



WU WEI

Based on the Philosophy of Lao Tse

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Henri Borel

(Translated by Shyam Sunder Jhunjhunwala)

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The present study on Lao Tse's 'Wu Wei' should not be considered in any way as a translation, even free, of that philosopher's work. I have simply tried to render the essence of his wisdom in all its purity: I have here and there given a direct translation of the truths enunciated by him, but most of this work is the development, in a form elaborated by me, of some principles to which he confined himself for formulation.

My conception of the terms 'Tao' and 'Wu Wei' is different from that of most of the Sinologists like Stanislas Julien, Giles and Legge who have translated the 'Tao Teh King'. This is not the place to justify it: one can judge better after the following pages, if this conception is wisdom or nonsense.

Lao Tse's is a tiny book and extremely simple at that: the author's thought is condensed in a few words taken in their pure primitive sense, sometimes a very different sense than the one assumed in other works, in the works of Confucius for example, but those few words are the Gospel. Lao Tse's work is not a philosophical treatise; it simply exposes the truths to which Lao Tse was led by his philosophy: only the quintessence of that philosophy is there, not the development of his system.

This small work is wholly penetrated by that essence, but is not a translation of Lao Tse. In his book there is none of the comparisons drawn by me from the landscape, the sea and the clouds; nowhere has he spoken of Art, also he has not specially dealt with Love. In dealing with these subjects, I have expressed the ideas and feelings deducing instinctively from Lao Tse's profound philosophy, for one who has been long penetrated by it. It may be then that my study contains much more of myself than I imagine,

but in that case also, it will be the expression of the thoughts and feelings awakened in me by the words of Lao Tse.

I have taken help only of the Chinese works on this philosophy, and of a small number of them. When, later, I read various translations in French and English, I was highly surprised to see how confused and unintelligible they are.

I have adhered to my simple idea of Lao Tse's work: I couldn't make any change there, for I felt their truth inside myself, as a simple and natural faith.

Henri Borel

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

In her talks of August 15 and 29, 1956, the Mother referred to *Wu Wei*, a French book, which she was reading out in her Friday classes. Whenever I went through these talks, I had a wish to read *Wu Wei*, but for decades I could not get it. One day in September 1996, a friend brought me, unasked, a typed copy of the French version done by Pierre Bernard, published by Librairie Fischbacher S.A., Paris. I was so impressed by it that I wanted to translate it into English. Another friend made inquiries in Paris and found that the original book was published more than fifty years ago and that no English version seems to have been made yet. He procured a photo copy of the book from the publishers for which I am obliged to them. In the revision of the translation I have been happily assisted by Hamsanandan de Reede, M.A., though not a born French linguist.

So here it is.

February 28, 1997
Shyam Sunder Jhunhunwala

CHAPTER ONE

TAO

I was at the temple of Shien Shan, on an island in the Chinese Sea, a few hours of journey from the port of Ha To.

Towards the West gently rise two chains of mountains joining their soft contours behind the island; on the East the Ocean shines as far as the eyes go. Very high, built upon the rock, the Temple stands in the shade of large Buddha trees.

Visitors to the island are scarce. Sometimes, fishermen fleeing before the danger of a typhoon anchor there when they have no hope left to reach the port. Nobody knows why the Temple is there in that solitary place, but the centuries have established its sacred right to be there. Strangers come there rarely, and on the island itself there are about a hundred inhabitants, very poor people, who live there simply because their ancestors lived there before them. I had gone to that place hoping to find someone of serious mind with whom I could study.

For more than a year I had visited temples and monasteries in the region in search of learned priests capable of teaching me what it was impossible for me to draw from available superficial books on Chinese religion, but as yet I had met only ignorant and narrow-minded beings, prostrating before idols whose symbolic sense escaped them and repeating strange 'suttas'¹ of which they didn't understand a word. Also, I had been obliged to draw all my knowledge from badly translated works, which had been badly treated at the hands of European scholars yet more badly than by

¹ The Chinese priests have the custom of repeating "suttas" or verses of religious poetry (which, to judge by their sound, have been drawn from Sanskrit and transliterated into Chinese sounds) of which they do not understand a word.

those of the Chinese ones that I had consulted. However, finally, an old Chinese had spoken to me of the "Sage of Shien Shan" as one well versed in the secrets of Heaven and Earth, and, though not very hopefully, I had crossed the sea to find him.

This temple was similar to many others that I had seen. Sordid priests, robed in sullied grey, sauntering on the steps, looked at me with a grin of stupefaction. The statues of Kwan Yin, Shakya Muni and Sam Pao Fu, that had been recently restored, blazed with the most violent colours one could think of, and completely disfigured their primitive beauty. The floor was untidy, covered with dust, littered with orange skin and debris of sugar cane. A thick and heavy atmosphere oppressed my chest.

Turning to one of the priests, I spoke to him:

"I have come to pay a visit to an old Sage known by the name of Lao Tse? Isn't he here?"

He replied with an air of astonishment, "Lao Tse lives in the hut at the top of the cliff, but he doesn't like the Barbarians."

I asked him calmly, "Would you like to take me to him for a dollar, Bhikkhu?"

There was greed in his look but he shook his head and answered, "I dare not. Find him yourself."

The other priests offered me tea with grinning smile in the hope of alms.

I left them and climbed the rocks. In half an hour I reached the summit and found there a small square hut built of stone. I knocked at the door and quite soon I heard the bolt being pulled.

The Sage was standing before me and looking at me. It was all a revelation.

I had the same impression as at the sight of a great light which does not dazzle, but soothes.

He was before me, tall and straight like a palm tree. His face was peaceful like a calm evening, amidst the silence of trees and tranquillity of moonlight. His whole person breathed the majesty of Nature, as simply beautiful, as purely spontaneous as a mountain or a cloud. From his presence alone emanated a sacred atmosphere like the pious influence that penetrates the sweet light of a countryside at twilight. I felt uneasy under his deep look, and saw my miserable existence revealed in all its mediocrity. I was unable to speak, but felt his luminous influence in silence.

He raised his hand with a gesture similar to a swaying flower, and gave it to me with a cordial frankness. He spoke, and his voice was musical and sweet like the chant of the breeze amidst the trees:

“You are welcome, Stranger. What do you want of me, this old man?”

“I am in search of a Master”, I replied to him humbly. “I am in search of a direction that can make a good man of me. For long I have explored this country, full of beauty, but men seem to be dead and I am as poor as ever.”

“You are making some mistake here”, said the Sage. “Don’t try so hard to be so good. Don’t try for it excessively hard, else you will never attain to the true wisdom. You know how the Yellow Emperor² regained his magic pearl? I am going to tell you that.”³

“The Yellow Emperor once went on a voyage to the Red Sea and climbed the summit of the mountains of Kouen Loun. Returning to the South, he lost his magic pearl. He resorted to his brain,

² The Yellow Emperor is a legendary sovereign who seemed to have reigned towards the year 2697 B.C.

³ The next passage has been taken from the twelfth chapter of “Nan Hwa King”.

implored it to find it back, but in vain. He resorted to his eyes, but in vain. He resorted to his eloquence, but always in vain. In the end he resorted to Nothing, and Nothing rendered it to him. 'What an extraordinary thing', exclaimed the Yellow Emperor, 'that Nothing has the power to find it back!'

"Do you understand me, young man?"

"I think the pearl was his soul", I replied, "and the mind, sight and speech cover up the soul rather than revealing it.

And I think, it is only in the peace of a perfect quietude that the consciousness of his soul was accorded to the Yellow Emperor. Is it correct, Master?"

"Yes, it is so. You have seen correctly. And do you know also who is the author of this nice legend?"

"I am young and ignorant, I don't know."

"It is Chuang Tse, the disciple of Lao Tse, the greatest Sage of China. It is neither Confucius nor Mencius who have expressed the purest wisdom in the country, but Lao Tse. He had been the greatest of all and Chuang Tse was his disciple. You, people of other lands, you also, I know, have a certain admiration full of good intentions for Lao Tse, but very few of you know that he was the purest human being who ever lived. Have you read Tao Teh King and have you ever searched for what he meant by Tao?"

"I will deem myself to be truly fortunate, Master, if you kindly explain it to me."

"I think, young man I can truly initiate you. For years I did not have any pupil, and in your eyes I don't see curiosity, but rather a pure desire for wisdom to liberate your soul. Now, listen⁴ :

⁴ The whole of the next passage until the words and the myriads return into the Unique" is an adaptation, but not a translation of the first section of Tao Teh King. Our Occidental

“Tao, in reality, is nothing other than what you, people of other lands, call God. Tao is the Unique, the beginning and the end - He contains all things and it is to Him that all things return.

“Lao Tse wrote the word ‘Tao’ at the beginning of his book, but in reality he meant the Supreme, the Unique, who can’t have any name precisely because He is the Unique. Your word ‘God’ is equally inappropriate. ‘Wu’ that is to say ‘Nothing’, that is Tao. You

languages do not have the terms to render the style of Lao Tse maintaining his astounding simplicity. My version, which owes partly to the aid of Chinese commentators, resorts to a wholly new interpretation and, as far as I can judge, the correct one. Herbert Giles, one of the most reputed and in some ways the most competent Sinologists, translates only the first sentence of the first section and omits the rest which he regards as negligible, (cf. “The Remains of Lao Tse” by H.A.Giles, Hongkong, China Mail Office, 1886). The same Orientalist translates “Tao” by “The Way” without considering that it has a different sense. What Lao Tse means is the Supreme, the Infinite and that cannot be the Way at the same time, for the Way in a figurative sense leads to a destination and cannot be confused with the latter. Another Sinologist, yet more reputed than Giles, Dr. Legg translates “Tao” by “the course” and the simple line “If Tao could be expressed in words, he will not be the eternal Tao” is turned by him into “The course that can be followed is not the eternal, immutable course”! The origin of these confusions is simple: the word Tao and the Chinese character representing it have numerous meanings: in “Chung Yung” of Confucius they effectively mean “the Way”, but in another hundred cases they mean “word, expression”. Lao Tse having employed this character twice in one sentence with two different meanings, all translators have fallen into error. The sentence is as simple as possible, and in two of the Chinese publications seen by me, the commentators have given the same meaning as I have, by using the word “said” (instead of “expressed”) and “by word of mouth”. However Wells Williams is the only Sinologist to catch the meaning when he translates thus, “The Tao who can be expressed is not the eternal Tao”. The construction of the sentence has not been rendered correctly but at least the sense is right.

After the publication of my study in the Dutch Review Gids I saw for the first time the work of Professor de Groot under the title Jaarlijksche Feesten en Gebruiken der Emoy Chinezen. There I saw that the author is in agreement with me to consider “Tao” as untranslatable: he sees in it a profound conception “for which the Chinese philosopher himself did not find a name and which he was constrained to designate by the word “Tao”. The Professor adds, “If one translates this word by “the universal soul of Nature”, “the omnipresent energy of Nature”, or simply “Nature”, one will certainly not be far from the philosopher’s conception. In my view the term implies something yet higher: anyway, among all the interpretations known to me the Professor’s is the one I am closest to agree with.

don't understand me? Listen again:

“There exists an absolute Reality, without beginning and without end, which we can't understand and which, therefore to us, resembles Nothing. That what we are able to understand and which has a relative reality for us is, in truth, an appearance only. It is indeed the product of the absolute Reality, since all emanates from that Reality and returns to it, but things that are real to our eyes are not real in themselves. What we call the Being is in fact the Non-Being, and what we call the Non-Being is the Being in its true sense. As a result we live in great darkness. What we imagine as real is not real, but yet it emanates from the Real, for the Real is All. Thus, the Being and the Non-Being are Tao, both of them; but, above all, don't forget that Tao is only a sound articulated by a human being and *its idea is essentially inexpressible*. All things perceived by the senses and all desires of the heart are unreal. Tao is the source of Heaven and Earth. One begets two, two will beget three. Three will beget myriads, and the myriads return into the Unique.

“If you remember this well, young man, you have crossed the first gate on the path of Wisdom.

“You now know that Tao is the origin of all, – of trees, flowers and birds, of the ocean, desert and rocks, of light and darkness, of heat and cold, of day and night, of summer and winter, and of your own life. Worlds and oceans evaporate in the Eternity. Man emerges from darkness, laughs for a moment in the clarity of light and disappears; but, in all these vicissitudes, it is the Unique that is being manifest. Tao is in all. Your soul, in its utmost depth, is Tao.

“Do you see the world opening up before you, child?”

And with a majestic gesture he pointed to the sea.

On each side in the atmosphere rose mountains, distinctly, solid and massive – like solidified thoughts, strongly built with a

conscious energy – and, in the distance, they let themselves remain dreaming under the influence of light and air. On a very high point stood out a small tree, isolated, with delicate leaves, bathed in light. The evening had begun to fall, full of a sweet serenity, and a pinkish light, indistinct but yet living, gave an air of peaceful joy to the blue mountains which stood in contrast with it. A peaceful aspiration, a calm equilibrium was released from all things as if from the ethereal atmosphere of conscious piety. And the sea rose softly, moving with silent waves, approaching with the irresistible calm as an aspect of the Infinite. The sail of a small boat with its golden reflections was moving towards the island: it looked so tiny in the immense ocean, so bold and so exquisite! All was pure: nowhere any trace of anything vile.”

And with the rare impulse of a powerful joy, I exclaimed:

“Yes, Master, I feel it now: what I am searching, that is everywhere. I had no need to search for it so far away, for That is quite close to me, That is everywhere, - That which I searched for, That which is myself, That, That is my soul. Truly, it is a revelation: God is everywhere. Tao is in all things.”

“True, my child, but don’t make a mistake here. Tao is there in what you see, but Tao is not what you see. Don’t think that Tao is visible to your eyes. Tao will not awaken joy in your heart nor make you shed tears, because all that you see and all your emotions are relative and not real.

“Moreover now I will speak to you no further on the subject. You are but at the first gate yet and you are seeing only the first rays of dawn. It is already a lot that you conceive of Tao as present in all things. This will make your life more natural and more confident, for, believe me, you are secure in Tao’s arms like a child in its mother’s! And this will render you profoundly grave, for you

will feel yourself sacred everywhere like a priest in his temple. From now, you will no more take fright from the vicissitudes of things, neither from life, nor from death because you know that as life emanates from Tao, so does death; and it is such a simple thing that Tao, who has penetrated into your life, continues to surround you after your death, without break!

“Look at the scene around. The trees, the mountains, the sea, they are your brothers as are air and light. Observe how the sea approaches us spontaneously, naturally, purely “for it has to be thus”? Do you see that bush over there, leaning towards you as a little sister? Do you see the simple movement of its thin leaves? Well, I am going to speak to you of “Wu Wei”⁵, of “non-resistance”, of “spontaneous movement” decided by the impulse that is in you just as it is born from Tao. Men will be truly men if they would let their life flow of itself as the sea swells, as the flower blooms in the simple beauty of Tao. In every man there is a tendency towards the movement which, proceeding from Tao, tends to bring him back towards Tao; but men are blinded by their senses and by their greed. Pleasure, desire, hatred, fame or riches excite them to make effort. Their movements are vehement, violent, and disorderly, their progression is a series of furious jumps and violent falls. They cling

⁵ The word “Wu Wei” which is really untranslatable has been rendered by the Sinologists by the word inaction, signifying idleness, inertia. It is absolutely certain that it does not signify idleness: rather it evokes the idea of action, activity – that is, inactivity of passions and perverted, “unnatural” desires, but activity in the sense of natural movement that proceeds from Tao. Even so, we find in ‘Nan Hwa King’ the following passage: “The skies and the earth do nothing (in the bad sense of the word) and (yet) there is nothing they do not do.” The whole Nature consists of ‘Wu Wei’, a natural movement that emanates from Tao. Thus, in translating ‘Wu Wei’ by inaction, the Sinologists arrived at a meaning exactly contrary to that of the Chinese text.

Lao Tse himself does not elaborate further on the subject. What follows is my own interpretation of the text. The first chapter of the original makes only one page and contains only forty-nine characters. Nothing else shows better the astonishing subtlety and the conciseness of the language of Lao Tse who has expressed so much in so few words.

to all that is unreal. They long for too many things to be able to long for the Unique. Sometimes they also desire to be wise and good, and that is the worst of all. They desire to know too much of it.

“The only remedy, here it is: they must return to the source from where they came. Tao is in us. Tao is in repose, and it is only by renunciation of desire, even of the desire of goodness or wisdom, that we can attain repose. Oh! this desire to know what is Tao! This painful search for words by which to express, to try to know Tao! The true sages follow the Teaching without words, that which remains unexpressed.⁶ And who will ever express it? Those who know what Tao is, don’t speak of it; those who speak, don’t know it.⁷ Myself, I will not say what Tao is. It is you who have to make the discovery, liberating yourself for it from all passion and from all greed, living with an absolute spontaneity, not making any effort which is not natural. One has to approach Tao without hurt or effort, with a movement as reposeful as that of this vast ocean. The ocean moves, not because it wishes to move or because it knows that that is wise or good: it moves involuntarily, unconscious of movement. It is thus that you also will return to Tao, and when you have returned to Him, you will not know it, because you yourself would have become Tao.”

He fell silent and looked at me with sweetness. In his eyes was a peaceful clarity, similar to the nuance of the skies.

“Father”, I told him, “what you say is beautiful like the sea and seems as simple as Nature, but surely it is not as easy, this absorption of man in Tao, without effort, remaining inactive.”

“Don’t take one word for another”, he replied. “By absence of

⁶ This sentence has been translated from “Tao Teh King” (Chapter II).

⁷ From the beginning of the 56th Chapter. This sentence is there also in the 15th chapter of ‘Nan Hwa King’.

effort - Wu Wei - Lao Tse did not mean inaction, idleness with closed eyes. He meant relaxation of terrestrial activity, of desire, of greed for things unreal. That implies a powerful movement of the soul which has to be released from its wretched body like a bird from his cage. He wanted to indicate a kind of surrender to an inner directive power which derives from Tao and takes us back to Tao. And, believe me, this movement is as natural as that of the cloud passing above us."

Very high, in the blue ether, golden clouds were passing over us, slowly, towards the sea. They were resplendent with a wonderful purity, like that of a great sacred love: gently they were drifting away into the distance.

"A moment more, and they would be gone; they will disappear in the immensity of the skies", said the Sage, "and you will then see nothing else but the eternal blue. It is thus that your soul will be absorbed in Tao."

"My life is brimming over with sins", I replied to him. "I carry a burden of dark desires, and it is the same for men, my brothers. How could *our* life ever float thus towards Tao, radiant, taken back to its purest essence? It is so heavy with evil that it must inevitably sink in the mud."

"No, no, don't think so", replied the Sage who was smiling with a touching benevolence. No man can annihilate Tao, and the imperishable light of the soul radiates in each of us. Don't believe that man's perversity can be so big or so powerful. The eternal Tao dwells in us: in the murderer and in the courtesan as well as in the philosopher and in the poet. Everyone carries within himself an indestructible treasure and no one is better than any other. One can not love someone in preference to another; one cannot bless someone and curse another. They are as similar in their essence as

are any two grains of sand on this rock and none will be banished from Tao for ever, for all carry Tao within them. Their sins are illusory, unreal as vapour. Their acts are only a false appearance and their words vanish like ephemeral thoughts. They cannot be "bad", yet more, they cannot be "good": they are irresistibly drawn towards Tao like this drop of water towards the vast sea. Some may take more time than others, but that is all, and what do centuries matter in front of eternity? Poor friend, has your sin rendered you so fearful? Could you believe that your sin is more powerful than Tao? Could you believe that the sin of mankind is more powerful than Tao? You have made too much effort to become what is called "good", and you have come to the point of seeing your own wickedness with a false clarity. You have desired too much goodness in others and their sin has troubled you unreasonably: but all that is appearance. Tao is neither good, nor bad: Tao is real. Tao alone *is*, and the life of unreal things is a life of false contrasts, of false relations which have no independent existence and which largely mislead into error. Above all, then, don't desire to be good and don't call yourself bad. Wu Wei, exempt from effort, carried by the force inherent in you, - well, that is what you should be. Not bad, not good either - not small, not big either, not low, not high either: and it is only then that you *will be* in reality, although in the ordinary sense of the word you will have ceased to be. When you will be liberated from all appearances, from all your greed and all your desires, you will be carried by your own impulse without even being conscious that you are moving, and that movement of the sole true principle of life, which is to move of oneself, free and without bonds towards Tao, will be as easy and as unconscious as the dissolution of that little cloud above us."

I had a sudden feeling of deliverance: it was neither of joy, nor of happiness, it was rather a very calm feeling of expansion, an

enlargement of my horizon of thought.

“Thank you, Father!”, I told him. The revelation of Tao that I owe to you, already communicates to me an impulse which seems to carry me forward gently and which I cannot define. How admirable is Tao! With all my wisdom, with all my knowledge, never before did I experience something similar.”

“Speak not of that thirst for wisdom”, said the Sage. “Don’t desire to know Tao too much, it is only thus that you will become capable to know him by intuition: for the knowledge acquired by an effort which is not natural, only results in distancing one further from Tao. Don’t make any effort to know all that which can be known about men and things that surround you. Above all, don’t search for happiness too eagerly and don’t fear unhappiness, for they are not real, neither the one nor the other. Joy is not real, more so, suffering. Tao would not be Tao if you could represent him to yourself as suffering or as joy, as happiness or as unhappiness: for Tao is an All and contrasts cannot exist in him.

“Listen, with what simplicity Chuang Tse has expressed it: The greatest joy, it is ‘no joy’. And, for you, suffering also would have ceased to be. Never believe that suffering is a real thing, an essential element of existence. Your sufferings will disappear one day from your life as fog does from the mountains, for one day you will understand how all facts of life are natural and spontaneous. All the great problems which seem to you to be full of mystery and obscurity will become ‘Wu Wei’, wholly simple, without resistance, and cease to be an object of perplexity for you: for all proceeds from Tao, all having been made a natural part of the grandiose system which has come out of a unique principle. Then, nothing will have any more the power to trouble you or give you joy. You will laugh no more, and you would have ceased to weep. I see a doubt in your

look, as if you find me too hard, too cold: but when you would have gone a little further, you will understand that it indicates perfect harmony with Tao. Then envisaging suffering you will understand that it must disappear one day, for it is unreal. Envisaging joy, you will understand that it is but an imperfect joy and mixed with shadows, which depends on the moment and circumstances, and which draws its apparent existence from a contrast with sorrow. In front of a man of goodness, you will find it wholly natural that he is what he is, and you will have a presentiment how much better he will be when he would have ceased to represent the conventional type of goodness. You will look at a criminal with a complete calm, without any special love or particular hatred, for he is your companion in Tao and his crime is impotent to annihilate Tao within him.

“Then, for the first time, when you would have become Wu Wei, — not existing in the usual human sense of the word - all will be well for you and you will journey through your life with a movement as calm and as natural as that of the vast sea in front of us. Nothing will disturb your peace. Your sleep will become dreamless and your consciousness of self will not bring you worry.⁸ You will see Tao in all things, you will become one with all that exists; you will feel yourself as intimate with the whole Nature as with yourself, and journeying with a calm submission through alternations of day and night, summer and winter, life and death, you will enter one day into Tao in whom there are no more any alternations and from whom you have just come out so pure that you will return into him.”

“Father, what you say is simple and compellingly believable; but

⁸ This sentence is expressed almost as follows in the 6th chapter of ‘Nan Hwa King’: “The true men of primitive ages slept without dreams and their awareness of themselves was free from cares”.

life is yet so dear! and I have fear of death. I am yet afraid that my friends may die or my wife or my children. Death seems to me so dark, so morose, and life is radiant, oh! so radiant, with the sun and the green and flowery earth.”

“That is because you don’t know yet to feel what is perfectly natural in death, as truly natural as in life. You are attaching too much importance to this insignificant body and to the grave into which it must go down: but that is the prisoner’s impression, troubling him, even at the time of release, the idea of quitting the dark cell where he has lived so long. You look at death in contrast to life, and both of them are unreal, both are a change and an illusion: but, only your soul is passing from a known sea unto an unknown ocean. What is real in you – your soul - cannot perish and does not participate in this fear. This terror has to be vanquished for ever, or yet better, when you will be more aged, when you will have lived spontaneously, naturally, following the impulses of Tao, you will yourself cease to feel it. You will not lament any more for these who entered into rest before you and to whom you will one day be reunited without knowing that you are reunited to them, because these contrasts would have ceased to be apparent to you ...

In the old times,⁹ a day came when Chuang Tse’s wife died, and Hui Tse found the widower peacefully seated on the floor and passing time, as usual, striking a gong. When Hui Tse let him see that he interpreted his conduct as one of indifference, Chuang Tse

⁹ This episode is translated from the 18th section of ‘Nan Wha King’. By the term ‘The Great Abode’, Chuang Tse obviously meant the universe: the idea of Abode, ‘home’ gives this passage something of the familiar and intimate, as if Chuang Tse had the feeling that the dead stay at their places as a man is in his home. H. Giles translates by “the Eternity”, of which there is no question in the Chinese text, and thus his translation loses the nuance of confidence which renders the words of Chuang Tse so touching. (Cf. ‘Chuang Tse’ by H. Giles, London, Bernard Quatrach 1889). The original expression is “Ku Shih”, that is “Great Abode”.

replied to him, 'Your manner of envisaging is not natural. Firstly, it is true, I was troubled: it could not have been otherwise, but after some reflection I thought that at the origin she was not in this life, and that at that time, not only was she not born, she had no form either, - that not only that she had no form, still more, in the absence of form no germ of life had yet penetrated. - that nevertheless then, as in a furrow warmed up by the sun, vital energy began to wake up, - that the vital energy developed a form and the form gave place for birth. Today one other vicissitude was accomplished and she has died: it resembles the succession of the four seasons - spring, summer, autumn and winter. She sleeps in peace at the Great Abode. If I had wept and lamented, I would be acting as if the spirit of all that had not entered into me, and that is why I don't do it any more."

He spoke in all simplicity and in a tone that showed how it appeared natural to him; but it was not clear to me yet, and I said to him:

"I find this wisdom terrible: it nearly frightens me. Life would seem to me so cold and so empty if I were wise to this extent!"

"Life *is* indeed virtually cold and empty", he answered tranquilly, without any trace of scorn in the tone of his voice. And man is as deceptive as life itself. There is not one who knows himself, not one who knows men - his brothers -and yet they are all similar. In fact, life doesn't exist, it is unreal."

I remained, eyes plunged in the descending twilight; not able to add anything. The mountains seemed to sleep peacefully in the soft velvety light of the faint evening mist, resting under the large sky, like little children. Indistinct red lights twinkled feebly above us and, in the distance, rose a sad and monotonous song accompanied by the playing of a flute. In the depths of darkness, the sea reposed

in its majesty and the murmur of the Infinite filled everything.

Then a great sadness rose in me, and tears came to my eyes, while I asked him with a passionate insistence:

“What do you do then with friendship and love?”

He looked at me; I didn't see him distinctly any more in the night, but a strangely soft light shone in his eyes and he replied in his peaceful voice:

“These are by far the best contents of existence. They are just one with the first leaping up of Tao in your being, but a day will come when they will not be more for you than what the banks of a river are for its waters when they get lost in the Ocean. Don't think that I am teaching you to banish love from your heart, for that will be going against Tao. Love what you love and don't let yourself go astray by the idea that love is an obstacle, holding you captive. To exile love from your heart will be an insensible and lowly act and distance you further from Tao than ever before. I am only saying that love will one day disappear of itself, without your knowing it, and that Tao is not love. Don't ever forget that so long as I wish to speak and so long as it is good for you, I speak to you of the highest aspect of things. If I were speaking only of this existence and of men, I would say that love is above all; but for him who has returned into Tao, love belongs to the forgotten past.

“It is getting late and I don't wish to give you too much in the beginning to think of. Undoubtedly you wish to pass the night at the Temple and I am going to prepare your bed. Come with me and take good care going down the mountain.”

He lighted a small lamp and gave me his hand to guide me. We advanced with small steps: he was watchful as if I were his child; whenever the slope became steeper, he lighted my path and made me go slow, watching every movement of mine.

Arriving at the foot of the hill, he showed me the small room reserved for travelling mandarins¹⁰ and found me a pillow and cover.

“Father”, I said to him, “I thank you from all my heart. Could I ever show you my gratitude?”

He looked at me peacefully, and his look was grand like the sea. He was calm and sweet like the night. He smiled at me and it was like light smiling over the earth. And he left without a word.

¹⁰ Most of the temples keep a room as a lodge for mandarins or where the European travellers can pass a night, probably even longer.

CHAPTER TWO

ART

“What is Art?” I asked the Sage.

We were sitting on the mountain-side, under the shade of an overhanging rock. The sea spread out in front of us, a limitless glitter of light under the splendour of the sun. Golden sails were gliding on its surface; flying sea-gulls were passing and repassing in their noble curves; large clouds of snow-like purity were rising on the horizon and floating in the blue with a majestic slowness.

“Art is something as natural as the sea, the birds and the clouds”, answered the Sage. “You will not have so much difficulty in understanding and feeling it as in understanding and feeling Tao. It will suffice for you to look around yourself: Poetry is as old as the sky and the earth.”¹¹

“Beauty was born at the same time as the sky and the earth. The sun, the moon, the mist, reddening at dawn and twilight hours, illuminate each other, and yet howsoever infinitely varied and wonderful be the aspects presented by these great phenomena of Nature, there are no colours to paint them as we colour cloth. All phenomena of the world, in the course of their own occurrence, give birth to sound and all sound implies some movement which is its cause. Among all sounds the greatest are those of wind and thunder.

“Listen to the stream which, passing over the rocks, rushes down the mountain. Though its flow be little, its voice makes itself heard, in high or low volume, brief or prolonged, not exactly after

¹¹ The following passage till the end of the sentence, “Poetry is the music of the heart” has been taken by me from the preface written by Ong Glao Ki for his publication *The Poetry of Tang Dynasty*. Ong Glao Ki lived during the first half of the 18th century.

the rules of music, it is true, but it has its rhythm and its law. It is the natural (spontaneous) voice of sky and earth, the voice born of movement.

“But, well, when the human heart is in its purest dispositions, when the flame of intelligence is fully live, if the heart is moved, it, it also exhales a sound. Is it not a wonderful metamorphosis that from it literature is born?” “So, Poetry is the music of the heart?”

“Certainly. It is quite natural and you must have felt that it is so. Poetry reveals itself in all who have ears and eyes, for the entire Nature is a sublime poet: and it is because of its very simplicity that it is so strict and so unchanging. When movement is born, the poem’s music pours out of itself; no other sound is poetry. The sound must be born of itself - Wu Wei; it cannot be engendered by any artifice. Numerous, quite numerous are they who, by a constrained movement, produce forced sounds, but they are not poets: they are rather more like monkeys and parrots. Truly speaking, true poets are rare, they whose verses stream out of themselves, melodious, powerful like the rumbling of a torrent among rocks, like the rumble of lightning among clouds, sweet as the murmur of a shower at twilight, as the light breath of summer breeze at night. Listen, listen to the sea at our feet! Is it not singing a wonderful song? Is it not a true poem? Is it not pure music? Look, how the waves undulate in their incessant mobility, one after the other, one above the other; they go on undulating, always advancing, always further and further; they retreat only to fade away again in a musical murmur. Do you hear their rhythmic assault? Oh! a poet has to be great and simple as the sea. His inner movement, as that of the sea, is an impulse emanating from Tao: he must abandon himself to it, in peace, without resistance, docile like a child. The sea is grand, very grand; the poet, he also is grand, very grand; but grander, yet grander is Tao who has no grandeur.”

He fell silent listening to the sea, and I saw how its music was penetrating deep in him.

Since his first words I had reflected long on Tao. I had feared that his high and sublime philosophy would imply death for the artist: in getting devoted to this wisdom of his, I was frightened of myself also becoming incapable of feeling the pure inspiration of the poet as well as of being ravished like a child at the sight of beauty.

However I was seeing him here plunged in the purest ecstasy, as if he was contemplating the sea for the first time. Penetrated by veneration, the eyes full of light, he was listening to the melody of waves.

“Is it not beautiful?” he resumed. “Isn’t it admirable, this sound emanating from Tao who has no sound; this light emanating from Tao who has no light; the music of words, the verses, born from Tao who is wordless? Aren’t we living in an unbounded mystery, - a mystery which will be resolved one day in the clear vision of absolute truth?”

I remained silent for long, not succeeding yet to grasp fully his thought. It seemed to me too simple, and doubtful. I asked him:

“Can it also be as simple to make and sing poems? Surely it is not easy for us to make verses as it is for a torrent to precipitate among the rocks. Do we not need to exercise ourselves first and to possess the technique of versification and then is it not rather a deliberate act than a spontaneous movement?”

My question did not embarrass him for he replied at once, “Let it not trouble you. Does a man carry in him the true source from where the verses should spring forth or does he not? That is all. The pure impulse that comes from Tao, is it there in him, or the ‘motif’ of his life is something less beautiful? If he carries within him this

source, he is a poet, if not, he is not. By now you have certainly understood that, considering from a higher view-point, all men are in reality poets, for, as I have told you, the essential and original impulse which emanates from Tao and returns unto Him exists in all men, but this impulse is rarely there so prompt and strongly developed as to endow a man with the perception of these superior revelations of beauty, thanks to which, the current of his life escapes between the banks which imprison it and flows on till it gets lost in boundless eternity.

“The same idea can be again translated thus: ordinary men are similar to stagnant water in a terrain, in the midst of poor vegetation, while poets are limpid currents which flow in the midst of splendours of their banks, towards the infinite ocean. But better I explain to you less by images for they are not speaking clear enough for you.

“You would like to know if the man who possesses the true inspiration of a poet is obliged to make certain technical preparations for guidance in his art or if, on the contrary, it is entirely by himself that he moves, as does Nature. No doubt of it, the latter idea is correct. Don’t forget indeed that a young poet, after having studied for a while the different forms of verse, suddenly comes to find them so natural that they remove all inclination of his for anything else. His verses take a beautiful form, involuntarily, simply because any other movement will be foreign to him. That is the difference between a poet and dilettante. The poet sings his verses spontaneously, abandoning himself to his own impulse and later, when he examines them, he recognises that everything in them – the sound, the rhythm, the movement of the whole - is right; on the contrary, the dilettante, after choosing a form of verse from among the types preserved by the artists, tries to forcibly penetrate into them a succession of soulless words. Whereas the words full of

the poet's soul pour forth of themselves, precisely because they were full of the soul; and if we envisage things in their true aspect, there are no immutable and definitive poetic forms; there is not even an absolute law, for the verses that spring forth spontaneously from their source move of themselves and are independent of all human types that were conceived before. The only law is that there is no law.

"Perhaps you will find this idea too bold, young man! Remember, however, that my demonstrations are not lessons from men, but derive from Tao and, besides, I know very few true poets. Truly speaking, men as simple, as pure as Nature are rare. Do you think there are many in your country?"

This unexpected question embarrassed me and I asked myself what it was leading to. Besides it was difficult to answer, and then I put him another question.

"Master, I cannot answer before you have spoken more. Why does a poet make poems?"

This question seemed to astonish him most, for he repeated it as if he doubted that he had heard it right.

"Why does a poet make poems?"

"Yes, Master, why?"

With a frank laugh he replied, "Why does the sea rumble? Why does the bird sing? Do you know, my child?"

"Because they cannot refuse it, Father. Because they must give way to that mode of their nature. That is Wu Wei."

"Undoubtedly. And, well, why should it be otherwise for the poet?"

I reflected a moment, but the response came only with difficulty.

“Indeed, but yet it could have been different. A poet can sing to create a literature when it is lacking or to renew and enrich it when it is in danger of perishing. Such motifs look good but are not unmixed. Certain poets also sing for getting glory, for being famous, for being crowned with laurels or for drawing the smile of young girls with limpid eyes who scatter flowers before them on their way.”

“You must express yourself more exactly”, said the Sage, “and not profane the words which, among thousands of others, should be held sacred above others, for the poets who sing for similar reasons are not at all poets. A poet sings because he has the gift of singing; if he obeys some motivation for singing, he becomes a dilettante.”

“But, Father, after having sung with the same simplicity as the bird, is it possible that later a poet takes pleasure from laurels and roses? That he has jealousy and hate for those who carry away the laurels of which he thinks himself to be deserving? That he plays false to convictions of the soul and calls beauty ugly, scorning the beauty he himself created? Can he call that odious what is beautiful, because the laurels came from hands not pleasing to him? Can he drape himself in a borrowed costume and aim at acting differently from other men to display himself by his originality? Can he believe in his being better than others? Can he shake hands with the vulgar ones that applaud him and can he hate those that mock him instead of crowning him with flowers? How do you explain that all this *happens*? It looks so strange in comparison with the simplicity of the bird and the ocean!”

“Friend, all these questions are an answer to my question, for your questions are enough to prove that poets are not numerous in your country. Remember that I understand and use the word poet

in its purest and highest sense. A poet can live only for his art which he loves for art's sake, and not as a means to ensure vague terrestrial satisfactions for himself. A poet envisages men and things in their nature and relations in their utmost simplicity, and in such a simple way that he reaches very close to the nature of Tao. Other people distinguish men and things only confusedly and as if across a fog: the poet looks at all that as an incontestable fact: how then can he expect his simplicity to be understood by the confused mind of the people? How could he nourish feelings of hate and sorrow when the public scoffs at him? What pleasure he could have when it wants to crown him? It is as with the four seasons of Chuang Tse. There is nothing particularly troublesome in all that, because that is the natural course of things; the poet, therefore, is neither disappointed, when he is not heard, nor exulted when the world felicitates him. He considers the state of things in relation to what concerns the masses and the way they behave towards him, as the natural effect of a cause well-known to him. He is not even indifferent to the judgment of the masses, for it does not exist for him. If he sings his verses, it is not intended for the public, but because he cannot but do it. He escapes from the noise of men's commentaries on his work, and he does not know if he is famous or forgotten. "The greatest fame is in not being famous."

"You are looking at me, young man, as if I were saying things stranger than you have ever dared to dream of, and yet, I am speaking to you nothing but the simplest truth, simple and natural like the truth of a landscape or of death. You have just nearly escaped from the intense pressure of the existence led by your compatriots, and that is why you have never yet seen the true simplicity, and that is why you have heard of nothing else than glory, profit, honour and immortality, and to your notions, all that may appear as indispensable as air and as real as your soul: it is

however only false semblance and an illusion. The poets you have known, had perhaps the fibre of true poets, but they were turned away from the impulse derived from Tao, the principle of their life; they did not remain their own selves and, by weakness, they fell again into the nature of ordinary men, so much that they had arrived at behaving like them, but only with more intensity. This is what I gather from your questions; but these men are not poets any more and they will sing true poems no more, as long as they will remain what they have become, because even the slightest deviation from the original impulse suffices to extinguish the poetry in them. There is no other way than the direct way, one and simple as a young girl, without detour like a straight line, and this way is spontaneity. Outside of it, there is but false activity and lack of the natural; outside of it also there are highways that lead to glory and fame, but there take place murder and suicides, where friends shed the blood of friends to achieve one's own ends better. The straight line traces its own way, with no secret detours, in a simple continuity towards the infinite.

“You will understand now that, by the very nature of things, all the situations which you cited and which would make the poet a victim exposed to the whims of the crowd, become impossible. You have probably read in the history of your country as in the history of mine, that some poets died of sorrow at denial of justice to them, that some others put an end to their life because of the disdain which they did not deserve. Indeed, I have always felt the tragedy in these cases, but I have understood at the same time that such poets cannot be called truly great; and, of course, I am not speaking only of the artists of speech, but of all artists. You want me to show you now the work of an artist as simple and true as a man can conceive? Come with me.”

He took me inside a room of his cottage, a cell with white walls,

without any other furniture than a small bunk, a table covered with books, and some chairs. Opening a door of a wall cupboard, he drew from there a wooden drawer which he held with as much precaution as for a sacred object or a small child. He put it gently on the floor, raised the lid and took out a sort of relic-box, in brown red wood, which he placed on the table.¹²

“Look at this chest first”, he said. “How beautiful it is! A beautiful thing should have a beautiful frame. And see, its flaps are closed: is it not a happy idea to protect its contents from profane looks? But before you I can surely open them.”

And the two flaps opened.

Against a background of pale blue silk there appeared a large statue, radiant, beaming with a wonderful brightness that emanated from itself: it was the Buddha Kwan Yin seated on a lotus that stood straight and graceful, opening up above the tumult of furious waves.¹³

“Do you understand the absolute simplicity and beauty of this work?” he asked, and his voice expressed a great love full of tenderness. Is it not the embodiment of absolute calm? How serene is the face, how wonderfully tender, and yet profoundly grave with eyes closed, whose inner sight penetrates into the Infinite. Look at the cheeks, how sweet and delicate they are. Look at the mouth and at the sublime curve of the eyebrows and the purity of the pearl that shines in the middle of the forehead,¹⁴ symbol of the soul that takes

¹² The Chinese have the custom of preserving their treasures with such care. The ancient figures of Buddha are usually placed in a relic box lined with silk. The relic box remains in a wooden casket, which is covered with cloth. They are opened on big occasions.

¹³ The statues of this kind are not an invention of the author: they exist and the author has one.

¹⁴ The Pearl Soul, “Durma”.

its flight far from the body. And the body has only a few lines, but look, what limitless love and what compassion are there in the attitude of the falling left arm, and the right arm raised with two joined fingers, as in preaching, what ineffable saintliness it evokes! What beauty in the folded legs resting so gently on the lotus! And look, what sweetness is there in spite of the immense force and mastery that are revealed by the whole! With what subtle grace the feet are curved in reverse!

“Isn’t the essence of Buddhism gathered in a single figure? It is not necessary to have read anything of Buddhism to penetrate here into its most intimate sense: the repose. Is it not the image of absolute repose, this ideally pure face which sees with such calm into eternity and love? Is it not the absolute love for the world, this attitude of the arms? And is the essence of the whole not caught and expressed in the gesture of the raised fingers?

“And the substance, of which such figure is made? I don’t know if you realise that such an artist must have worked for years and years before he could obtain the pure and ethereal substance that he needed? For this stone is so hard and the idea that it evokes is matter: all that does not suit the plastic representation of this ideal conception: the repose.

Also, the artist worked with all kinds of common substances, mud, sand and earth; he transformed them by a suitable and harmonious combination with fine stones, pearl and jade into precious substances. It is thus that the substance of this figure, ceasing to be material, became rather the embodiment of a sublime idea. The artist also wanted to symbolise in his work the pink dawn which came to enlighten humanity when Buddha appeared: that is why he has introduced this nuance of pink, a light reflection of which pierces through the snow-whiteness of this porcelain, similar

to that which plays in the morning clouds before the splendour of the rising sun breaks out. This brightness taking birth, hardly indicated, isn't it touching, even more than the light itself? Do you see this pink colour, indefinable and yet clear, which radiates through the whiteness? Is it not chaste like the first blushing of a virgin? Isn't it the divine love of the artist that we see warming the purity of the white? An image like this one is in reality no longer an image: the idea of matter disappears completely; it is an inspiration.

For long I remained too moved to speak; yet more than the wisdom of the old man, it was the beauty of this art that I felt taking possession of my soul and purifying it. Finally, I gently asked him:

“Who created this wonder? I would be happy to know the name to respect it along with yours.”

“Friend, it is hardly important”, he replied. “The soul that was in that artist returned to Tao as yours will one day. His body has fallen into dust as the leaves of a tree, as yours will do at its hour. What importance then can one attach to his name? I will however tell you: it was Tan Wei.¹⁵ He has inscribed his name in finely traced characters on the back of the statue, as was the custom in his days. Who was he? Certainly a humble artisan, who did not suspect that he was such an artist, who deemed himself as nothing but a simple countryman and did not have the least idea that his work was so beautiful, but he must have, for a long time, contemplated the skies and the snow, loved the immensity of the seas, the landscapes and the flowers, otherwise he never would have had such delicate feeling, for the simple lines and such pure colours are there only in

¹⁵ The statue in the author's possession is that of Tan Wei. Ho Chao Tsung was another great artist whose several works the author has been able to acquire with great difficulty. All artists know these names well, but I have failed to collect more details on the subject. These artists lived so simply and remained so unknown during their life-time that even their place of birth cannot be ascertained.

Nature. He was certainly not famous: you will not find his name in any story. I am not able to say from where he came, how he lived, nor until what age. I know only this that since more than four hundred years, works of this genre have not been produced and that the connoisseurs attribute this one to the first half of the Ming dynasty. It is probable that this artist peacefully led the same kind of life as his fellow men; that he worked diligently as an ordinary labourer and that he died humbly, unaware of his greatness, but his work remained, and this image brought by a happy chance to this district unravaged by the last wars, is still as it was made. And it may still last in the same condition for centuries and centuries, with its imperishable radiance, with its virgin majesty. Oh, to create a similar thing with a pure unconscious simplicity, that is to be poet. Here is the art that does not belong to an epoch but to eternity. It is beautiful, isn't it? This almost everlasting porcelain, this radiance which will never be extinguished! The work is here, on this earth, so durable, and yet so delicate, and it will remain so, long after our successors will be dead ... and the soul of the artist is with Tao."

We remained for long, contemplating the image, then he retook the casket with care.

"It is so delicate", he said, "that I hardly dare to expose it to broad sunlight. For such a miracle of tender delicateness, the daylight is too hard. I feel a kind of fear that the light might suddenly reduce it to dust or dissolve it as a light cloud, so much does it resemble the soul in its composition."

And with infinite care he replaced the casket in the box and closed it.

He led me out and we sat in the shade of an overhanging rock.

"How beautiful it would be", I exclaimed, "if all men were capable of creating similar works, in all simplicity, and could be

surrounded by them everywhere!”

“All men?”, he replied. “Oh, perhaps it is to ask too much, but there was a time when the great empire was a vast temple of Art and Beauty. You can still see its traces, here in China. In that epoch, these people were mostly composed of artists with a simple spirit. The objects in their surroundings were all beautiful, the smallest ones as the biggest, be it a temple, a garden, a table, a seat or a knife. Observe the tea cups, so fine, or the small incense-holders of that epoch. The poorest coolie ate in utensils as perfect in their style as my statue of Kwan Yin. All objects were made beautiful, and that was done involuntarily. Naturally, the simple artisans did not consider themselves to be artists or to be different from their fellow creatures in any way; no mean rivalry could rise between them, else there would have been the end of their art. All was beautiful because their attitude towards all was simple and without divisions and because they worked honestly. So it was as natural then for things to be beautiful as it is today to be ugly. The art of China has fallen to its lowest level: it is the consequence of its miserable social condition. You have certainly noticed the decline in the art of the country, and that, that is the sign of the death of the great Empire, for art is an inseparable companion of the blossoming of the life of a country. If art declines, the whole country degenerates: I am not speaking from the political point of view, but rather from the moral view-point, for a nation morally strong and simple of heart involuntarily gives birth to a powerful and healthy art. Yes, what you were saying is true: how better the existence of men would be if they could create a better environment, and how extraordinary it is that it shouldn't be, for Nature remains accessible to them always and everywhere. Look at the clouds, the trees and the sea!”

The sea, immobile as always, was murmuring at our feet; it was limitless and pure. The clouds floated majestically towards the

earth, with a slow movement, in dazzling light. Golden rays were caressing the mountains and vanishing before the rhythmic march of clouds. Everywhere, light and movement, sounds, and play of colour.

The Sage calmly contemplated this infinite beauty with confidence and naturalness as if he had the profound consciousness of the intimate relation that existed between him and this environment. He seemed to guess the thoughts engaging my mind while I looked at him for he spoke: "We are according ourselves with the surrounding beauty as naturally as a tree or a mountain. Provided that we always remain so, we could preserve the feeling of our own well-being in the vast play of the world-system. So much has been said about human life, and scholars have created a labyrinth of such confused theories! However, in its intimate substance, it is as simple as Nature. Nothing is more simple than another, and in spite of all contrary appearances, in reality, nothing is in disorder: everything moves in a way as sure and inevitable as the sea."

In his voice there were at the same time the great love of the poet and the tranquil assurance of the learned that takes support in an indisputable truth.

"Are you satisfied for today?" he asked amicably. "Have I helped you take a step forward? Do you now feel more clearly what poetry is?"

"Father", I replied, "your wisdom is poetry and poetry is wisdom. How can it be so?"

"That is very true from your point of view", he answered, "but you have yet to learn that all these words are only an appearance. I don't know what my wisdom is, nor my poetry: they are all one. It is so simple and so natural when one comes to understand it. All

that is Tao.”

CHAPTER THREE

LOVE

Once more it was evening. We were seated on the grass, on the flank of the mountain, and our inner calm was in harmony with the solemn silence of the twilight. The distant mountain-chains reposed in an atmosphere that breathed respect and devotion; they seemed to be kneeling under the vault of the skies, getting the blessing of the gently descending night. The isolated trees, here and there on the hills, were immobile, as if in suspense in a silent adoration. The sea with its distant indistinct murmur, seemed lost in its own immensity. All things bathed in an infinite peace, and faint sounds rose in the night like prayers.

The Sage stood before me, with the apparent dignity of a tree in the midst of Nature, inspiring a sacred emotion like the evening itself.

I had come back to put questions again to him, for my soul no longer knew of rest away from him, and a powerful impulse had risen in me, but now, once near him, I hardly dared to speak. Truly, it seemed to me that words were no longer necessary and that all was getting revealed spontaneously. How simple and good everything seemed that evening! Wasn't it my own intimate being that I recognised in all the environing beauty, and wasn't everything on the point of absorption in the Infinite?

However, I spoke, and my voice broke the great silence.

"Father", I spoke with sadness, "every word of yours stays in my mind, and their perfume fills my soul. This soul, at present, is not mine any more; it is no more what it was in the past. It seems to me to be dead, and I don't know what is happening in me, in the

day or in the night, so that my mind may get unburdened and detached. Father, I know well that it is Tao: it is the death and glorious resurrection, but it is not love, and, without love, Tao appears to me only as an illusion full of obscurities!"

The old man slowly moved his eyes over the evening scene, and smiled.

"What is love?" he asked calmly. "Do you know it well? I doubt."

"No, I don't know it well", I answered. "I don't know it at all, but that is what renders it so precious. Yes, let me explain: I want to speak of the love of a young girl, of the love of a woman. I still remember, Father, what I felt when I saw that one whom I loved and when my soul knew enchantment for the first time. It was like the ocean, like a vast sky, like death. The day was breaking, and I was blinded! It was a suffering, Father; my heart beat violently and my eyes were burning. The world was like a furnace, things were taking a strange aspect and seemed to begin to live. It was like a great flame which sprang up from my soul: it was frightening, adorable, but so infinitely grand. Father, I think, it was grander than Tao!"

"I know well what it was", the Sage replied. "It was Beauty, the earthly form of the formless Tao that was evoking in you the rhythm of the movement by which you will return into Tao. You could have felt the same thing at the sight of a tree, of a cloud, or of a flower; but because you are human, living on desires, it could be revealed to you only by another human, a woman, and also because that form was more understandable and more familiar to you. And because the desire did not allow the full blooming of a pure contemplation, the rhythm that awakened in you changed into a furious torment, similar to a sea beaten by a tempest that does not

know where it is leading to. The intimate essence of all that you felt was not love, but Tao.”

The calm of the old Sage made me impatient and excited me to give him a rude answer:

“Oh! It is quite easy to discourse on these things, but having never felt something similar yourself, you cannot truly understand what you are speaking of.”

He looked at me fixedly, and put his hand on my shoulder with sympathy.

“It would be cruel on your part to speak thus, young man, if you were speaking to someone else than me. I lived earlier than you started breathing in this world! At that time lived a young girl, so adorable that she seemed to be the Form directly born of Tao. She was the whole world for me and the world was but a dead thing lying at her feet. I saw nothing but her, and trees, clouds, men, nothing else existed for my eyes. She was more beautiful than this evening, sweeter than the lines of these distant mountains, more tender than the tops of these swaying trees, and the radiance of her presence was a more exquisite joy than the twinkling of that star down there. I will not tell you her story: the suffering from fires of hell would be less than what I suffered then; but all that was unreal, all that is past like a storm getting lost in the distance. It had seemed to me that I had only to die, my sole desire then was to escape from that suffering into death; but a dawn rose in my soul, all became clear and comprehensible. Nothing was lost. Everything remained as before. The beauty that I had taken as enchanting continued to live, intact, in myself; for it was not from that woman, but from the depths of my soul that the beauty really came out, and I again saw it, radiating throughout the entire world, in an imperishable splendour. Nature was wholly like what I had conceived in this

fragile feminine appearance to be, but her alone. My soul was one with Nature and marching with a Rhythm same as Nature's towards the eternal Tao."

His calmness had calmed me and I answered:

"She whom I loved is dead, Father. She who broke my soul as a child picks a flower, never became my wife; but I have a wife now, a wonder of force and goodness, a woman who is as essential to my life as daylight and air. I don't love her as I still love the one who is dead, but I know that she is a human being purer than the other. How is it that I don't love her as much? She transformed my tormented, troubled life into a peaceful movement towards death. She is simple and true as Nature itself and her face is also as dear to me as daylight."

"You really love her", said the Sage, "but you don't know what love is, nor what it is to love. I am going to teach it to you: love is nothing other than the Rhythm of Tao. I have said this to you: it is from Tao that you come and to Tao you will return. When still young and the soul plunged in darkness, you feel the shaking of the first impulse inside you, you do not know yet where you are going. The Woman is revealed to your eyes and you feel that she is the goal to which the Rhythm experienced by you is carrying you; but, even when this form is yours and you have quivered at the contact, you continue to feel in yourself the Rhythm, and you learn that you must go beyond, always beyond, so that it may be appeased. It is then that a great sadness rises in the soul of the man and the woman; both look towards each other and ask themselves towards which goal then they are proceeding. Their hands held in a sweet clasp, they will go together through life, carried by the same impulse, towards the same goal. Call it love, if you wish to; what does a name matter? But I call it Tao; and the souls of those who

love are like two white clouds floating together, gently, and which disappear, dispersed by the same breeze in the infinite azure of the skies.”

“But that is not the love I am speaking of!” I exclaimed. “Love is not the desire to see the Beloved absorbed in Tao! Love is the desire to be constantly near her, the intense aspiration to melt the two souls in one alone, the ardent desire to glide with her in felicity, united in one and the same breath, but always alone with the Beloved, not with others, not with Nature! And if I were absorbed in Tao, all that happiness will be lost for ever! Oh! let me remain in this blessed world with my loyal companion. Here everything is cheerful and hospitable, while Tao still remains so sombre and impenetrable for me.”

“The ardour of desire gets extinguished”, replied the Sage calmly. “The body of hers whom you love will wither and return into the earth. The leaves of trees wither away in autumn and the faded flowers sadly lean towards the earth. How can you love so much the non-durable? Besides, you do not yet really know either how you love or what you love. The woman’s beauty is but a vague reflection of Tao’s formless beauty. The emotion evoked by it, the desire to destroy yourself in her beauty, the blooming of your being that makes you wish to flee with the Beloved towards the infinities of happiness, believe me, is nothing other than Tao’s Rhythm – only, you don’t know. You still resemble the river which knows only of its sunlit banks and which ignores the power that carries it along, but which, inevitably, is going to lose itself one day in the ocean’s immensity. Why this struggle for happiness? It is true what Chuang Tse said, “The greatest happiness is the absence of happiness.” This perpetual fluctuation, isn’t it mediocre and pitiable? A momentary ascent between two falls? Oh! the uncertainty and the fragility of man’s intentions and progress!

Don't look for happiness in a woman; it is Tao's Revelation being offered to you; she is the purest Form in the entire Nature through which Tao manifests; she is the sweet force that awakens in you Tao's Rhythm, but by herself she is only a poor creature resembling you. And for her you are the same Revelation which she is for you. Don't imagine that what you are seeing in her is the Tao, sacred above all, whom you will attain one day, for then you will certainly reject her, the day you will understand what she really is! If you wish to truly love a woman, love her as a participant in the same fragile nature like yourself, and don't look for happiness through her. Whether, in your love, you understand it or not, her intimate being is Tao. A poet sees a woman, and carried by the Rhythm, he sees the beauty of his beloved in all things, - in the trees, the mountains, the horizons, for the woman's beauty is the same as Nature's. It is the expression of Tao who has neither limit, nor form, and that what your soul desires in your enchantment caused by the sight, that strange, inexpressible feeling is nothing else than the union with that beauty and with the source of that beauty, with Tao, and your wife feels the same. You both are angels for each other, guiding each other towards Tao, unknowingly."

For an instant I stayed silently lost in my reflections. There was a great sadness in the evening's silence and fading colours. Below the horizon, at the spot where the sun had set, a weak trail of red light was persisting, like a suffering getting extinguished.

"What then is this sadness emanating from all Nature around us?" I asked him. " Under this twilight the entire earth seems to weep in a sorrowful aspiration, isn't it? Look at its mourning, look at these dying tinges, at the leaning tree tops, at the pensive attitude of mountains. When men's eyes rest on this great sorrow of Nature, tears rise in them; it seems that she is aspiring for her Beloved: the sea, the mountain, the sky, all things seem to be filled with an

immense mourning.”

The Sage replied, “It is the same sorrow that works in human heart. Your own aspiration vibrates in Nature also; the nostalgia of the evening is the nostalgia of your soul. Your soul has lost its love, the Tao, to whom it was united in the past, and it desires reunion with its love. An absolute reunion with Tao, is that not an immense love? To be so absolutely one with the beloved that you be entirely hers and she entirely yours; a union so complete and eternal that desire cannot rise in you any more, because the supreme Happiness is attained, and that there is only peace, a sacred, calm and luminous peace!... For Tao is the Infinite of the Soul, unique, eternal and all purity.

“Is that not more perfect than the love of a woman, this poor sad love where each day reveals some soiling of the soul’s limited life by a sombre and ardent passion? When you will be absorbed in Tao, and only then, you will be completely, eternally united with the soul of your beloved, with the soul of all men, your brothers, and with the soul of Nature; and the few moments of uncertain happiness enjoyed by the lovers on earth are nothing in comparison with that infinite happiness: the union of souls of all those who love in an eternity of perfect purity.”

A horizon of happiness opened up before my soul, larger than the vague horizon of the sea, vaster than the skies.

“Oh, Father”, I exclaimed in ecstasy, “is it possible that all is so sacred and I never understood it? I had been so filled with desires, so exhausted by tears, and my chest was so heavy with tears and terrors! I was consumed by so many fears! I trembled at the idea of death; looking at so much suffering around me I despaired of seeing that all was well; I considered myself doomed because of savage passions, because of carnal desires burning in me, which

threw their flames outside, and because while hating them I was condemned to serve them by my own cowardice. With what nameless horror I thought that the body of my beloved, resembling a tender flower, has to fall into dust one day and return into the sombre and cold bosom of earth! I thought that I would no more ever know this happy peace of seeing again the expression of her eyes in which her soul was shining. And that was Tao! Is it true that Tao had been always and was even then within me as a faithful guardian?

Was it Tao who shone in her eyes? Was Tao there in all my surroundings, in clouds, in trees and in the sea? And is the intimate being of the earth and skies also the intimate being of my beloved and of my own soul? Is it for *that* that there burns in me this mysterious desire which I had not been understanding and which always carried me further away, without respite? I thought that that was taking me away from my beloved and that I was ceasing to love her. Is it really Tao's Rhythm that also carried my beloved along? The same Rhythm by which the entire Nature breathes, by which the suns and planets follow their glorious course through the eternities? Oh! then truly all becomes sacred! Then, truly, Tao is in all things, as my soul is in Tao. Oh! Father, Father, how light my soul is becoming! My soul seems to foresee what will happen one day; the skies and the vast sea also are predicting it. Look, how much the attitude of our surrounding trees seems to be penetrated by respectfulness; look at the mountain-lines, how gentle they are in their sacred repose. The entire Nature is full of a healthy veneration and my soul also trembles in its ecstasy, because it has seen its Beloved!"

I remained plunged a long while in the forgetfulness of everything, silent, immobile. It seemed to me like being one with the soul of my Master and with Nature. Seeing nothing, hearing

nothing, exempt from all desire, delivered from all will, I was deep down in an infinite peace ...

I woke up at a light sound: a fruit had fallen from a tree on the ground. When I raised my eyes, the moonlight was resplendent. The Sage stood beside me and leaned amicably towards me.

“You have stretched too much the forces of your soul, my young friend”, he said with seriousness. “It is too much for you in such a short time and you fell asleep by exhaustion. The sea also has gone to sleep. Look, there is no ripple on its surface; unmoving, dreamy, it is receiving the blessings of light. But you have to wake up now; it is late, your boat is ready, and in the town your wife awaits you at home.”

I replied, still half immersed in a dream:

“It will be so good to live here. Allow me to return here with my wife and let us stay here for good. I cannot return any more to the crowd. Ah! Father, I have no courage for it: I see their mocking faces, their incredulity, their ignorance of all veneration. In the midst of that coarse crowd how would I be able to preserve the wonderful light and delicate and pure feelings with which my soul is filled? How would I be able to hide them beneath a smile or by my words, so that they never notice them and cannot defile them with their odious ridicule?

He put his hand on my shoulder and said with a grave air:

“Listen well, friend, to what I am going to say, and above all believe me. I am going to pain you, but I cannot avoid it. You *must* return to the world, among men, your companions; it cannot be otherwise. You have already conversed with me too much; it also may be that I have spoken to you a bit too much. Henceforth your development should be your own work, and you must discover all by yourself. Only be simple at heart, and you will discover

everything painlessly, as a child finds flowers. At this moment you are feeling in a deep and pure manner what I have taught you; the dispositions you are in now, mark one of the highest moments of your life, but you are not yet able to be strong enough to uphold them. You will fall back again, and the spiritual perception will again give place to words and theories. It is only by slow steps that you will be able to find again these dispositions with all their purity and maintain them in a permanent way. When that will happen, you can return here in peace, and you will do well *then* to live here; but at that time I would be dead since long.

“You must complete your development in the bosom of life and not outside of it, for you are not yet pure enough to rise above it. There was an instant when you were capable of it, it is true, but the reaction is going to take place soon. You should not isolate yourself from the rest of men; they are your equals, even though perhaps their perceptions do not have the purity of yours. You can go among them as a companion and hold them by the hand. Only, don’t let them look into your soul as long as they will be yet very far behind you. They will not mock out of wickedness, but rather because of their religious convictions and because they don’t have any idea of the state of misery and abandonment in which they live; because they do not know how far they are from sacred things which in reality constitute your life. You need to be so robust in your convictions that nothing will obstruct you. You will be that strong only after long and quite rude struggles, but your strength will be born of your very tears and through suffering you will attain peace. Remember above all that Tao, Poetry and Love are one and the same thing, even though you look to defining them by these different vague expressions. Remember that Tao is constantly within you and around you, that he never abandons you, that you are in security and well guarded under that holy protection. You

are surrounded by blessings, you are protected by an eternal love. All things are satisfied by the primordial force of Tao that dwells in you."

His words were so sweet and so convincing that I had nothing to reply. I let myself be guided by him to the coast; my boat was waiting, immobile on the smooth waters.

"Farewell, my young friend, farewell", he said with a calm voice full of tenderness. "Remember all I have told you."

I could not leave him thus; suddenly I thought of the loneliness of his life on the island and tears of sympathy rose in my eyes. I grasped his hand:

"Father, come with me", I beseeched him. "My wife and I will take care of you; we will do all for you, and when you will be sick we will nurse you. Don't remain in this solitude, deprived of the love that could render your life so sweet."

He smiled with kindness, shook his head as a father does at his child's caprice, and replied with peaceful cordiality:

"You have already fallen back! Do you understand now how necessary it is for you to stay in the midst of everyday life? I have just spoken to you of the immensity of the love that surrounds me, and you think of me as alone, forgotten! Here, in Tao, I am as safe, as sheltered as a child is with its mother. Friend, your intention is good, but you need to become wiser, much wiser! Don't be anxious about me; it is not necessary, though I am grateful for this sentiment of yours. Think only of yourself for the moment. Do what I tell you. Believe that what I advise you is the best for you. You will find something in your boat which will remind you of the days you spent here. Farewell."

I bowed in silence and kissed his hand. I believed that I felt it

trembling with emotion, but when I looked at him again, his face was calm and smiling like the moon in the sky.

I got on the boat; the boatman took the oars and with a few skilful strokes made us slide over the calm surface of the water. It was already at some distance from the shore when my foot touched something at the bottom of the boat, and I suddenly remembered that something was there for me. I took it: it was a small casket. I promptly raised the lid, and in the clear and soft moonlight I saw with its mystic radiance the wonderful porcelain of Kwan-Yin's figure, the very one which the Sage had so carefully preserved and which he loved so much.

In the sublime serenity of its severe and yet sweet traits, in the ethereal delicateness of the transparent porcelain, the pure figure of Kwan-Yin rested among the radiant lotus-petals. Under the moonlight, it seemed to be radiant with a spiritual light.

I hardly dared to believe that this sacred image was given to me. I took my handkerchief and waved it in the direction of the coast to send my thanks to the Sage. He was standing immobile and looking straight in front: I waited passionately hoping for a gesture from him, for a last farewell from him, for a last sign of affection, but he remained immobile. Was he following me with his eyes? Was he looking at the sea?...

I shut the lid of the casket and held it close, as if it was an object of his love that I was carrying. Then I understood that he loved me, but his immutable serenity was too noble for me: I felt sad that he did not send me any signal.

The distance between us grew more and more; his traits and contours became more and more vague: finally, my eyes could not see him any more.

He was living with his soul's dreams, in the midst of Nature,

alone in an infinite, deprived of all human love, but close to the immense heart of Tao.

I took the way that brought me back to the life among men, my brothers and my equals, in the soul of every one of whom dwells the primordial, eternal Tao.

The picturesque lights of the port were already shining in the distance and the murmur of the big city, drawing nearer and nearer, was coming at us over the surface of the sea.

Then I felt in me a powerful force and ordered the boatman to row yet faster. I was ready. Wasn't I as safe, as well protected in the vast city as in the peaceful countryside, in the streets as on the sea?

In all things and everywhere dwells Poetry, Love, Tao. And the entire world is a big sanctuary, wisely conceived and surely guarded like a solid and well-ordered dwelling place.