Poetry as a Vehicle of Grief*

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It takes a lot of courage to come and lecture in Japan. Even for a Chinese scholar to come and lecture in Chinese studies requires very considerable courage, if not total dauntlessness. The reasons why this is so are plain and simple. The distinguished achievements of Japan in the study of Chinese civilisation are universally recognised. Your findings are deeply admired and with humility turned to account by Chinese scholars conversant with your language. It is obviously no easy task for me therefore to find a topic that would seem novel and of some interest to you. Illiterate in Japanese, confronted with the treasure trove of your Sinology, I feel like a pauper looking at a big safe in a bank, neither knowing the combination, nor having the tools to pry it open, capable of doing nothing but stand in awe and stare.

Ignorance can, however, be the inspiration of derring-do. In Italy it is often said by way of mockery, “he invented the umbrella” (*ha inventato l’ombrello*). The story has it that a country bumpkin was on the road one day when it started to drizzle; he happened to have with him a stick and a square of cloth; in a moment of inspiration, he spread the cloth on the top end of the stick to cover his head and succeeded in reaching home without becoming drenched. He congratulated himself, and furthermore was convinced that he had made a notable contribution to human progress and owed it to the world to make his discovery public. Along he came into the city, to the “Patents Bureau” (of which he had vaguely heard), equipped with stick and cloth, full of excitement intending to expound and demonstrate his discovery. When the staff of the Bureau heard what he had come for, they burst out laughing, and produced a real umbrella for him to inspect. My predicament today is really rather like that of the bumpkin going to the Bureau, benighted and ignorant, having never set eyes on an umbrella. But then, when you can’t find a house with eaves to

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shelter you from the rain, spreading a cloth on the top end of a stick should probably be considered an acceptable manner of coping with the contingency.

Poetic expression has been likened by Nietzsche to the hen’s cackle, both being “induced by pain” (Der Schmerz macht Huhner und Dichter gackern).¹ This homely but vivid analogy is in complete agreement with a view commonly accepted in the Chinese literary tradition, the view that pain engenders poetry more than pleasure does, that good poetry is, in the main, an expression or discharge of the emotions of unhappiness, anxiety or frustration. In pre-modern China, not only was this view a commonplace in theoretical discourses on literature, it was also a familiar norm in the practical business of writing. As a result we take this view for granted, forgetting its significance, failing to recognize it as an important concept in Chinese literary criticism. I shall confine myself to well-known examples in my attempt to illuminate this view in the rest of my discussion.

“Poetry can be used to stimulate, to observe, to interconnect and to grieve” says Book XVII of the Analects (Lunyu 論語). To “grieve” is but one of the four functions of poetry; and it is placed last among them. “In times of peace, the music we hear sounds contented and joyful... In times of war, the music we hear is plaintive or agitated... And at the fall of a state, the music we hear is sorrowful and contemplative...” says the “Great Preface” of the Book of Songs (Shijing 詩經), dealing even-handedly, without favouring any one of the three types of “music” (yin 音). In elaborating on the saying “Poetry is the expression of the emotions” (shi yan zhi 詩言志), the “Treatise on Literature and the Arts” (“Yiwen zhi” 藝文志) of the History of the Han Dynasty (Han shu 漢書) shows an equal absence of partiality: “Thus when the emotion of joy or sorrow is aroused, the voice of lyricism is sounded.”

Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 85 B.C.) is probably the first writer to deny that the claims of pain and of pleasure are equal. In both his “Letter in Reply to Ren An” (“Bao Ren Shaoqing shu” 報任少卿書) and the “Preface” (“Zixu” 自序) to his Records of the Grand Historian (Shi ji 史記), he considers some of the greatest works of literature from ancient times to his own day, and points out how they have been written in prison or in disgrace, when the writer has been suffering, generally from misfortune or more specifically from mutilation; in other words, these great works of literature have been produced by hapless persons tormented by poverty, disease and chastisement. Sima Qian concludes that the classical compilations ranging from the Book of Changes (Zhouyi 周易) to the Book of Songs were “mostly written by men of wisdom