Towards a Conclusion

In this book, the concept of ‘spontaneity’ is defined negatively and dialectically. Absolute spontaneity exists only as something lost or impossible. Paradoxically, when one strives to achieve the impossible while recognising one’s limits, a second kind of spontaneity – provisional and conditioned – may be actualised.

Artistic and ethical spontaneity is a universal ideal because of the innate tendency of thoughts to reach beyond the sheer materiality of existence. The ideal of spontaneity thus possesses utopian characteristics of negation and discontent. The ultimate negation, however, directs itself towards thinking per se. Such a higher form of reflection reconfirms materiality or the absence of human agency as the utopia – a utopia in which man necessarily has no position. It is like Eden, where proto-humans wandered in animal form, without self-consciousness. Man cannot live in Eden but constantly tries to return there, where he will be relieved of the burden of self-knowledge. The Way is simultaneously a goal and a process. On the Way towards absolute spontaneity, one partakes of the bliss when one recognises the non-existence of the final destination and knows that the full truth is in the process of treading the path.

This is the source of Su Shi’s ‘gay genius’, a benign spirit that was once amicable and uplifting. Despite his lofty aspirations – to become a divine artist who creates works as Heaven creates things, or to become an immortal who roams in utter freedom, riding cosmic forces – he also laughed at his limits. He knew that his resignation was necessary, as he was bound by external forces – human nature, state authority, destiny and death – and revolt would be in vain. If his insight brought him close to the modern existentialists, his genuine optimism set him apart. Instead of seeing the world as absurd, he saw it, together with its immense time and space, as endless opportunities to enrich himself towards completion, however unattainable the goal was. As a result, his ‘spontaneity’ embraced its opposites, including mediacy, materiality, cultural paradigms and rituality. In a jovial twist, it was also employed as a rhetorical device to achieve various ends, such as self-persuasion, self-justification, to write occasional poetry for friends or to simply excuse his weaknesses. Yet, the weaknesses that he chose to expose in his poetry also endeared him to later readers, encouraging them to imagine that Su’s poetry was a faithful mirror that reflected the author’s true nature. My reading, in a certain sense, continues the myth, despite my wish to break away from it. The mirror of Su Shi reflects my own face as a modern and transcultural reader.
The continuing practice of reading into the author is not a bad thing. I am thinking of Professor Morris Zapp, the fictitious English literature professor in David Lodge’s *Small World* trilogy, who wanted to write such a comprehensive work on Jane Austen that he would put an end to the field, once and for all. Fortunately, students of Chinese literature know better. Ever since the twelfth century, there have been many attempts at reading Su Shi that faithfully render the ‘true’ author; yet, the reading goes on, making his works a ‘classic’ in the sense of something that is ‘forever inexhaustible’ in interpretation (Goethe), or something that “has never finished saying what it has to say” (Calvino). Each generation of readers finds its own new way to approach Su Shi, who has been transformed into the Mt Lu that he describes in a poem:

横看成岭侧成峰  
Seen from the front it is a long range; from the side, a lofty peak;  
遠近高低各不同  
from afar, nearby, high or low, its looks are in constant change.  
不識廬山真面目  
I do not know the true appearance of Mount Lu,  
只緣身在此山中  
because my body stands in the middle of this mountain.  

If the reception history of Su Shi’s works has become the Mt Lu that he describes, my own reading, as part of this history, contributes one more modern sketch of the mountain.  

This book is a personal journey. I read Su’s poems as a child, reread them as a college student, and truly began to engage with them when I was in Princeton – an ocean and a continent away from home. His poem on the Cold Food Festival in Huangzhou always takes me back to my first few days there.

年年欲惜春  
Year after year I tried to detain the spring;  
春去不容惜  
but the spring departed without being detained.  
今年又苦雨  
This year again the bitter rain has been falling –  
兩月秋蕭瑟  
in two months of autumn desolation.  

The semester had not started, and my unknown roommate had not yet arrived. I was alone in a barracks-style apartment, with no furniture (aside from a mattress and a laptop). Far from the downtown, I had no telephone or trans-

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1 I thank Martin Kern for sending me these two quotes.  