

Two Stories by Zhao Zhenkai

The Poetry and Fiction of Bei Dao/Zhao Zhenkai

IN DECEMBER 1978, the pages of an unofficial magazine, *Jintian* 今天, were pasted up in three places in Peking: on a wall at Xidan soon to be known as Democracy Wall; on the wall of the Ministry of Culture; and on the gate of the offices of *Shikan* 詩刊 (Poetry), an official national magazine. In January the following year, these big-character posters appeared in magazine form, typewritten and mimeographed, and subtitled in English *The Moment* (later issues renamed *Today*). Unlike most of the other unofficial journals connected with the Democracy Movement, which focused on political analysis and issues, *Today* was essentially a literary journal, featuring poetry, prose, literary criticism and translations from foreign literature.

The writers who contributed to *Today* expressed a strong awareness of the independence of literature from politics; their literary goals were broader and deeper than those of both the politically-oriented writers of the Democracy movement and the “new literary tide” which had been officially recognized in December 1978 at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress. Unwilling to allow that literature is basically just a tool for class struggle or that the uniqueness of the individual is subordinate to social or class character, the *Today* writers sought to explore hitherto restricted areas in art and politics in China: the relationship between the individual and society, the fundamentals of human nature, the full expression of the self. Such explorations could not but imply an inherent questioning of the present system as a whole. The *Today* group, in its particular concern with the state of literature, extended its questioning to a re-evaluation of the Chinese cultural tradition, urging a “broader perspective” in cultural matters as a necessary means of revitalizing Chinese literature. Although closed by the authorities in September 1980, the *Today* publications and their writers have left a permanent mark in the Chinese literary world.

Zhao Zhenkai 趙振開 was one of the chief editors of *Today*. Under various pseudonyms he also published a rather large body of his own work in *Today*, including the two stories and most of the poems by him in this special issue of *Renditions*. He was born in Peking in 1949, but his family was originally from the south. His father was then, and still is, a professional administrator; his mother was a nurse, later a doctor. His education, at one of the top high schools in Peking, was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, and for a brief period he was a Red Guard activist. In 1969 he was assigned work in a construction company in Peking, where he remained until 1980. Since 1979, when one of his poems was published in *Poetry*, many of his poems and stories have appeared in the official press, and he has enjoyed a strong following throughout China, especially among the young. He is

currently an editor at *El Popola Cinio*, China's Esperanto magazine.¹

At first glance the poet and the fiction writer appear to be two different persons inhabited by two widely different sensibilities. In fact, they represent two aspects of a profoundly complex personality: a traveller in search of spiritual solace, and an observer of spiritual sterility. The two sides overlap: in the bitter edge of despair which surfaces in the poems like a reef at low tide, and in the tenderness which informs the rare moments of shared love in a lifetime of rejection and betrayal. Nevertheless the contrast is sufficient to justify the choice of different pen-names by the author for his work. Bei Dao 北島 is the name he has been using almost invariably for his poems; for his fiction, first published under the pen-names Ai Shan 艾珊 and Shi Mo 石默, he has now reverted to his real name, Zhao Zhenkai.

The poet Bei Dao² is a traveller on a quest which leads him in many directions. Most often it leads him to the sea, to a lonely island or shore pounded by waves; but without a boat ticket, he is reduced to dreaming of the ocean and what lies beyond. Sometimes his quest takes him to a river bank, a sheltering haven to the poor and needy; sometimes it takes him to a valley, protected from the winds and time; sometimes it takes him to a deserted temple, where perhaps an omen of regeneration lingers about the ruins; sometimes a park with trees and a pond in the middle of the city offers temporary refuge. At the end of the quest lies the ideal, the union of loving hearts dwelling together in a centre of peace like the eye of a cyclone. The mood is subdued, but not hopeless, and companionship alleviates the trials of the journey through hostile territory. The consolations of nature and love are real, and dreams are true. Nevertheless even in the more tranquil poems the unasked questions intrude: what forces the traveller forward and at the same time impedes his journey? From what does he seek refuge? Some of the poems contain a note of despair, some an overwhelming cry. The ordinary acts of daily life are fraught with an unknown but menacing danger; all that is precious in life becomes meaningless and fades away; for years beauty has been a lie, and deception a kind of devotion; night stretches on interminably, without promise of dawn.

In fiction the author is not pursuing his private quest but becomes an observer of the present moment in the lives of others. Selecting passages in a man or woman's life when inner torment threatens or destroys the mask of cynical indifference, he frequently portrays a kind of spiritual brutality or corruption. But despite the ugliness that emerges under the author's pen, there is no sense whatsoever of any hidden perversity of taste. The acuteness of the author's perception and his honesty as a writer force him to confront the viler aspects of existence, a confrontation that leaves him exhausted and depressed. There is no sentimentality or tacked-on ending to strike a false note of sensationalism. Instead the brutality is relieved by moments of great delicacy when love or memory reveals the potentiality of human worth amid sterility and betrayal. With great subtlety, the author suggests in these moment the self-awareness and self-disgust that co-habit with corruption. The objectivity of the author's voice prevents the self-disgust from spilling over

¹For further biographical detail, see "A Poetry of Shadows: An Introduction to Bei Dao's Poems", in *Notes from the City of the Sun: Poems by Bei Dao*, edited and translated by Bonnie S. McDougall, Cornell

University China-Japan Program, 1983.

²For a selection of Bei Dao's poems, see below pp. 195-208.

in a melodramatic bid for the reader's sympathy. Instead the bleak but under-dramatized narrative permits the reader to imagine that betrayal and sterility are not the necessary and inevitable condition of the human race, but a failure of courage under unusually adverse circumstances.

"Waves" is the author's longest, most complex and most experimental work. The original draft was completed in November 1974, revised in June 1976 and revised again in April 1979. As his first major effort in fiction, Zhao Zhenkai has an affectionate regard for it though admitting its relative naivety. For him its value lies in its authenticity and spirit of rebellion. This modest appraisal does not do justice to a work that testifies so positively to the creativity latent in young Chinese writers despite the rigours of the past thirty years. "Waves" is a patchwork of reflections in the minds of several characters. There is no detached author, and the reader is present as the action unfolds, piecing together the story from the characters' individual perceptions. The unifying element in "Waves", linking the fragmented composition verbally, structurally and thematically, is suggested by the title itself, literally "wave motion" or "undulation".³ Past and present alternate in the minds of the characters, scenes change fluidly, relationships intertwine. Reality is seen as a composite of multiple reflections and permutations, a pattern which undulates through time and the simultaneous perceptions of individuals. Life is a wave-like experience of fluctuations between illusion and reality, between a person and society, within relationships and even within a single personality. While the vision, structure and title of Zhao Zhenkai's "Waves" all suggest Virginia Woolf's most experimental novel, *The Waves*, the former was written before the author came in contact with Western modernist writing. Even since the efflorescence of the late seventies, Zhao Zhenkai's remarkable achievement in "Waves" has rarely been challenged.

"Moon on the Manuscript" is a very different kind of writing: controlled, detached, ironic. The reader is not obliged to sympathize with the first person narrator, simply to observe the way his mind works under the pressures of a highly competitive and demanding society. The brutality of this story is not physical but mental: violence is done to conscience, not to body. One of Zhao Zhenkai's most brilliant achievements to date, "Moon" is a masterpiece of the short story form.

One of the most striking characteristics of Bei Dao as a poet is his great courage—in a daring break with the practice of the past thirty years in China—in speaking with his own voice about his own hopes and fears. In his fiction, he avoids autobiography (also a rare phenomenon in contemporary Chinese fiction), but nevertheless expresses the fears and confusion of his own generation in a particularly compelling way. Whether as a poet or a writer of fiction, Zhao Zhenkai is concerned with what is universal and basic in human nature and human relationships. While critics carp at the difficulties of his "eccentric" and "disjointed" style, readers who share his concerns about the life and death of the human spirit have little trouble following his train of thought. The style is indivisible from the content: a continuing exploration into the human condition.

—SUSETTE COOKE and BONNIE S. McDOUGALL

³ Compare the passage in Yang Mu's essay, p. 78 above: 'Most modern poets . . . turn inward to describe the inner world of the human psyche, and its "undulations" 內心靈魂的波動.' (ed.)