at the budding friendship,
Verses we intoned, poems we improvised.
Heartful thanks for your fair kindness¹⁾,
Which, to my shame, I cannot requite.
To pay the full debt of my gratitude,
Wait I must till the afterlife.

- 1) His host's tenderness of heart is here compared to that of a washerwoman's, whereas his own inability (in the next line) to return the kindness is set against the gift of a thousand gold pieces Han Xin (king of Chu of the Western Han Dynasty) made to a washerwoman in reward for her goodness in sharing her meal with him when she saw him (a pauper) starving under the city walls many years back.

The washerwoman's compassionate heart and Han Xin's noble gratitude have since become proverbial.

Three Dirges¹⁾

(427 A.D.)

-1-

All that lives must die,
An early death need not be a premature demise.
Like you alive last night,
Today on the death roll I appeared.
My soul has drifted I know not where,
To the coffin is entrusted my withered frame.
The children cry for their father,
Friends weep over my body.
Dead to loss and gain,
No longer can I distinguish wrong from right.
Now that I've ceased to live,
Shame and glory have lost their meaning.

My sole regret is that, while alive

I didn't have my fill of wine.

- 1) Composed three months before the poet's actual death at the age of sixty-three.

-2-

My cup, forever dry,

New brims with sparkling wine.

The spring-brew foams and bubbles,

If only I could take a mouthful;

Food offerings are richly displayed in front of me,

By my side, friends and kinemen weep.

Voiceless is my mouth, though aching to speak,

Dimmed are my eyes, though burning to see.

The hall has so far provided calm repose,

In the wilds I shall have to pass this night.

Once turned from home,

To return will take an eternity for me.

-3-

Away rolls the prairie,

Through the poplars sighs the wind.

Over heavy late-autumn frost

To the wilds is borne my body.

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Not a mortal lives around,
Gravemounds loom large above me.
Looking up, my horse raises a distressing neigh;
The wind wails forth a dirge.
Once the vault of gloom is sealed,
Day will cease to dawn.
Day will cease to dawn,
Nor sage nor pundit could help himself.
Those who had come to see me go
Must have returned by now.
My nearest might still be mourning,
All others will have regained their cheer.
What else can be said of death?
To the Hills the body is consigned.

A Poem of Joint Authorship¹⁾

(Tao) Yuanming:

Wild geese sail by with the wind,
Where could they be destined?
To the frustrated scholar my thoughts are turned,
Could I help sighing over his hapless fate?

Yinzi:

Like them I'd fain scale the ethereal heights,
But how, without a strong whirlwind²⁾?
If Prince Qiao³⁾ were to come to my aid,
Into the deep blue I might yet soar.

Xunzi:

Tenderly mindful of their beloved ones,
Towards the skyline in pairs they file,
Through the chilly, vaporous air,
Weary but keeping close to each other.

(Tao) Yuanming:

The tall, dew-washed branches far away
Blend in with the sky.
'twere better I reined in my thoughts and stopped
gazing,
Lest my mind be further confused to no avail.

- 1) Verse-matching, which used to be a practice popular with the Chinese literati. Any occasion, from the chance meeting of congenial friends to an excursion to places of scenic beauty, could give rise to such extemporisations, aimed to mark a memorable event and crystalize the mood of the moment.

In this particular instance, the initial four lines of verse, with which Tao Yuanming starts off the poem, are meant to furnish the theme and set the general tone of the poem, as well as its tonal pattern and rhyme scheme. They are then passed on to the next person, who gives a new dimension to the poetic idea, strictly adhering to the set tonal pattern. The third person then takes up the thread and contributes his share to the common effort. When this has been accomplished, the first poet steps in and completes the circle. Such poems vary in length and especially in artistic value.

In the first stanza, the free flight of wild geese into the boundless blue brings to the poet's mind his own frustrated hopes and ambitions. The second poet sees his chance of joining the wild geese by achieving Taoist immortality. The third focuses on the "moral" qualities peculiar to the wild geese, viz. courage, endurance and tender affection for their life companions. The first poet then returns and rounds off the poem as well as his own poetic flight on a note of serene resignation.

- 2) An allusion to Zhuang Zi's fable of the giant roc that wheeled up into the air on a whirlwind, covering ninety thousand li in each of its flights.
- 3) The legendary Crown Prince of the Western Zhou Dynasty, also known as Prince Jin, who renounced his right to succession and sought

the tranquility of the mountains to practice ascetism, with a view to achieving longevity. Some thirty years later, he was said to have waved farewell to the world and soared to heaven. (See The Story of Wine, note 12.)

In all the better known editions of Tao Yuanming poems, these sixteen lines of joint authorship, bearing no date, are appended to the four - and five-character-line verses which form the first part of his works. This is due to the poem's uncertain authorship.

Commentators have so far been unable to establish the identity of the two co-authors who are here referred to merely by their given names. As to whether or not the opening and concluding lines by Tao's pen are genuine is still an open question. On the chance that the poem's authenticity might yet be established beyond a doubt one day, editors have been cautious not to delete it from their collections of Tao Yuanming poems.

Part Two
Prose Poems
and
Miscellaneous Writings in Prose

A Biographical Sketch of the Five-Willow Gentleman
(392 A.D.)

Unknown were his origins, his name and the way he styled himself. They called him the Five-Willow Gentleman after the five willows gracing the fringe of his cottage.

Quiet and sparing of words, he was concerned with neither fame nor gain. Without being pedantic, he had a passion for learning. Whenever a hidden meaning dawned upon him, he would forget his meals in an ecstasy of delight.

A weakness he had for the brimming cup, and would have indulged more freely in the tippie, had he been less impoverished. Knowing it, kith and kin would ask him over for a drink. Once there, he would drain off whatever amount was to be had, bent on getting himself drunk. As soon as justice had been done to the wine, he would take his leave.

The walls of his bare rooms had ceased to shelter him from wind and sun. His clothes of coarse

cloth would have ceased to provide his body with a cover, had he not tied together in knots each of the many gaping holes. His bamboo vessels and gourd ladles were invariably hollow. Yet he was at peace with himself and contented.

He took pleasure in writing. His works give a fair account of his interests and purpose in life. Thus he lived to the end of his days.

To conclude,
Qian Lou's¹⁾ wife had this to say of her husband:
"Unperturbed (he was) by poverty; indifferent to wealth and rank." Would this not serve for an accurate appraisal of the Five-Willow Gentleman?

With the rim of his wine cup between his lips, poetizing for the sheer joy of it, he appears to be a misplaced ancient of the times of Wu Hui or Ge Tian²⁾.

- 1) A recluse of the state of Qi, in the Warring States Period. Although of a needy family, he rejected the idea of pursuing an official career and repeatedly refused to accept ministerial posts offered to him by the sovereigns of the states of Qi and Lu. At his death, the only bedquilt he had was too short to cover his dead body. He became the image of the lofty, poor scholar. (See Seven Poems on Destitute