

Su Shi: The Poetry of Exile

Su Shi (苏轼; simplified 苏轼; *Sū Shì*, literary name 东坡 *dōngpō* “east slope,” 1037-1101) was a poet, calligrapher, painter and statesman during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). After criticizing some of the new government policies in his poetry, he was indicted in 1079 for treason. After the Crow Terrace Poetry Trial (乌台诗案), he was found guilty and condemned to death. The emperor commuted his sentence, and Su was exiled to Huangzhou in Hubei Province. There he converted an old army camp on the eastern slope of a mountain near the city into a farm. During his exile from 1080 to 1084, he adopted the name of his farm as his professional pseudonym, practised Buddhism and wrote poetry.

Poetry and Politics

Su Shi was born in Meishan near Chengdu in the western regions of the Chinese Empire. He and his younger brother Su Zhe travelled to the imperial capital Kaifeng to take the civil service examinations in 1057. They both passed with distinction and came to the attention of the powerful statesman Ouyang Xiu (1007-1070), who promoted their careers. Su Shi spent time as an administrator in various regions of the empire. While in Hangzhou in the southern Yangtze delta, he was responsible for dredging the West Lake and constructing a promenade that is now known as the Su Causeway. Hangzhou would later become the capital of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), when the northern regions seceded to form the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234).

From 1069 to 1076, the chancellor (and poet) Wang Anshi (1021-1086) brought in a series of reforms called the New Policies (熙宁 *xīnfǎ*). These were intended to improve the life of small farmers who were being bought out by large landowners, to increase taxation so that the government could maintain a professional army for defence rather than forcibly

drafting young men, and to stabilize the prices of goods like salt so that rich merchants could not monopolize the markets (Egan, 1994, pp 27-53). In a sense these government interventions were “proto-Keynesian” in nature (Zhao & Drechsler, 2018).

Although the intentions were good, the reforms were largely unsuccessful. For example, in the “Green Shoots” policy the government gave low-cost loans to small farmers to buy seeds in the spring. However, the bureaucrats administering the policy were terribly slow. The farmers had to travel to government centers for their loans and stay there for prolonged negotiations when they should have been at home planting. Wang Anshi refused to acknowledge the problems, and earned the sobriquet “his stubbornship” (Pease, 2021).

The following illustration shows the Song Dynasty at the time of these reforms.



The Crow Terrace Poetry Trial

Su Shi criticized the new reforms in both poetry and prose. By 1079 Wang Anshi had largely retired from public life, but his supporters were incensed by the criticisms. They arranged for the Imperial Office of the Censorate, nicknamed the Crow Terrace because of the crows who nested nearby, to indict Su Shi for treason. Article 122 of the Sung Criminal Code

prohibited any “expression of critical comments directed against the emperor” (Hartman, 1990, p 18). Or in more poetic terms

Denouncing the Imperial Chariot

The records of the trial are intriguing since much of the prosecution depended upon the interpretation of poetry that was by its very nature both allusive and metaphorical (Hartman, 1990; Wang, 2011). Su Shi provided a deposition in which he explained his own poetry. The following is the fourth of his *Mountain Village* poems:

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With walking sticks and wraps of cooked rice, they
depart in a rush
Turn around, with borrowed money spent, their hands
soon empty.
Children learn the language and ways of the big city
For half a year they stay inside the city walls.
(text and translation from LAC website)

And the following is Su Shi’s interpretation

My meaning here is that as soon as the common people receive the green-sprout money, they at once squander it in the cities. It also means that the country people twice yearly must pay summer and autumn taxes and several other levies, to which is now added the green-sprout and corvée assistance monies, with the result that the children from the families who work on the great estates are often in the cities, where they become disorderly and learn nothing but a city accent. (Hartman, 1990, p 23).

The trial dragged on for four months. At the end Su was found

guilty and condemned to death. However, Emperor Shenzong was counseled by the dowager Empress Cao and by Wang Anshi to commute the sentence. Su Shi was deprived of his salary and exiled to Huangzhou (黄冈, presently part of Huanggang), a small town in Hubei on the Yangtze River. (Hubei is the region north of the Dongting Lake, whereas Hunan is the area to its south.)

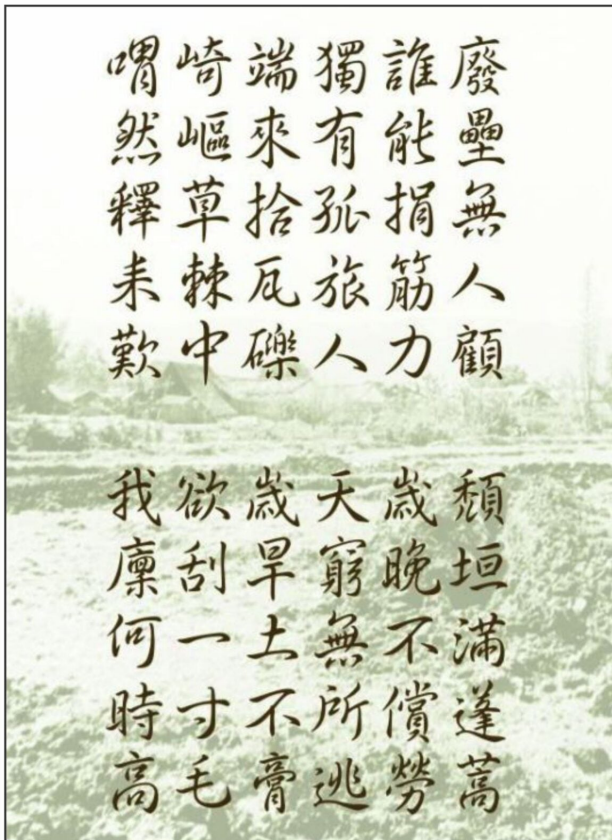
Su Shi arranged to obtain some land on the East Slope (Dongpo) of a hill near Huangzhou. There he became a farmer to provide food for his family. He changed from a formal statesman to a hard-working layman:

To state the matter simply, in Huangzhou, Su Shi became Su Dongpo, "Su of East Slope." This poetic personality, with its firm, philosophic, yet jovial poise of spirit, was created by Su Shi's major writings in Huangzhou. Reaffirmed in the poetry of his later exile to Huizhou and Hainandao, the image of Su Shi finding joy even in the worst of adversity has become part of the Chinese cultural heritage. (Fuller, 2023, p 251),

Su Tungpo now was to become a farmer by necessity and a recluse by temperament and natural inclination. What society, culture, learning, reading of history, and external duties and responsibilities do to a man is to hide his real self. Strip him of all these trappings of time and convention, and you have the real man. A Su Tungpo back among the people is like a seal in water; somehow a seal dragging its fins and tail on land is only half a seal. Su is never more likeable than when he is an independent farmer trying to make his own living. The Chinese mind usually glamorises a poet wearing a "coolie hat", putting his hands to the plough and standing against an idyllic hillside, provided he can also compose good verse and beat time to it by striking the buffalo's horn, and provided further that he occasionally, or even frequently, gets drunk and climbs the city wall to prowl in the moonlight. (Lin, 1948, p 183)

East Slope

In 1081, Su wrote a set of eight poems about his life as a farmer. The following is the first of these with a translation by Jeffrey Yang (2008):



Nobody tends the desolate fort Walls
worn plants overgrown who
would offer their strength for toil when
year's end brings no amends Only
a solitary wanderer heaven infinite
no place to flee then arrives to glean
the rubble Drought year
arid earth rugged among weeds
thorns a desire to scuff even
a hint of growth Rough breath
heavy sigh plow drops What
season will my granary be full

And the following is a translation by Lin and Young (2020)

A derelict campsite
no one tending it
one ruined wall
covered with wild grasses
who'd waste his strength
working this land
when the results
would never repay the labor?
But here I am, a solitary
disregarded traveler
worn out under heaven
nowhere else to turn

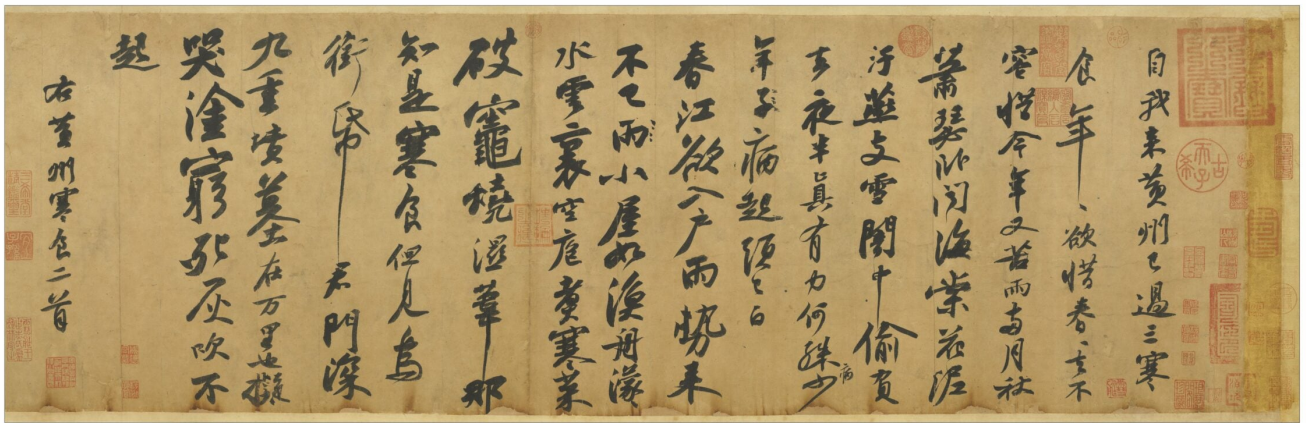
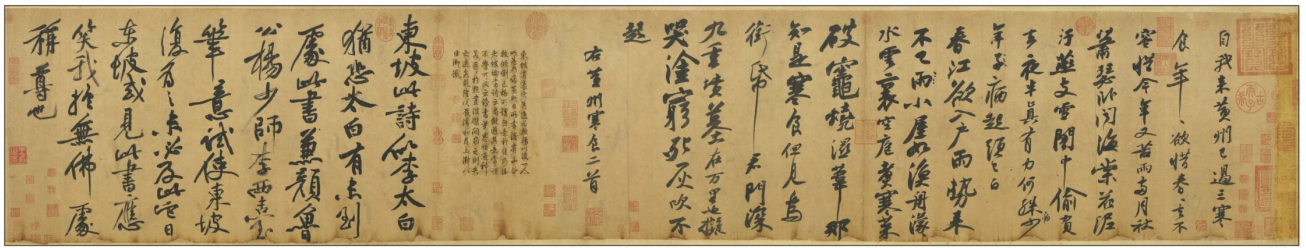
making an effort
picking up tile shards
in a drought year
soil not fertile
on this rugged patch
thick grass, thorns and brambles
trying to scratch each inch
clear of brush and weeds
I sigh and stop my plowing
turning to ask
when will my granary fill
and help me feed my family?

The Cold Food Festival

The Hanshi Observance (寒食) is a traditional festival celebrated in early April (Holzman, 1986). Legend has it that in the 7th Century BCE a nobleman Jie Zhitui refused to come out of the forest to pay allegiance to his lord. The angry lord burned down the forest to force Jie out, but wound up burning him to death. In remorse, the lord instituted an annual period without fires as a memorial to Jie.

In 1082, Su Shi wrote two poems about the festival, describing how desolate he felt. He wrote these out in his distinctive semi-cursive (running) script in a sample of calligraphy that has been preserved, and is now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. The following illustration shows the scroll that contains the calligraphy. The top section shows the full scroll (about 200 cm long). Below that is an enlargement of the title section that was added much later with calligraphy by Emperor Gaozong of Qing (1711-1799). This reads 寒食: Reminiscences of the Academy (likely one of the halls in the Forbidden City where the emperors studied). Then there is an enlargement of the poems with two colophons. The first

colophon in small script is by the Emperor Gaozong of Qing. The second colophon in characters larger than Su's is by Su's student Huang Tingjian (黄庭坚, 1045-1105). The lowest section shows an enlargement of Su's poem. Particularly striking characters are in lines 2 (年, *nián*, year), 5 (中, *zhōng*, middle), 11 (苇, *wěi*, reed), and 13 (纸, *zhǐ*, paper, banknote) from the right. Each of these has an exaggerated descending line suggestive of rain or tears. This piece of calligraphy is generally acknowledged as one of the greatest examples of running script.



The following is the text of the first poem written from left to right

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A free verse translation by Lin and Young (2020):

Ever since I came to Huangzhou we've had this festival three times. Each year I've tried to fall in love with spring it came and went and never returned my affection. This year again we're suffering rain two months more like a bleak and chilly autumn.	I lie here listening as cherry-apple blossoms fall flower petals mixed with mud scattered on soft ground. The season's disappearing secretly in the dark kidnapped by force of rain at midnight or like a young man overcome by illness who wakes, recovering, to find his hair turned white!
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Red Cliff Rhapsodies

In the winter of 208-209 CE, the Battle of the Red Cliffs (□□) occurred on the Yangtze River to the west of Huangzhou. This naval battle, wherein the forces from the south of China led by Liu Bei and Zhou Yu defeated the numerically superior forces of Cao Cao, was one of the major events leading to the downfall of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE) and the beginning of the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-280 CE).

During his time in Huangzhou, Su Shi and his friends made several trips by boat to the site of the ancient battle. Modern scholarship places the location of the battle near Chibi, which was west of the location visited by Su Shi, now called the “literary” as opposed to the “historical” Red Cliffs. In 1082, Su described these trips in two prose poems (“odes” or “rhapsodies”). In the first, Su Shi and his friends drank wine, and remembered the song that Cao Cao composed on the eve of the battle:

The moon is bright, the stars are few,
and magpies come flying south,
three times round they circle the tree,
where is the branch on which to roost?
(translated by Stephen Owen, 1996, p 281)

The following illustration shows the Red Cliffs on the Yangtze River and a map of the battle in which Cao Cao was defeated. The red calligraphy on the cliffs is 赤壁 (red cliffs) written from left to right.



One of Su's companions played a melancholy tune on his flute and remembers

Once Cao Cao had smashed Jingzhou, he came down to

Jiangling, going east with the current. The prows and sterns of his galleys stretched a thousand *li*, his flags and banners blotted the very sky; he poured wine and stood over the river, hefted his spear and composed a poem—he was indeed the boldest spirit that whole age! And yet where is he now? (translation of Tian, 2018, p 305)

This led him to a meditation on the transience of life:

We go riding a boat as small as a leaf and raise gourd flasks of wine to toast one another. We are but mayflies lodging between heaven and earth, single grains adrift, far out on the dark blue sea. We grieve that our lives last only a moment, and we covet the endlessness of the great river. We would throw an arm around those immortal beings in their flight and go off to roam with them; we would embrace the bright moonlight and have it done with forever. And since I knew that we could not suddenly have these things out of the blue, I gave the lingering echoes of that desire a place in my sad melody. (Tian, p 306)

Su replies to his companion

And do you, my friend, indeed understand the water and the moonlight? As Confucius said as he stood by the river, “It passes on just like this,” and yet it has never gone away. There is in all things a fullness and a waning to nothing, just as with that other thing, the moon; and yet it has never increased and never vanished altogether. If you think of it from the point of view of changing, then heaven and earth have never been able to stay as they are, even for the blink of an eye. But if you think of it from the point of view of not changing, then neither the self nor other things ever come to an end. So then what is there to covet? (Tian pp 306-307)

The quotation from Confucius is from *Analects* IX 16 “The water flows on and on like this, never stopping day or night”

Su continues

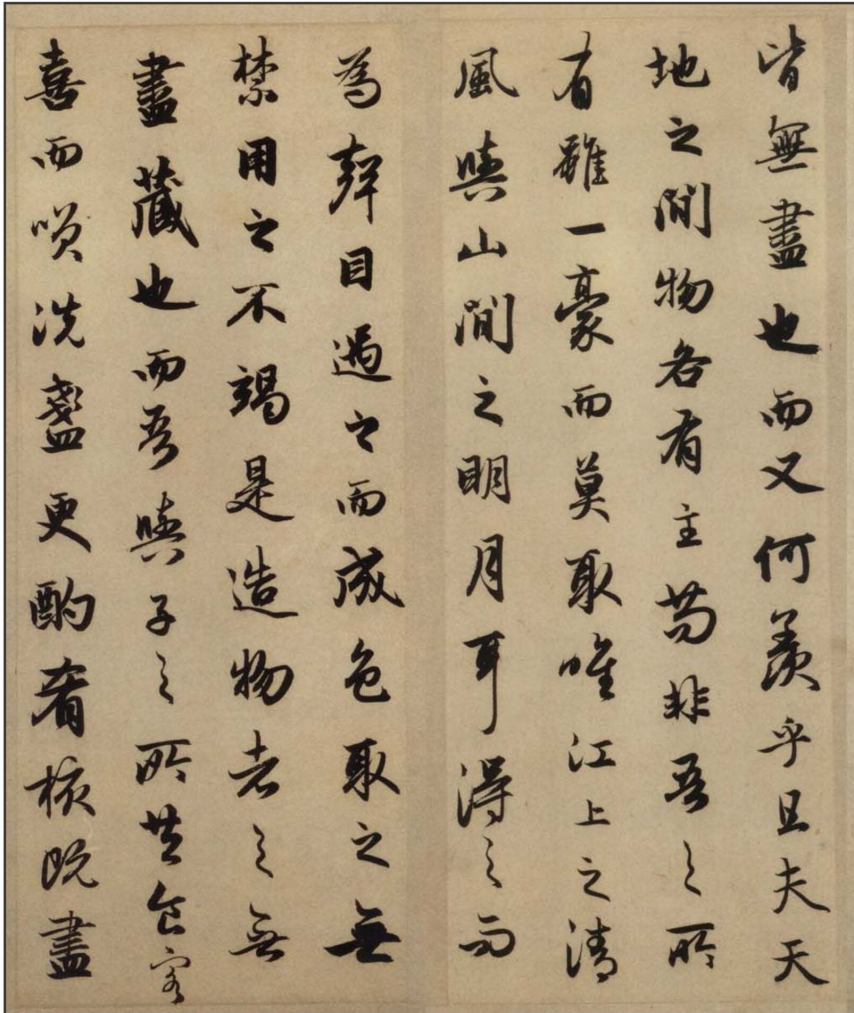
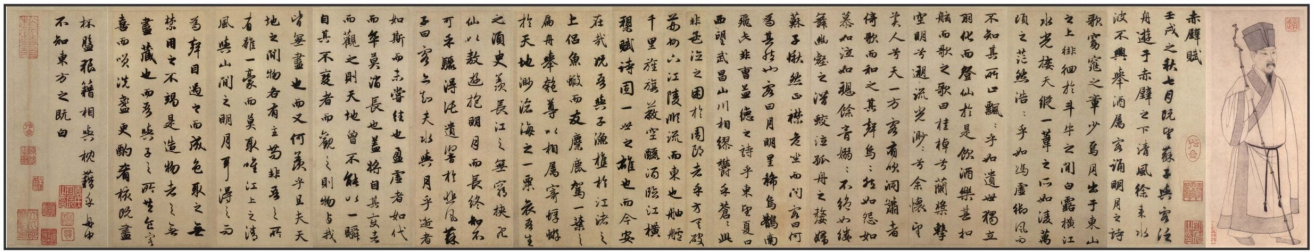
天地之間，萬物各有其主。苟非吾之所有，雖一髮不敢以取。惟此涼風明月，山色水聲，耳聽之則為聲，目視之則為色。無所可禁，無所可奪。此造物者之無所私也。且夫天地之間，萬物各有其主。苟非吾之所有，雖一髮不敢以取。惟此涼風明月，山色水聲，耳聽之則為聲，目視之則為色。無所可禁，無所可奪。此造物者之無所私也。

Between heaven and earth each thing has its own master. If something is not mine, then I cannot take it as mine, even if it is only a hair. There is only the cool breeze along with the bright moon among the mountains. The ears catch one of these, and it is sound; the eyes encounter the other, and it forms colors. Nothing prevents us from taking these as our own. We can do whatever we want with them, and they can never be used up. This is the inexhaustible treasure trove of the Fashioner-of-Things, and it serves the needs of both you and I alike. (Tian p 307)

This conclusion to the poem provides a moving reconciliation between transience and eternity. In the words of Zhang Longxi (2023, pp 221-222)

Through the dialogue of Master Su and the flute player and from the perspective that comprehends both mutability and constancy of all things, nature is invoked as a great healing power to cure human wounds and suffering, and relieve men from self-pity and depression.

Over two centuries later in 1301, the great Chinese calligrapher Zhao Mengfu wrote out Su Shi's Two Odes on the Red Cliff and provided a portrait of Su Shi. This original scroll was later cut up to form album leaves each 27 by 11 cm. These are now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. The following illustration shows at the top a digital recomposition of the original scroll of the first ode, and then an enlargement of the portrait and two album leaves near the end of the ode. The quotation beginning "Between heaven and earth... (天地 *qiě fū tiān*, and man heaven) begins in the right-most line of the enlarged album leaves three characters from the bottom.



Su's poem shows his ability to write fluently and clearly about issues of importance. Yang (2015, p 3) discusses this in terms of "spontaneity."

A primary Chinese term for this notion is *ziran* 自然 (literally 'self-so-ness'). *Ziran* in the premodern context could function as an adjective: 'being natural'; or adverb: 'naturally'; but not as a noun in the modern sense of 'nature', that is, our material environment. The semantic gist of 'spontaneity' is also found in terms such as *tianran* 天然 ('heavenly made so-ness'), *tianjun* 天君 ('Heaven,

the Potter'), *tiancai* 天材 ('heavenly endowed talent'), *shensi* 神思 ('divinely inspired thinking'), *wuxin* 无心 ('mindless'), *wuyi* 无意 ('without intention'), *wuwei* 无为 ('without agitation'), and so forth. Conspicuously, these are all compound words that suggest that a certain object is originated from itself (*zi*), created by a transcendental agent (*tian* or *shen*) or, in any case, simply formed without human interference (*wu*).

Su's poetry expresses the truth directly without any apparent effort on the part of the poet. The underlying pattern of the Dao makes itself manifest through the words (Bol, 1992). Fuller (2023, pp 2-4 and pp 78-118) considers the poetry in terms of 理 *lǐ* or "inherent pattern." Through Su's words one can see the underlying order of things. He quotes Su Shi's own description of his work:

My writing is like a spring of ten thousand gallons; it does not choose its path as it goes out. On level land it flows smoothly and quickly, and a thousand miles a day is not difficult. When it comes to turns and breaks over mountains and stones, it follows the object to describe the form, and it cannot be known. That which can be known is that it always travels where it ought to travel, and it always stops where it ought to stop. It is like this, and as for all else, I too cannot know. (Fuller, 2023, pp 3-4)

A Visit to Mount Lu

Politics changed and Su Shi's formal exile in Huangzhou came to an end in 1084. By 1086 he had returned to the capital in Kaifeng. In 1084 he visited Mount Lu (庐山, *Lúshān*), a mountainous area containing multiple towering peaks just south of the Yangtze and west of Lake Poyang. It is a land of mountains, mist and mysticism. The origin of the region's name is usually related to the legendary Kuangsu who lived in a

small hut (*lú*) in the mountains before becoming a Daoist immortal (Hargett, 2004, p 10). After the 4th Century CE, Mount Lou became a prominent center for Buddhism, and numerous temples were built there (Grant, 1994). One of these temples in the northwest part of the mountain is the “West Forest Temple.” One of Su Shi’s most famous poems records his visit there: *Inscription on the Wall of the West Forest Temple*. The Buddhist sense of the poem is that one cannot understand the overarching truth of life when one is lost in its details. The following is a word-by-word translation

題	西	林	壁			
tí	xī	lín	bì			
write inscribe	west	forest woods	wall cliff			
橫	看	成	嶺	側	成	峰
héng	kàn	chéng	lǐng	cè	chéng	fēng
crossways horizontal	see	become turn into	mountain range	side	become turn into	peak
遠	近	高	低	各	不	同
yuǎn	jìn	gāo	dī	gè	bù	tóng
far distant	near close	high tall	low	each every	not	same
不	識	廬	山	真	面	目
bù	shí	lú	shān	zhēn	miàn	mù
not	know recognize	Lu hut	mountain	true real	face aspect	eye eyesight
只	緣	身	在	此	山	中
zhǐ	yuán	shēn	zài	cǐ	shān	zhōng
only merely	cause edge	body oneself	exist be located	this here	mountain	middle inside

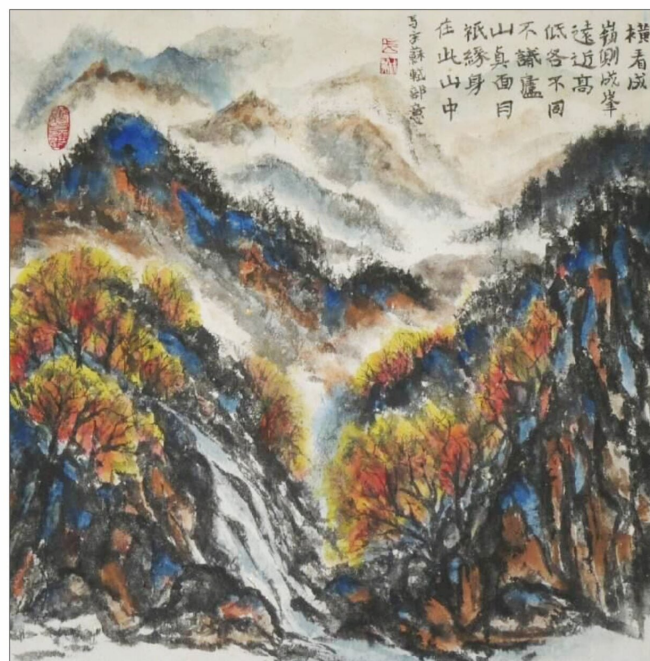
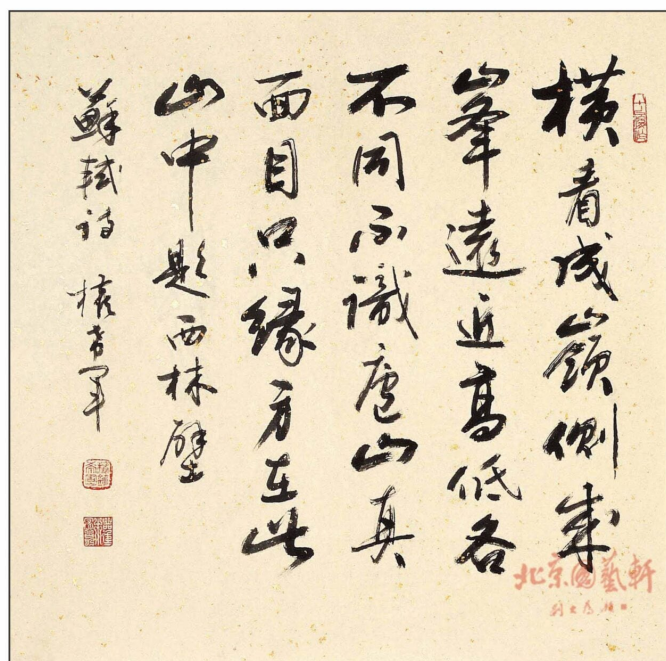
This is a translation by Burton Watson (1994, p. 108):

From the side, a whole range; from the end, a single peak;
 far, near, high, low, no two parts alike.
 Why can't I tell the true shape of Lu-shan?
 Because I myself am in the mountain.

And a rhyming version by Xu Yuanchong (2005, p 397).

It's a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side
Assuming different shapes viewed from far and wide
Of Mountain Lu we cannot make out the true face
For we are lost in the heart of the very place.

The following illustration shows on the left the poem as written out by a modern calligrapher Quan Xijun. On the right is a modern painting of Mount Lu in the autumn together with calligraphy of Su Shi's poem:



Below is a version of the poem in chaos calligraphy (2016) by Wang Dongling (1946-) together with two photographs of the area. The calligraphy gives a true sense of the land of mists and the mountains:



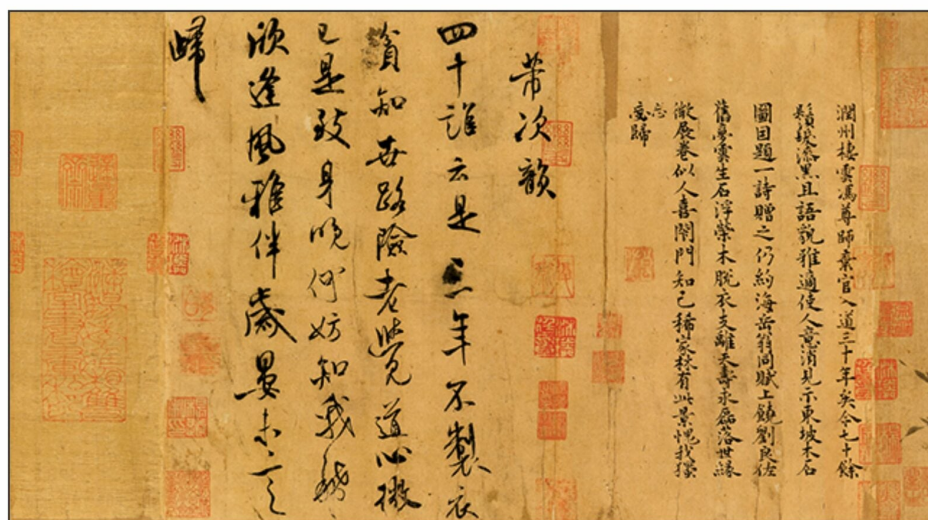
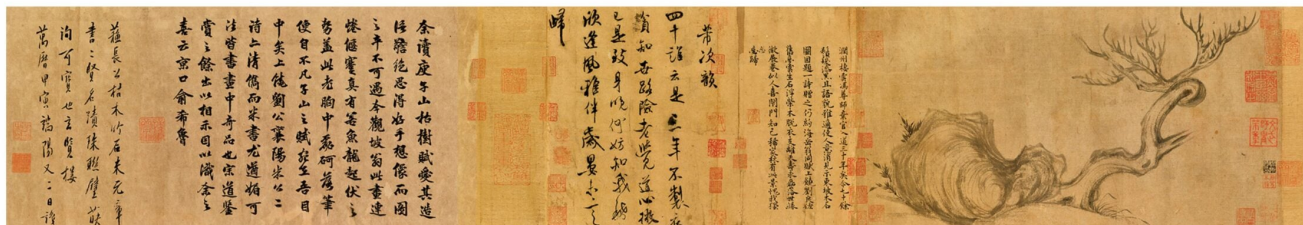
Mount Lu is the subject of many paintings. The following illustration shows on the left a painting made in 1467 by Shen Zhou (1427-1509) and on the right a modern painting by Qi Kun (1901-1944) created in 1943. These were exhibited at the National Palace Museum in Taipei in 2020.



Bamboo, Rock and Tree

Su Shi was a talented painter as well as calligrapher. In 2018 a scroll containing his painting of *Bamboo, Rock and Tree*, long held in a private collection, was auctioned for almost 60 million dollars (Sturman, 2022). The following illustration shows the complete scroll (26 cm by 185 cm) at the top. In the middle are the first two colophons, the rightmost by Liu Liangzuo (11th Century) and the next by the poet and

calligrapher Mi Fu (1052–1107). And at the bottom is the painting with the more recent seals removed. The painting was likely created in the 1080s and the first two colophons added in the 1090s.



Liu Liangzuo describes how he was able to view the painting that was owned by Feng Qiyun. He then provides a poem (4th line

from right)

□□□□, □□□□□□
□□□□, □□□□□

A rock born from clouds in an old dream;
A tree sheds its robes of empty glory.
Gnarled and knotted, heaven's gift of years is
timeless;
Rugged and upright, the fate of this world is fickle.
(translation Sturman, 2022)

Mi Fu provides a much more beautiful piece of calligraphy,
though his words are less poetic. His colophon begins:

□□□□, □□□□□□
□□□□, □□□□□

Forty, who says it's so?
Three years of no new clothing!
Poor, I know the worldly path is precarious;
Old, I awaken to the Dao-mind's subtlety.
(translation Sturman, 2022)

Dongpo Pork

Legend has it that Su Shi created the original recipe for East Slope Pork (□□□, *dōngpōròu*): pork belly braised with ginger and scallions in soy sauce and rice wine. The recipe is contained in a poem that has been attributed to Su Shi:

猪肉颂

净洗铛，少著水
柴头罨烟焰不起
待他自熟莫催他，
火候足时他自美
黄州好猪肉
价贱如泥土
贵者不肯吃
贫者不解煮
早晨起来打两碗
饱得自家君莫管

Ode to Pork

Clean your pot, add but a little water
light the stove, keep the smoke at bay.
It's done when it's done—how pointless to rush,
with heat and time, a thing of beauty emerges.
Huangzhou has good pork,
and cheap as dirt
The rich won't eat it;
the common-folk don't know how,
I eat two bowls for breakfast,
and I'm satisfied, with not a care in the world.



Epilogue

Although Su Shi returned to political favor in 1086, this was not to last. He was banished again in 1090 to the south of China, ultimately to Hainan Island. He was pardoned in 1100, but died soon thereafter in 1101.

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Modern Chinese Calligraphy: Wang Dongling

Chinese calligraphy began over 3000 years ago. Over the years several distinct styles of writing evolved: oracle, bronze, seal, clerical, regular, semi-cursive (running) and cursive (grass). The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) overturned the respect shown to these traditional modes. However, calligraphy flourished in the format of the big-character posters (大字报, *dàzì bào*). In the years following the revolution, Chinese calligraphy became more abstract. One of the most important modern calligraphers is Wang Dongling (王冬岭). Among his many achievements is a new writing style that he calls “chaos

script” 草书 *luànshū*.

A Calligrapher's Life

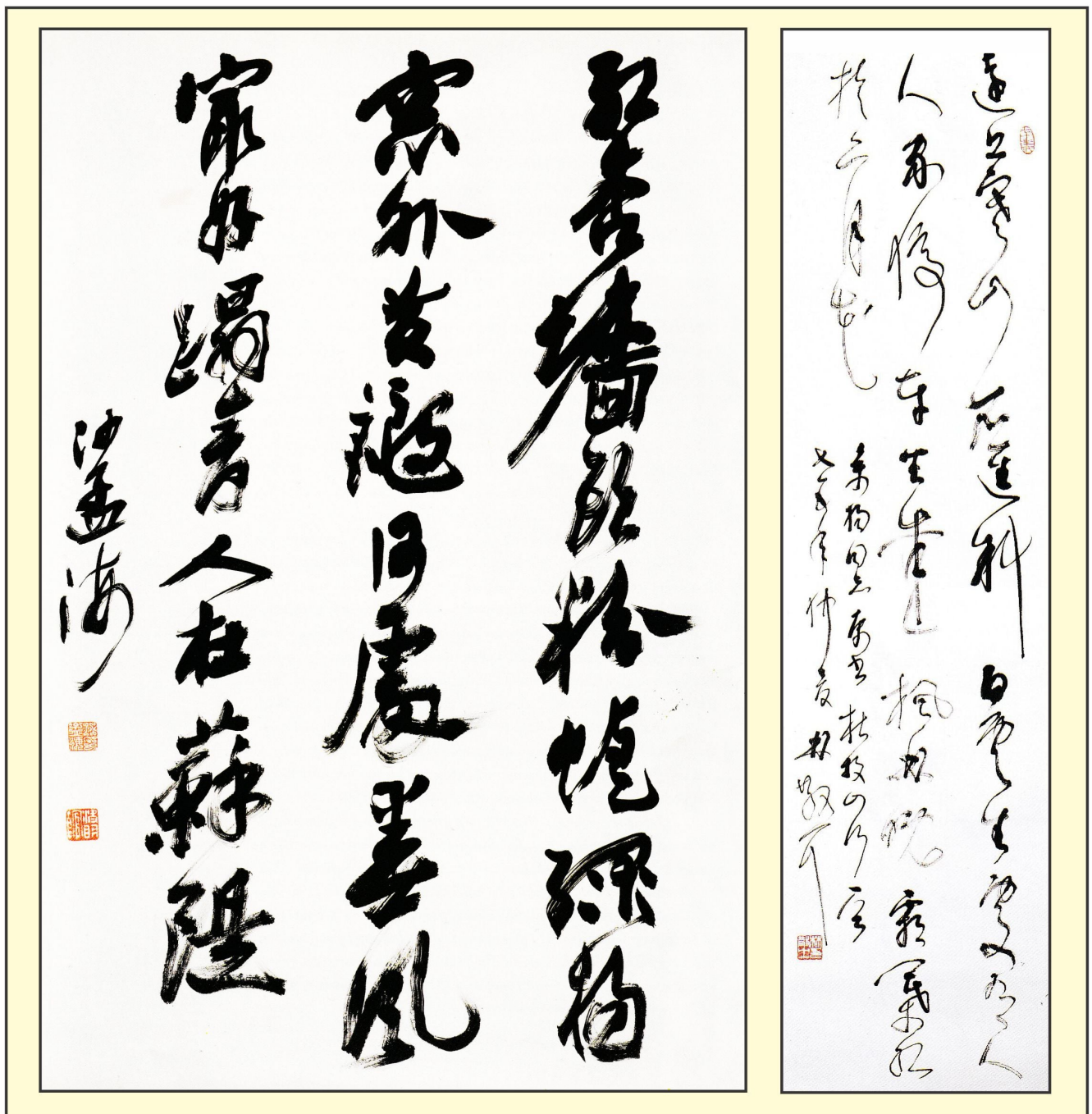
Wang Dongling was born in 1946 in Rudong about 175 km north of Shanghai. He studied fine arts in Nanjing, graduating in 1966 in time for the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. He was able to survive through this upheaval by creating big-character posters, an experience which gave him a fearful sense of freedom. He was intrigued by the traditional calligraphy that was being trashed by the revolutionaries, and in 1968 began to study with Lin Zanshi (1898-1989) in Wujiang just east of Shanghai (Barrass, 2002, p 164). This grand old calligrapher, a master of the cursive script, was known for his “iron line.” Lin survived the purges by providing calligraphy for the propaganda of the party and the poetry of Mao Zedong. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Wang enrolled in the Zhejiang Academy of Art (now the National Academy of Art) in Hangzhou, where he studied with Lu Weizhao (1899-1980) and Sha Menghai (1900-1992). After graduating from the academy, he spent some time as a visiting fellow at the University of Minnesota and at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the United States. He is presently a Professor of Calligraphy at the National Academy of Art in Hangzhou.

Influences

The following illustration shows calligraphy by two of his teachers: Lin Zanshi on the right and Sha Menghai on the left. Lin Zanshi wrote out the poem *Going up the Hill* by the Tang poet Du Mu (803–852) in 1975 using his iron line. The poem reads (Barrass, 2002, p 142)

A slanting stony path rises far up the chilly hill
To where men live amidst the fleecy clouds
I stop my carriage to admire the maple grove at dusk,
Where frozen leaves are redder than the flowers of early

spring.



In the 1980s, Sha Menghai wrote a poem about the view from his office in the Academy of Art (Barrass, 2002, p 138)

Red apricot blossom and pink butterflies can be seen over
the wall
While outside the window there are green willows and yellow
orioles
To best enjoy the spring breezes, join those who walk along

Su Dongpo's causeway across the West Lake.

East-West Interactions

Wang was also influenced by Western abstract art. He developed a highly fluid calligraphy and combined that with the freedom of Western abstraction. The following is a work called 史迹 (*shǐ jì*, History and Memory, 68 cm square) from 1990 (Hertel, 2016):



The black calligraphy provides a basic structure for the

abstract ecstasy of the colors. Though very freely written, the calligraphy still has definite meaning.

Wang also promoted direct contact between Chinese calligraphy and Western culture (Hertel, 2016). The following illustration shows Chinese calligraphy on a Western background (1999). Wang has written the character for passion/feeling (情 *gǎn*) on a two-page spread from a German arts magazine and then repeated the calligraphy on an identical spread.

He then placed the two sheets side by side, but with the left-hand one turned upside down. His intention was to illustrate how 'feeling' becomes 'passion' when, for example, one is 'head-over-heels' in love. (Barrass, 2002, p 168).



The following illustration shows another example of the interaction between East and West. In 2012, Wang wrote out the Heart Sutra on a magazine illustration (25 by 20 cm) of one of

Edward Weston's 1936 nude photographs of Charis Weston in the Oceano dunes (Iezzi, 2016). The juxtaposition is intriguing. The nude body was not a subject for Chinese artists. The main message of the Heart Sutra is that everything is "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). Nothing that we perceive is real.



Large-Character Calligraphy

Wang was very adept at making large-character calligraphic works (大字, *dàzì shū*). Unlike previous artists, he allowed the characters to overlap and to extend beyond the borders of the paper, and he let the ink to spread freely. The following illustration shows two large-character works (about 178 cm high) about flowers dancing from his 2013 exhibition.



Flowers' Dance

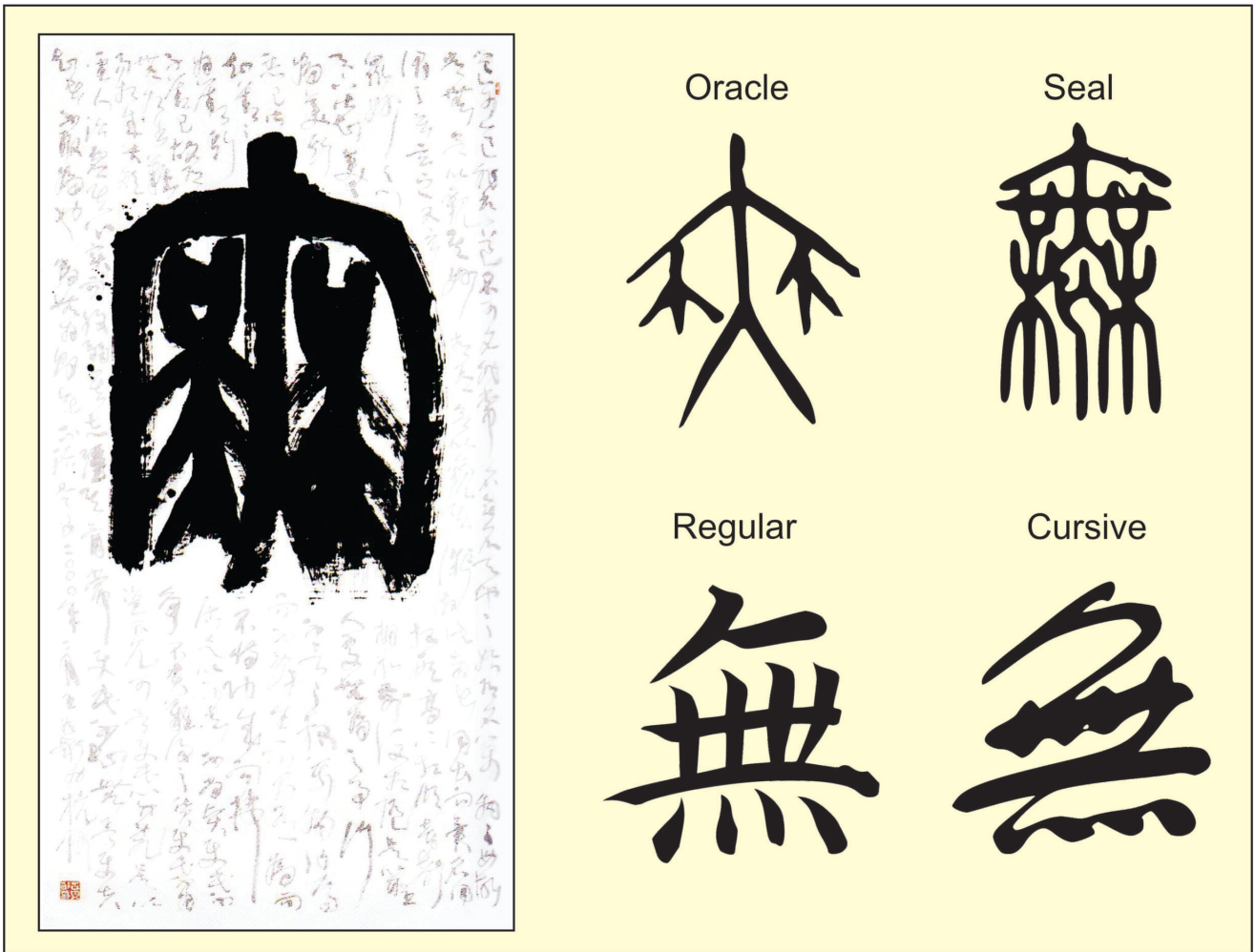
花飞



Dancing Flowers

飞花

The following illustration shows on the left a large work (272 by 142 cm) entitled *The Void*, about the nature of the Dao created by Wang in 2000 (Barrass, 2002, p 170). The background contains calligraphy of the first two chapters of the *Daodejing*, written in a style similar to the “iron line” of his teacher Lin Zanshi. In the center is the character that represents absence or nothingness (无, simplified 无, wú) written in a script based on the oracle script. The right section of the illustration shows the evolution of the character from ancient times.



The following is the Chinese text of the beginning of the first chapter of the *Daodejing* (Wikibooks) with a recent English translation by Fischer (2023). The character 无 begins the second line:

无欲则刚
无为之事

The way that can be (fully) conveyed is not the abiding Way; a name that can be (fully) descriptive is not an abiding name.

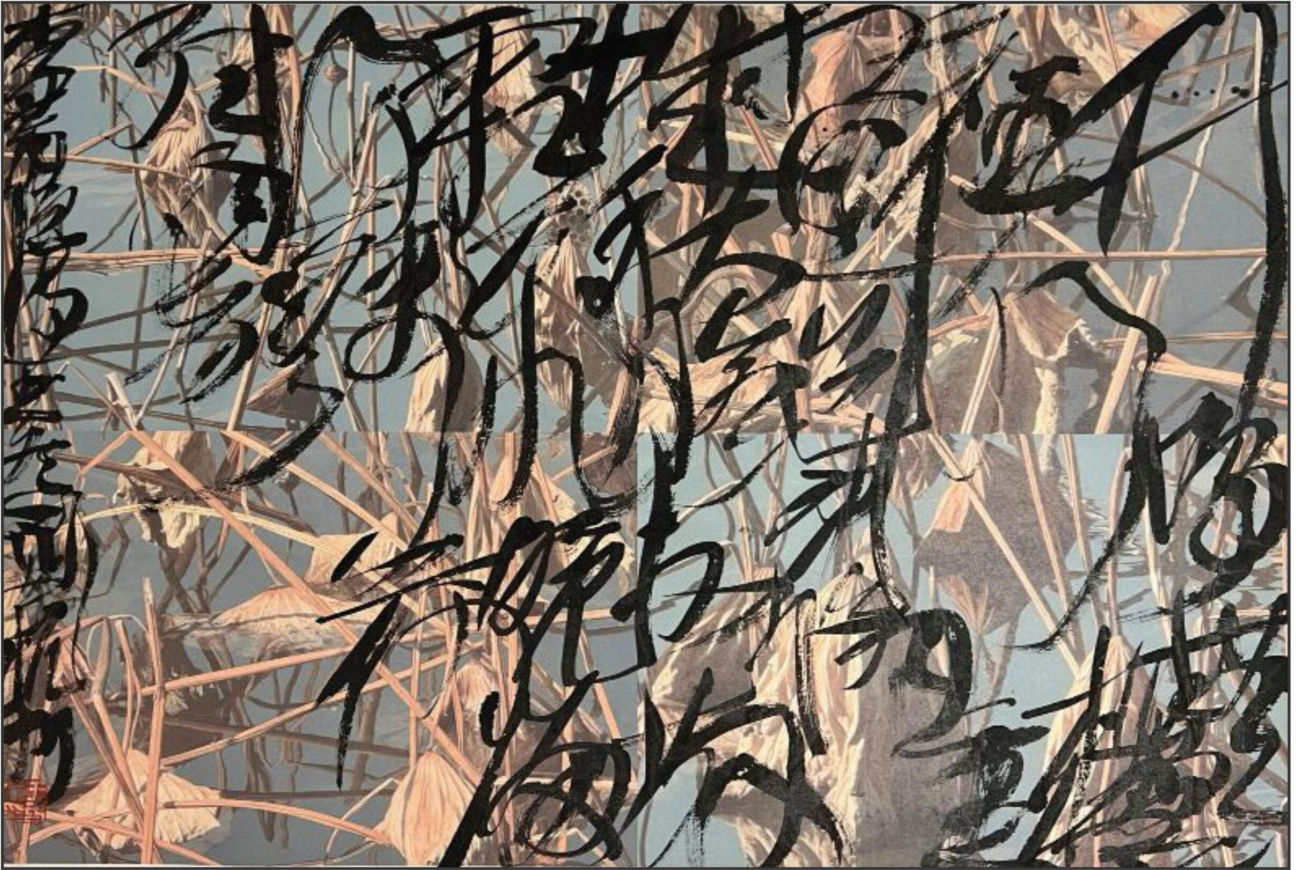
“Formlessness” is the name of the beginning of Heaven and Earth; “form” is the name of the mother of the myriad things.

Photographic Experiments

Using photosensitive paper and calligraphy written upon transparencies, Wang (2013) was able to create impressive white on black creations. The following is a gelatin silver print (51 x 61 cm) of *Love Cloud* (☁)

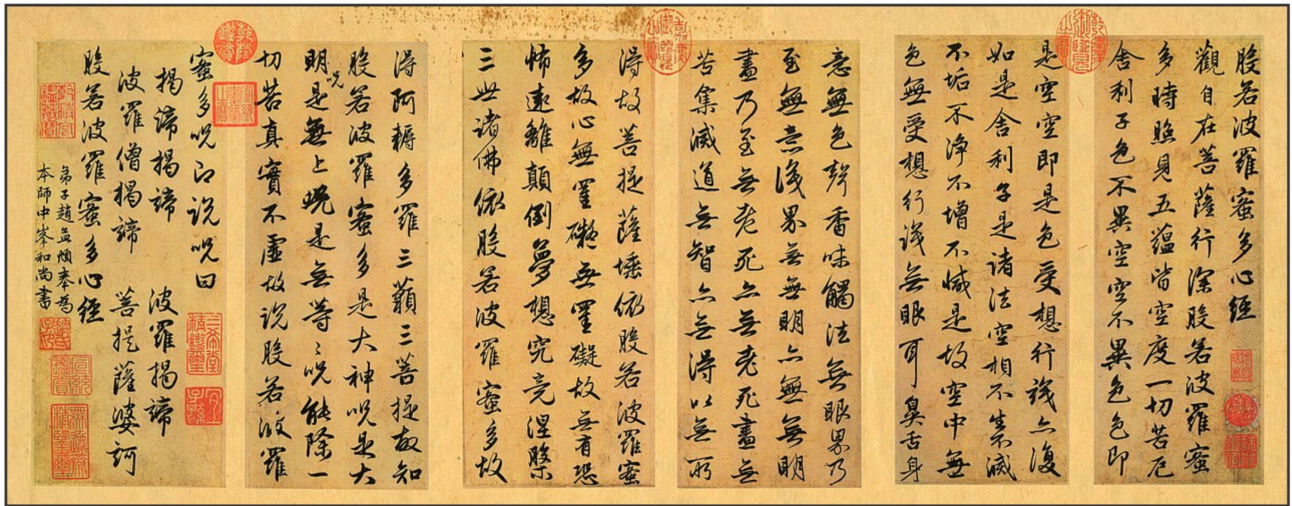


The following is calligraphy on a photographic print (51 by 69 cm) composed of four separate views of a lotus pond (Wang Dongling, 2023): *Li Shangyin – Newly Washed After the Rains, the Bamboo Dock is Transformed* (☁ – ☁☁☁☁☁☁, Zhú wù wú chén shuǐ kǎn qīng)



Chaos Script

Over recent years Wang has developed a fluid cursive script called chaos script (乱书 *luànshū*) that breaks all the rules of traditional calligraphy (Festi & Hou, 2023). In cursive script the characters may run into each other vertically. In chaos script the characters overlap both vertically and horizontally, and can extend beyond the edges of the paper. The calligraphy is created with a long-handled brush writing on paper laid out on the ground. The resultant work shows a slow alternation of dark and light as the ink intermittently dries in the brush and must be replenished. The following illustrations show the Heart Sutra as written in regular script by Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322 CE) and in chaos script in 2016 by Wang Dongling (Ferrell et al, 2026, p 126).



The following are comments by Wang on chaos script (Wang Dongling, 2016):

Chaos Script came about gradually, over a long process of creative practice. In Chaos Script, the strokes of cursive script overlap and interweave, creating what appears to be unreadable abstract images. But the execution of Chaos Script in fact still adheres to the rules of traditional calligraphy. It is not haphazard—it appears chaotic but is actually not so. I settled on the name of Chaos Script after some deliberation. Luan evokes disorder and mess, but it also implies *zhi* (“control,” “govern”)—after chaos comes control. In poetry, there is a famous line [by Bai Juyi (772-846)]: “Riotous blossoms [*luanhua*] gradually enchant the travelers’ vision.” Chaos has a feeling of nature.

Chaos calligraphy is as much related to painting as to writing. In an essay in the catalogue of Wang's 2016 exhibition, Britta Erickson remarks

The closest comparison to Wang's long cascades of intertwined lines that comes to mind are the vines painted by Wu Changshi 吴昌硕 (1844-1927), Professor Wang's teacher's teacher. One of the greatest calligraphers of the twentieth century, Wu Changshi employed calligraphic scripts in rendering natural forms. His loose, twisting renderings of vines brought together the artist's understanding of nature, and of calligraphy, and he would allow the vines to be cropped by the paper's edge, so that the viewer would then consider the wide spaces into which those vines stretched, beyond the frame of the painting. Wang Dongling's Chaos Script similarly engages the mind to extrapolate beyond the paper's edge to consider the breadth of the world into which his writing expands. The expanse can feel infinite.

The following illustration shows the transition from Wu Changshi on the left through Wang's teacher Lu Weizhao (1899-1980) to Wang's chaos script on the right.

Wu's painting represents *Wisteria*. The inscription reads

The branches are messy and overflowing, [but] please do not chop off the vines!

The painting by Lu Weizhao depicts *Bamboo and Rock* (1962).

Wang's example of chaos script is his 2019 calligraphy of the famous poem *Quiet Night Thoughts* by the Tang poet Li Bai (701-762):

□□□□	<i>Chuáng qián míngyuè guāng</i>
□□□□	<i>Yí shì dìshang shuāng</i>
□□□□	<i>Jǔtóu wàng míngyuè</i>
□□□□	<i>Dītóu sī gùxiāng</i>

A pool of moonlight on my bed this late hour
like a blanket of frost on the world.
I lift my eyes to a bright mountain moon.
Resigned, remembering my home, I bow.
(translation Sam Hamill, 2013, p 94).



Calligraphy as Performance

Chaos script lends itself easily to performance. It is an art based on action. The following are comments by Gao Shiming (2023):

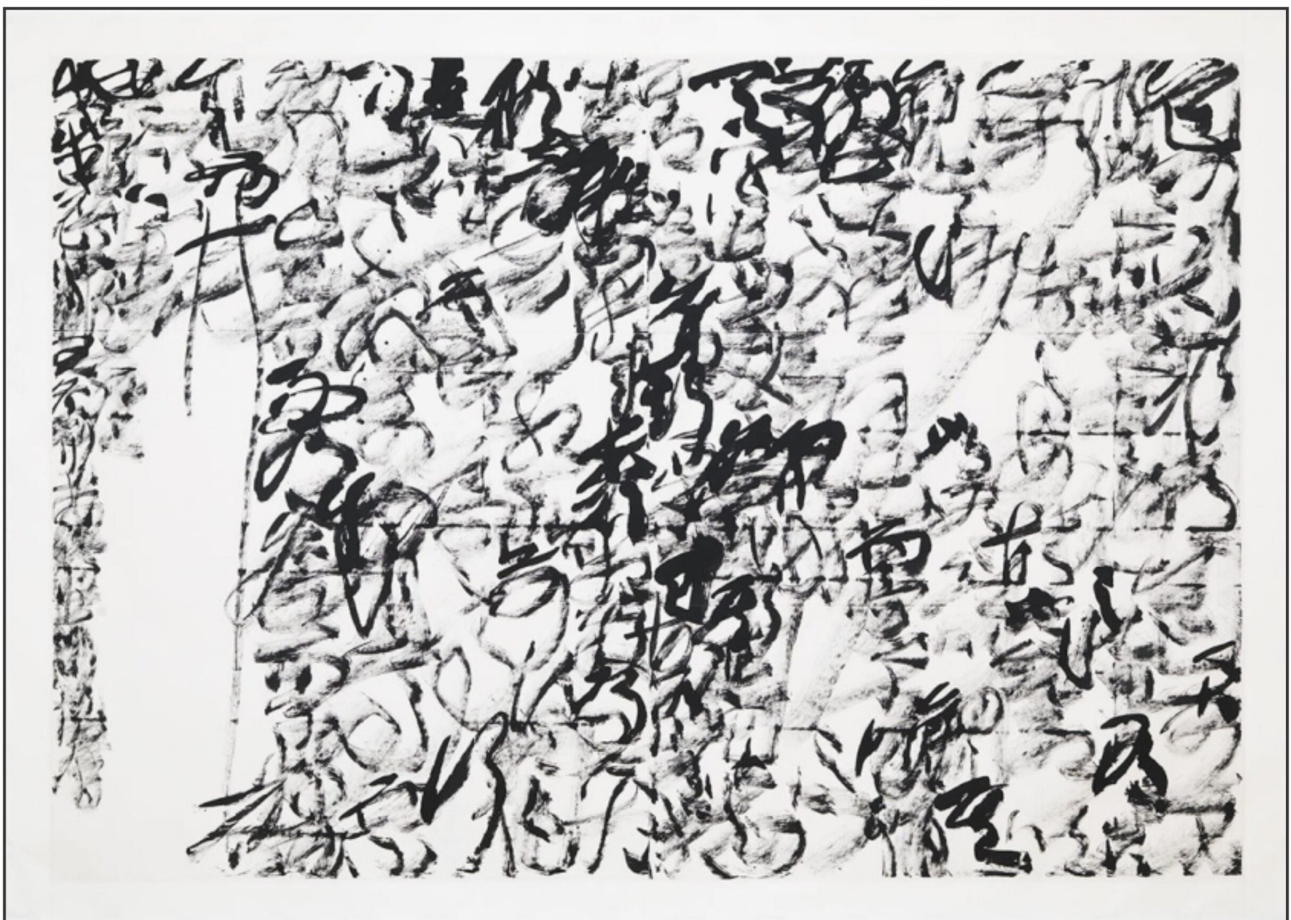
Writing becomes simple ink, markings, and traces, and the physicality and emotional tenor of the writing becomes the centre of everything. Wang's chaos script crystallises action. When that action stops, the state and meaning of

that movement linger. This state of action is a dance that arises when the mood strikes. The impulse to write chaos stems from writing in an uninhibited state of disorientation and overwhelm. In the state of writing generated by the dialectic between chaos and order, a calligrapher loses himself yet finds contentment.

The following shows a video of Wang Dongling writing out the first two chapters of the *Daodejing* in chaos script at the Asia Society Museum in New York in 2018.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Wang-Dongling-Demonstrates-His-Dynamic-Calligraphy-Style-at-Asia-Society-New-York.mp4>

And the following illustrations shows the calligraphy in its final form:



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Bright is the Ring of Words: English Art Song

During the 19th Century, composers began to set poems to music. In these “art songs” or *Lieder*, the piano accompaniment accentuated the emotions and complemented the meaning of the poem. Although Beethoven’s *An die ferne Geliebte* (1816) was the first cycle of art songs, Schubert was the composer who definitively established the genre. He was followed by Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, and Mahler. In the British Isles, a golden age of art song occurred in the first 20 years of the 20th Century. Young composers, many trained in the German tradition, set to music both the lines they had learned in school and the poems of their contemporaries. The illustration is a wood cut from 1903 by Wassily Kandinsky.

Songs

Art songs (*Kunstlieder* in German) are often distinguished from folk songs (*Volkslieder*): art songs are musical settings for poetry that has been published in print, whereas the words and melodies for folk songs are handed down orally. However, some poets wrote ballads in the style of traditional folk songs, and some folk songs can be poetically complex. Art songs are also differentiated from popular songs by being “through-composed” (*durchkomponiert*) so that the melody varies with the meaning of the words, whereas popular songs typically use a simple repetitive rhythm. The accompaniment is typically more complex in art songs than in popular songs, often running in counterpoint to the voice. The words to art songs are created

prior to the music, whereas words and music for popular songs are usually created simultaneously. Modern art songs are typically written for a solo voice with piano. However, in the Renaissance, similar songs (*ayres*) were written for lute accompaniment. Some composers, such as Mahler and Vaughan-Williams, arranged their original piano setting for full orchestra. All distinctions tend to be fuzzy, and no one type of song is necessarily better than another. As stated in the Oxford Dictionary of Music (Kennedy et al., 2012) in the entry for “song”

Brave the man or woman who will make a didactic value-judgement between *Dives and Lazarus*, *Gretchen am Spinnrade* and *Smoke gets in your eyes*.

Poetry and Music

Human speech has its own rhythm – prosody – and this can be heightened or regularized in poetry (Menninghaus et al. 2018). This is what makes poetry more appealing when recited out loud than when read silently. Listening to art song adds another dimension to the perceptual experience: one must attend both to the words and to the music (Campbell, 2023). Since it can be difficult to adjust the melody of the music to the rhythm of the poetry, some poets would prefer their poems not be set to music. Whitner (1957) quotes Victor Hugo who wrote on a manuscript of his verse, “Commit no nuisance along these poems by setting them to music.” Nevertheless, in the better art songs, the music heightens the emotions of the words and makes their meaning more vivid and memorable.

The history of English Song (e.g., Kimball, 2005) suggests two Golden Ages. During the first (1580-1630) poems were set to music, with the lute being the typical accompaniment. In the second (the first half of the 20th Century), the songs were accompanied by piano. The following sections consider nine English art songs composed during first two decades of the 20th

Century. Each is presented as text, as recitation, and as song, with some also presented as music alone.

Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
The firefly wakens: waken thou with me.

Now droops the milkwhite peacock like a ghost,
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars,
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
And slips into the bosom of the lake:
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
Into my bosom and be lost in me.

This poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was extracted from his long narrative poem *The Princess* (1847), wherein Princess Ida forswears the world of men and establishes a university for women. The story was likely derived from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, and was itself adapted by Gilbert and Sullivan into the operetta *Princess Ida*. The 14-line unrhymed poem is spoken by the Princess as she cares for the wounded Prince in Canto VII of the poem. As she invokes the sunset, she realizes that she feels more deeply for him than she had thought. The reference to Danaë, the beautiful young woman who was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of golden rain, accentuates the underlying erotic feelings in the lines.

The following illustration shows Gustav Klimt's *Danaë* (1907):



The following is a recitation of the poem by Simon Russell Beale

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/crimson_petal_beale.mp3

Roger Quilter (1877-1953) set the poem to music in 1902. The following is a performance by baritone Benjamin Luxon accompanied by David Willison on piano.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/quilter_crimson_petal_luxon.mp3

And the following is a transcription of Quilter's song-setting by Steven Hough.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/crimson-petal-hough.mp3>

Aedh wishes for the cloths of heaven

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,

I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) published this poem in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). The speaker is Yeats using the persona of *Aedh* (a name that means "fire" in Irish), a lovelorn, visionary poet. The poem, clearly related to Yeats's unrequited love for Maud Gonne, is recited by Greg Wise:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/yeats_cloths_wise.mp3

Thomas Dunhill (1877-1946) published a cycle of songs from Yeats' *The Wind among the Reeds* in 1904, later revising them for orchestral accompaniment in 1912. The following is a performance by tenor Ian Bostridge with Julius Drake on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/dunhill_cloths_bostridge.mp3

The following is the poem in calligraphy as published by the Cuala Press, established in 1908 by Elizabeth Yeats, the poet's brother.

HAD I THE HEAVEN'S
EMBROIDERED CLOTHS,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet :
But I, being poor, have only my dreams—;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W.B. Yeats.

Bright is the Ring of Words

Bright is the ring of words
When the right man rings them,
Fair the fall of songs
When the singer sings them.

Still they are carolled and said —
On wings they are carried —
After the singer is dead
And the maker buried.

Low as the singer lies

In the field of heather,
Songs of his fashion bring
The swains together.

And when the west is red
With the sunset embers,
The lover lingers and sings
And the maid remembers.

The poem comes from *Songs of Travel* (1896) by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894). *Faute de mieux* the following is my recitation of the poem:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Stevenson-Bright-tp.mp3>

Stevenson considered the poems as “songs,” and Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) set the words to music in 1904 as part of *The Vagabond and Other Songs*. The following is a performance by baritone Bryn Terfel with Malcom Martineau on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/vaughan_williams_bright_terfel.mp3

The score at the song’s end illustrates the complexity of the accompaniment:

[Moderato risoluto] *pp* molto più lento

The lo - ver lin - gers and sings And the maid re - mem - bers.

ben marcato *colla voce*

p *pp* molto più lento *rall.*

Down by the Salley Gardens

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-
white feet.

She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on
the tree;

But I, being young and foolish, with her would not
agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white
hand.

She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on
the weirs;

But I was young and foolish, and now am full of
tears.

William Butler Yeats published this poem in 1889. He extrapolated it from a few lines of an old song sung by a peasant woman in County Sligo. The word "salley" is a variant of a "sallow," which is another word for the willow tree (Latin *Salix*). These trees were cultivated to provide materials for baskets, fences and roofs. A weir is a low dam of rocks or wood built across a river to raise the level of the upstream water. Settling and other irregularities can cause portions of the weir to rise above the water level, and become covered in grass. The grass on the weirs thus suggests an islet of rest in the turbulent waters flowing around it. The following is a recitation of the poem by Jim Norton:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Salley-Gardens-Jim-Norton.mp3>

Herbert Hughes (1882-1937), an Irish composer, set the poem in 1909 to the tune of a traditional Irish air called *The Maids of Moune Shore*. The following is a classical performance of this setting by the contralto Kathleen Ferrier with Phyllis

Spurr on piano:

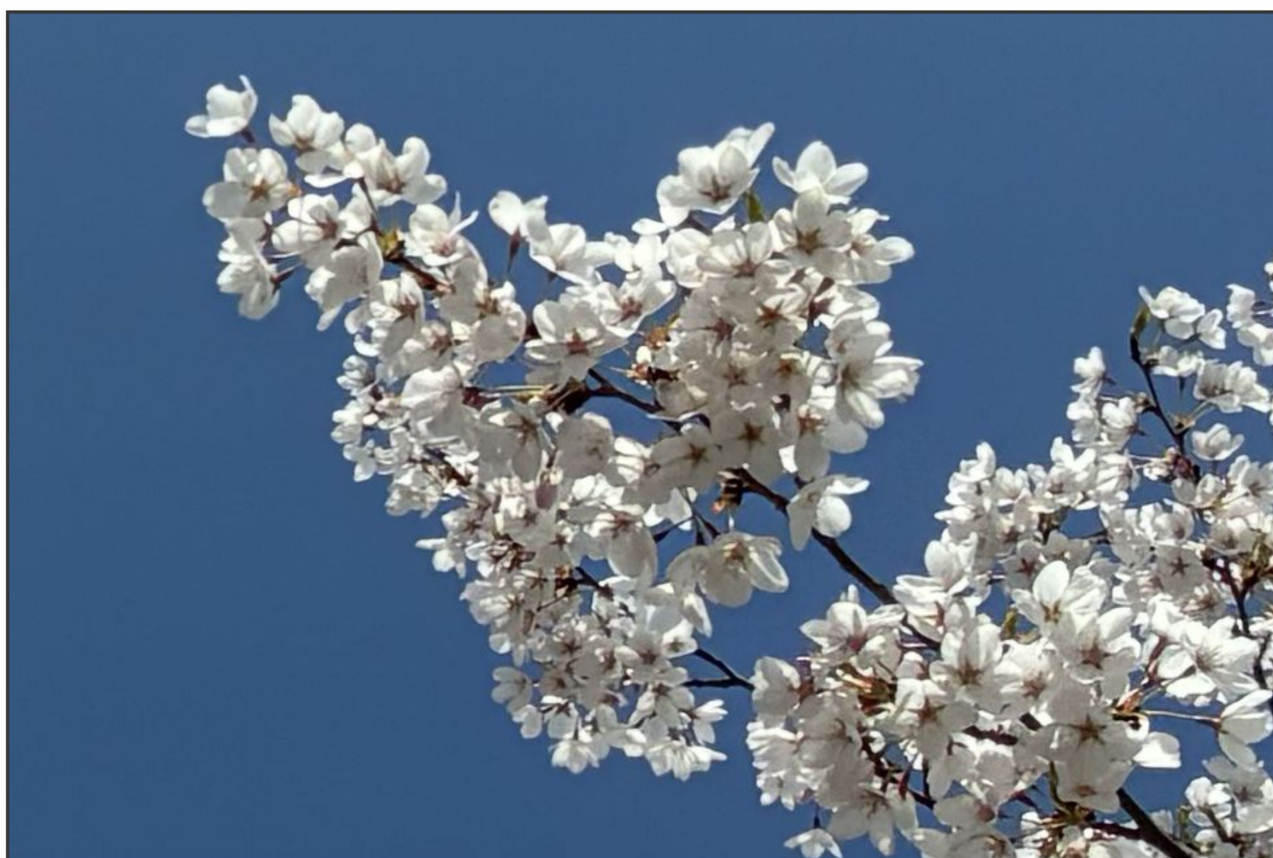
<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Ferrier-Salley-Gardens.mp3>

And another by countertenor Daniel Taylor accompanied by Sylvain Bergeron on lute. This performance gives the impression of a Renaissance Ayre.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Taylor-Salley-Gardens.mp3>

The following is a performance of the Hughes tune adapted for cello (Gerald Peregrine) and violin (Lynda O'Connor):

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Salley-Gardens-Violin-Cello.mp3>



Loveliest of Trees the Cherry Now

Loveliest of trees the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now of my three score years and ten,
twenty will not come again.
And take from seventy years a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom,
Fifty Springs is little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

This poem, published by A. E. Housman (1859-1936) in his *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), has been widely anthologized and set to music numerous times. The following is a recitation by Emma Fielding:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/housman_loveliest_fielding.mp3

George Butterworth (1895-1916) was the first composer to set the poem to music in 1912. The following is a performance by Benjamin Luxon with David Willison on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/butterworth_cherry_luxon.mp3

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And Summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And oft' is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd:
But thy eternal Summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

All the art songs considered so far used poems published in the years just before the composers set the music. The composers also used earlier poems – particularly those from the late 16th to early 17th Centuries. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) published his sonnets in 1609. The following is a recitation of his 18th Sonnet by Hugh Grant:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/shakespeare_sonnet18_grant.mp3

Frederick Septimus Kelly (1881-1916) was born in Australia and educated in England. As well as studying music, he was a gold medalist in rowing at the 1908 Olympics. His setting for Shakespeare's sonnet was published in 1912. According to Banfield (1885, p 141),

The treatment of the opening line, the searching for a comparison, is particularly happy: the intermediate dominant of the relative minor leads in as if with a gradual concentration of the mind.

[Allegretto]

Shall I com - pare thee — to a sum - mer's day? Thou art more etc.

Ped. * etc.

The following is a performance by baritone Stephen Varcoe with Clifford Benson on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/kelly_shakespeare_varcoe.mp3

To Gratiana Dancing and Singing

See! with what constant motion
Even and glorious, as the sun,
Gratiana steers that noble frame,
Soft as her breast, sweet as her voice,
That gave each winding law and poise,
And swifter than the wings of Fame.

She beat the happy pavement
By such a star-made firmament,
Which now no more the roof envies;
But swells up high with Atlas ev'n,
Bearing the brighter, nobler Heav'n,
And in her, all the Dieties.

Each step trod out a lovers thought
And the ambitious hopes he brought,
Chain'd to her brave feet with such arts,
Such sweet command and gentle awe,
As when she ceas'd, we sighing saw
The floor lay pav'd with broken hearts.

So did she move: so did she sing:
Like the harmonious spheres that bring
Unto their rounds their music's aid;
Which she performed such a way,
As all th' enamour'd world will say:
The Graces danced, and Apollo play'd.

Richard Lovelace (1617-1657) was a Cavalier Poet who fought on

the side of Charles I during the English Civil War (1642–1651). Most of his poems, many dedicated to various idealized mistresses such as Althea, Lucasta, and Gratiana (Cousins, 1988), were collected and published posthumously. The following is a reading of the poem by *Cavaet* from Librivox.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/gratiana_lovelace_caveat.mp3

William Denis Browne (1888–1915), an English composer, set Lovelace's poem (omitting the second verse) to music in 1913. He based his melody on an *Allmayne* (a dance form originating in Germany, also called *Allemande*) from the 17th-Century *Virginal Book* of Elizabeth Rogers. The following is a performance by tenor Ian Bostridge with Julius Drake on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/denis_browne_gratiana_bostridge.mp3

Sea-Fever

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like
a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's
over.

John Masefield (1878-1967) joined HMS Conway, a naval training ship in 1891 and spent much of his life in the 1890s at sea. This poem comes from his first book, *Salt-Water Ballads* (1902). The poems from this first volume were published together with later poems in 1916 as *Salt-Water Poems and Ballads*, which was profusely illustrated by Charles Pears (1873-1958). This is Pears's depiction of the first two lines of *Sea-Fever*:



The following is a recitation of the poem by Terence Stamp:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/sea_fever_stamp.mp3

John Nicholson Ireland (1879-1962) set Masefield's poem to music in 1913. The following is a performance by baritone Bryn Terfel with Malcolm Martineau on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/ireland_sea_fever_terfel.mp3

Epitaph

Here lies a most beautiful lady,
Light of step and heart was she:
I think she was the most beautiful lady
That ever was in the West Country.

But beauty vanishes; beauty passes;
However rare, rare it be;
And when I crumble who shall remember
This lady of the West Country?

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) published this brief but powerful poem in *The Listeners and Other Poems* (1912). In 1934 he made a recording of this and other poems. The following represents my best effort to decrease the high levels of noise:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/de-la-mare-epitaph.mp3>

Arthur L Wood provides a much clearer recitation:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Epitaph-Arthur-L-Wood.mp3>

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937), an English poet and composer, set the

poem to music in 1920. The following is a performance by the baritone Benjamin Luxon with David Willison on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/gurney_epitaph_luxon.mp3

Lament

Many of the composers active during the early years of the 20th Century died in World War I. William Denis Browne died at Gallipoli in 1915. William Septimus Kelly and George Butterworth both died in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Ivor Gurney was irrevocably affected by his injuries during the war, and spent much of his time afterwards in psychiatric hospitals. Two weeks before he died at the Battle of the Somme, Kelly began writing a *Lament*. His original piano score was recently adapted for orchestra by Christopher Latham. The following is an arrangement for violin and piano with Latham playing the violin and Tamara Anna Cislowska playing the piano:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Somme-Lament-Violin-Piano.mp3>

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Zoroaster: Struggles between Good and Evil

Zoroaster, a legendary prophet who probably lived toward the end of the 2nd Millennium BCE, proclaimed a new religion based on a belief in a supreme god *Ahura Mazda* (Lord of Wisdom) who fights for truth and order (*asha*) against the forces of deceit and chaos (*druj*) led by *Angra Mainyu* (Evil Spirit). Since fire is the symbol of *asha*, Zoroastrian temples contain an eternal sacred flame, which represents the presence of *Ahura Mazda*. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest organized religions of the

world and one of the smallest, with only about 120,000 adherents in the world today.

History

Sometime between 4000 and 1500 BCE a people speaking a proto-Indo-European language came to Eastern Iran and Northwest India. They may have come from the Steppes or from Anatolia or both (see Heggarty et al, 2023). As well as their language they carried with them a multitude of gods and a sense of cosmic order or justice. These migrants divided into those that travelled into India speaking Indo-Aryan languages such as Sanskrit, and those that came to Iran speaking Iranian languages such as Avestan. A concept of cosmic order common to both groups became known as *rta* in the Sanskrit *Vedas*, the earliest of Hindu Scriptures, and as *asha* in the Avestan *Gathas*, the earliest Zoroastrian scriptures (Schlerath & Skjærvø, 2018).

Zarathustra was a prophet in Iran who lifted one of the many gods above the others. His name perhaps meant “handler of camels” and his God was *Ahura Mazda*. The name was transliterated into Greek as Zoroaster, which could be read as “pure star,” but this meaning was coincidental. No one knows anything for certain about the life of Zoroaster, but most scholars estimate that he lived sometime toward the end of the 2nd Millennium BCE (Boyce, 1989, p 190; Nigosian, 1993, p 15; Hartz, 2004, p 20; Stausberg, 2008, p 20; Malandra, 2015), although he might have lived at anytime between 1500 BCE and the founding of the Achaemenid Empire in 550 BCE by Darius the Great. Zoroastrianism became the official religion of that empire. The Behistun monument near Kermanshah shows Darius trampling his rival Gaumata and welcoming as prisoners the kings that he has conquered.



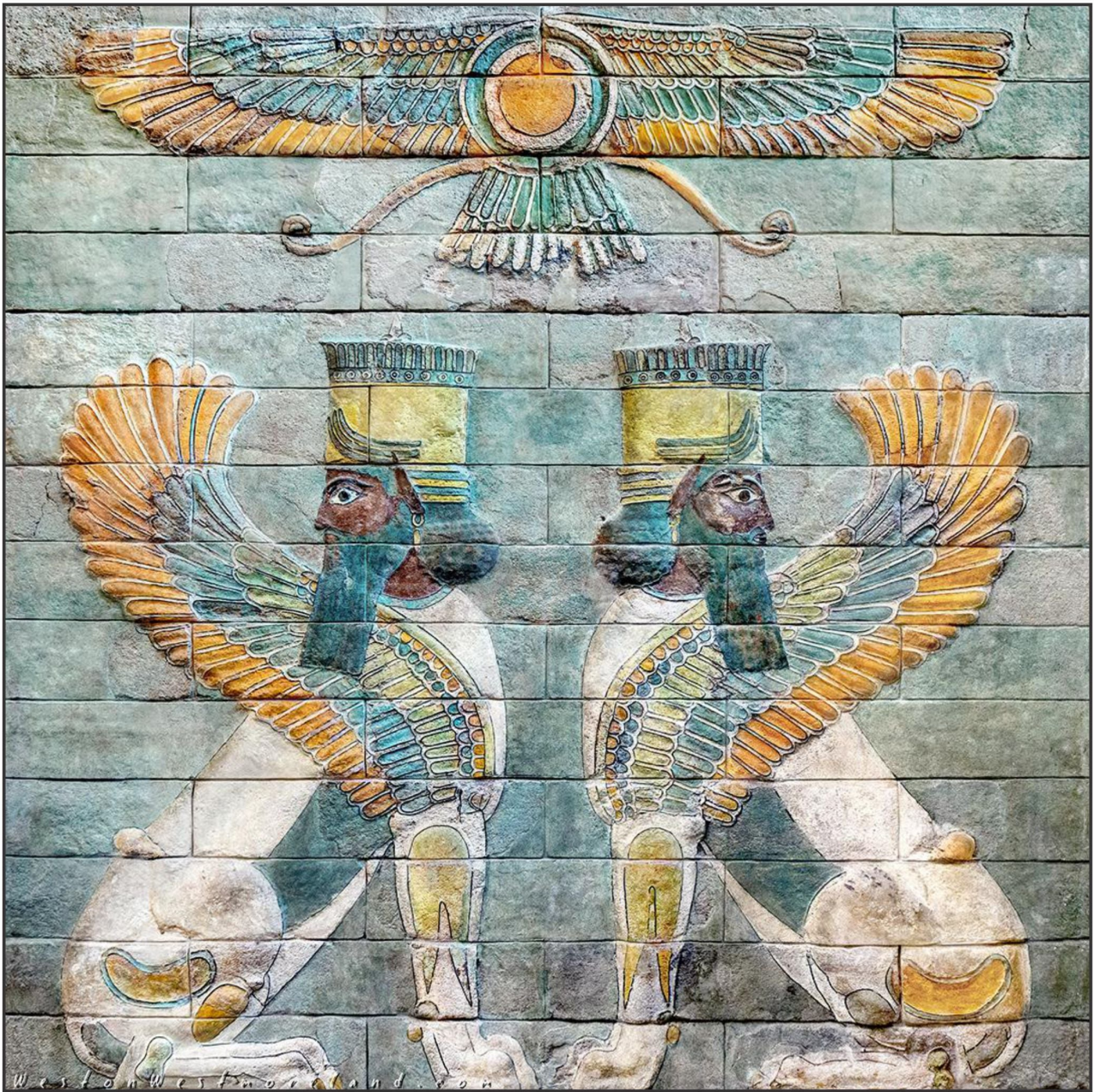
The extensive cuneiform inscription, written in Old Persian, Akkadian and Elamite, describes his conquests and affirms

King Darius says: This is what I have done, by the grace of Ahuramazda have I always acted. Whosoever shall read this inscription hereafter, let that which I have done be believed. You must not hold it to be lies.

The following map shows the extent of the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE):



The following shows an enameled brick panel from the Palace of Darius created in Susa in about 550 BCE and presently in the Louvre Museum. It shows two guardian *aladlammu*, also known as *lamassu*: composite creatures with the body of a bull or lion, a human head and wings of an eagle (Ritter, 2010). This motif originates in earlier Mesopotamian empires, particularly the Assyrian. The human head represents intelligence, the bull's body strength and the eagle's wings freedom. Above the *aladlammu* is a winged disc which represents the grace of Ahura Mazda. This motif was also present in the Behistun inscription:



The Achaemenid Empire replaced the preceding empires of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Medians. In 480 BCE Xerxes, the son of Darius invaded Greece. Though the Persians were able to sack Athens, the invasion ultimately failed in the Peloponnese.

In 334 BCE Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) invaded Persia. Over the next few years, he established his own empire stretching from Alexandria in Egypt to the borderlands of India. Upon his death, his general Seleucus I Nicator ruled over the eastern part of this region as the Seleucid Empire

(312-63 BCE). The Romans later took control of the Western part of this empire (Syria), leaving Iran to be ruled by the Parthians (247 BCE – 224 CE). The greatest of the Parthian emperors was Mithradates I, whose name meant “gift of Mithra,” and who reigned from 165–132 BCE. Then, from 224 to 651 CE, Iran became the center of the Sasanian Empire. Throughout this prolonged period of changing empires, Zoroastrianism remained as the official Persian religion (Malandra, 2015). By the time of the Sasanian empire, the Avestan language had evolved into Middle Persian (*Pahlavi*), the direct ancestor of modern Persian (*Farsi*): Ahura Mazda was now named *Ormazd*, and *Angra Mainyu* had become *Ahriman*.

The following illustration shows a relief carving at Naqsh-e Rostam from about 235 CE, showing the investiture of Ardashir I (180–242 CE), the founder of the Sasanian Empire, as the *Shahanshah* (King of Kings) by Ahura Mazda. On the right, the horse of Ahura Mazda tramples Ahriman beneath its hooves. Ahura Mazda is giving the diadem of kingship to Ardashir, whose own horse tramples the body of Artabanus V, the last king of the Parthian Empire. He holds in his left hand a *barsom* (a bundle of twigs used in Zoroastrian rituals). Ardashir wears an elaborate turban (*korymbos*). Behind Ardashir is the Zoroastrian high priest, Kartir.



In 633, one year after the founding of Islam, Muslim forces under Muhammed first invaded the western regions of the Sasanian Empire. The Empire had been weakened by prolonged conflict with the Byzantine Empire, and by fragmentation into different feuding regions. Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Rashidun caliph continued the conquest and by his death in 644 CE most of Persia was under Muslim rule. Some of the central regions, such as the province of Khorasan, were not fully subjugated until 651 (Litvinsky et al., 1996). Although under Arab rule, Persia was able to maintain much of its culture, particularly during the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258; 1261–1517). Although Arabic became the dominant language in other areas of Muslim rule, the Persian language flourished. Ferdowsi's *Shanameh*, the great epic of Persian poetry, completed in 1010 CE, retold the history of Persia from ancient times to time of its writing. Nevertheless, Islam completely replaced Zoroastrianism as the state religion (Choksy 2018).

The Muslims tolerated Christians and Jews since they were “People of the Book,” but persecuted Zoroastrians as pagan infidels. Many fire-temples were transformed into mosques and many Zoroastrians converted to Islam. Some faithful Zoroastrians retreated to inland regions of Persia, such as Khorasan. In the 9th Century, Babak Khorramdin led a brief Zoroastrian rebellion against Arab rule, but this came to naught. Some Zoroastrians decided to leave their newly Islamic land and settle in India (Hinnells & Williams, 2007). Zoroastrians had traded with the Indians of the Gujarat region even before the Muslim conquest. A Zoroastrian migration to India were described in an epic poem *Qissa-i Sanjan*, written by a Zoroastrian priest in 1599 CE. The poem recounts how the Zoroastrians sailed from the Island of Hormuz and initially settled in Diu before moving on to Sanjun and thence to Mumbai. Although the poem describes one specific migration, groups of Zoroastrians likely moved to India from Persia over several centuries, and over several routes.



A famous story is told about the arrival of the Zoroastrians in Gujarat. The local king Jadi Rana explained that his kingdom was full and showed a cup of milk filled to the brim to illustrate this problem. One of the Zoroastrian priests added sugar to the milk to show how the new immigrants could enrich the land without displacing anyone. Asylum was granted, and Zoroastrians still partake of *faloodeh* – a dessert of vermicelli, milk, sugar and rosewater – at times of celebration

Over the years, the Zoroastrian immigrants became a flourishing community in northeast India, known as the *Parsis* or “those from Persia” (Hinnells & Williams, 2007). The Parsis have maintained the rituals of their Zoroastrian forebears. Though they remain small in numbers (about 50,000 in the present day), they have contributed extensively to the economy and culture of India. About 20,000 Zoroastrians remain in modern Iran. Other smaller Zoroastrian communities exist in North America and Europe, set up by Iranian emigrants or by Parsis mercantile connections. The total number of Zoroastrians in the world is about 120,000.

Basic Principles of Zoroastrianism

As in any religion, the founding texts of Zoroastrianism provide sometimes contradictory claims. This problem is exacerbated by the difficulty in interpreting the language in which these texts were written. A text entitled *The Advice Book of Zarathustra* from the Pahlavi period (probably originating in the late Sasanian dynasty but not written down until much later) begins with the following verses which summarize the main tenets of the Zoroastrian faith (Vevaina, 2015, pp 214-215; Skjaervo, 2011, pp 192-193):

The Teachers of Old, who have the foremost knowledge of the Religion, have said that, at the age of fifteen, one should know the following: “Who am I, and to whom do I belong? Where did I come from, and to where will I go back? ... And

what are my duties in the world of the living (*getig*), and what is my reward in the world of thought (*menog*)? ... Do I belong to Ohrmazd, or do I belong to Ahreman, to the gods or to the demons, to the good or the bad? Am I a human or a demon? How many are the paths, and which is my Religion?... Are the Origins one or two? From whom is goodness and badness?

I belong to Ohrmazd, not to Ahreman, to the gods, not to the demons, to the good, not to the bad. I am a human, not a demon, the creature of Ohrmazd, not of Ahreman ... My duties and obligations are to think about Ohrmazd that he is, has always been, and will always be, that he is the immortal ruler, boundless, and pure, while Ahreman is not and shall be destroyed ... have no doubt that good deeds are good for me and bad deeds bad for me; that my friend is Ohrmazd and my enemy Ahrimen; and that the path of the Tradition is one ...The one path is that of good thought, speech, and action; paradise is the light and purity and limitlessness of Ohrmazd the Creator, who has always been and shall always be. Another is the path of evil thought, speech, and action. This is the darkness, boundedness, all evil and destruction, and badness of the wicked one, the Foul Spirit, who once upon a time was not in this creation and who once in the future shall not be in the creation of Ohrmazd, but in the end will be annihilated. ...I must have no doubt about this too, that the Origins are two: the Creator and the Destroyer. The Creator is Ohrmazd, from whom all goodness and all light emanates. The Destroyer is the wicked Evil Spirit, who is all badness and full of death, wicked and deceiving. ... I have to have no doubt about these things, ... that every person is mortal; that the soul (*gyān*) is expelled and the body destroyed; that the accounting takes place at the third dawn (*sidōsh*); that the Resurrection and the Final Body will come about.

In summary: One God – Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd) – created and

rules the world according to the principles of *asha*. He and will ultimately triumph over the forces of *druj* (deceit, evil) led by Angra Mainyu. Human beings must follow the way of *asha* by means of good thought, good speech and good action. This will justify their resurrection after death.

(i) Asha

The starting point for any interpretation of Zoroastrianism is the concept of *asha* (or *asa*, depending on the transliteration). This Avestan word goes back long before Zoroaster to the time when the proto-Indo-European language was being formulated. It is homologous to *rta* Sanskrit (Schlerath & Skjærvø, 2018). The meaning of *asha* is very difficult to express in a single word. Irani (1990) proposes that it contains four main ideas:

The first is the most general philosophical concept, **Truth**. The second is the cosmological implication of the **Order** underlying the universe. The third and fourth belong to the moral dimension – **Right** as the most general term of moral correctness, and **Justice** as the moral principle of the social system.

In these early times before the monotheistic reformations of Zoroaster, one of the many gods, Mithra (or Mitra), was responsible for the maintenance of *asha*. The name of Mitra combines *mi* (bind) with *tra* (causing to) to suggest covenants, oaths, truth-telling and contracts – the bases of social order and harmony. Mithra is portrayed as radiating light like the sun. Boyce (1975, p 27) describes Mithra's role:

One of the striking features of his activity is that he is concerned with upholding the great Indo-Iranian principle of *rta/asa*. This term, it is now generally accepted, represents a concept which cannot be precisely rendered by any single word in another tongue. It stands, it seems, for

“order” in the widest sense: cosmic order, by which night gives place to day and the seasons change; the order of sacrifice, by which this natural rhythm is strengthened and maintained; social order, by which men can live together in harmony and prosperity; and moral order or “truth”. In both India and Iran to possess *rta* or *asa*, to be *rtavan* or *asavan*, was to be a just and upright being; and when used of the dead these words implied that the departed was blessed in the hereafter, having attained the Paradise which he deserved.

Ahmadi (2015) proposed that *asha* in effect refers to the whole of creation, that which has been ordered, and might be expressed by the word “cosmos” which derives from the Greek *kosmein* (to arrange or to put into proper order). (“Cosmetic” has the same etymology.)

The concept that there is some underlying order in the universe, that everything is unfolding as it should, is common to many different philosophies and religions. The *asha/rta* of the Indo-European forebears is closely related to *Maat* in Ancient Egypt, to the *Dao* in China and to the *logos* in Greek philosophy. To my mind these concepts essentially indicate that the world is intelligible. There is an order behind things that we can try to understand and to follow, “a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will” (*Hamlet*, V:2)

Asha is the subject of a Zoroastrian prayer recited during all Zoroastrian observances (Rose, 2011a, p 24)

Ashem vohu
vahishtem asti
ushta asti
ushta ahmai
hyat ashai vahishtai ashem

Asha is the best good

It is happiness [or 'it is desired'],
according to our desire, there will be
Asha which belongs to the best Asha."

Another translation (Nigosian 1993, p 103) is

Righteousness [is] good, it is best.
According to [our] wish it is,
according to our wish it shall be.
Righteousness belongs to Asa Vahista.

(ii) Monotheism

Zoroaster's great contribution to human religious thought was to proclaim one God – Ahura Mazda – as the supreme creator and lord of the universe. The Jewish patriarch Abraham who may have lived sometime toward the end of the 2nd millennium BCE is generally considered the first monotheist. However, recent evidence suggests that although Jewish monotheism had its beginnings around the 1st Millennium BCE, it was not fully formulated until the period of the Babylonian Exile in the 6th Century BCE (Gnose, 1997, Chapter 2). Yahweh was initially considered as the God of the Israelites and only later evolved to be the God of the whole universe. Zoroaster probably lived at around the same time as Abraham, though both are legendary rather than historical figures, Zoroaster may have been the first prophet to preach universal monotheism, and Zoroastrianism the first monotheistic religions to survive its founder (Ferrero, 2021). The Egyptian Akhenaten (servant of Aten, 1353-1336 BCE) favored the Sun God *Aten* above all other gods, but *Atenism* did not persist beyond his brief lifetime.

Ahura Mazda was recognized before Zoroaster, though he was not as clearly defined as some of the other gods of the Indo-European pantheon, such as Mithra (god of the sun and of covenants) and Apam Napat (god of water and fertility).

Zoroaster reportedly had a vision in which he met Ahura Mazda in person, and recognized him as the supreme creator, and source of *asha*. In the religion that he proclaimed, some of the other gods were somehow subsumed into Ahura Mazda. Hymns are offered in praise of both Ahura Mazda and Mithra. Many other gods remained separate but were still considered worthy of worship (*yazata*). These were subservient to the will of Ahura Mazda (Hintze, 2014). In all monotheistic religions, the supreme God, even though omnipotent, needs other heavenly beings to facilitate his plans. In the Abrahamic religions, these are called angels.

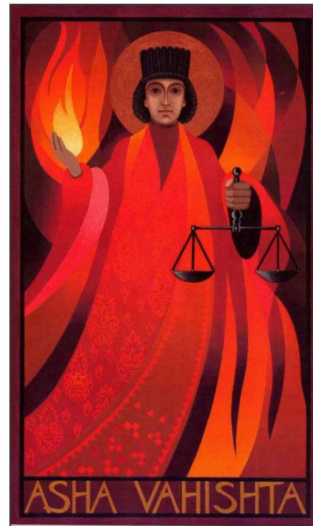
One of the earliest acts of Ahura Mazda was to create the *Amesha Spenta* (Immortal Benevolents). These are as much abstract concepts – emanations from the mind of Ahura Mazda – as actual divinities. They share some of the characteristics of the Seven Heavenly Virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope, and charity) in Christianity and their organization is related to the Five Great Elements (*Pancha Mahabhuta*, earth water, fire, air, ether) of Hinduism. They are generally considered six in number (Stausberg, 2008, p 29) though some authors describe seven (Rose, 2011a, p 29). The following illustration shows some modern images:

Amesha Spentas

Beneficial Immortals



Good Mind, Animals



Truth and Justice, Fire



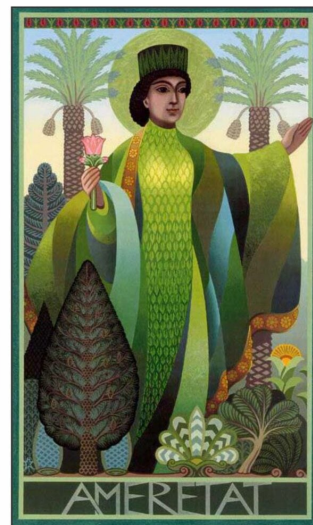
Power, Sky/Metal



Devotion, Earth



Wholeness, Water



Immortality, Plants



Holy Spirit, Humans

(iii) Dualism

Essential to Zoroastrianism is the concept of dualism (Gnoli, 2017; Vevaina, 2015). In the Gathas (Y 30:3-4), Zoroaster reveals his vision (or dream) about the two opposing forces in the world (Ahmadi, 2013). Our incomplete understanding of the Avestan language limits our interpretation but the following is one translation:

The two primeval Spirits, who are twins, were revealed to me in sleep. Their ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving are two: the good and the evil. And between these two ways the wise men have rightly chosen, and not the foolish ones. And when these two Spirits met, they established at the

origin life and non-life, and that at the end the worst existence will be for the followers of Falsehood and for the follower of Truth the Best Thinking. (translation from Gnoli, 2017).

The two spirits are Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. Ahura Mazda, assisted by the *amesha spenta* and the *yazatas*, supports *asha* (truth, justice, order, righteousness). Angra Mainyu promotes *druj* (lie, wrongdoing, chaos, evil) with the support of *daevas* (devils, demons).

Angra Mainyu is a spirit of destruction, incapable of creating anything, and inactive in the absence of creation. Its home is the kingdom of death. Boyce (1975, p 199) describes the spirit:

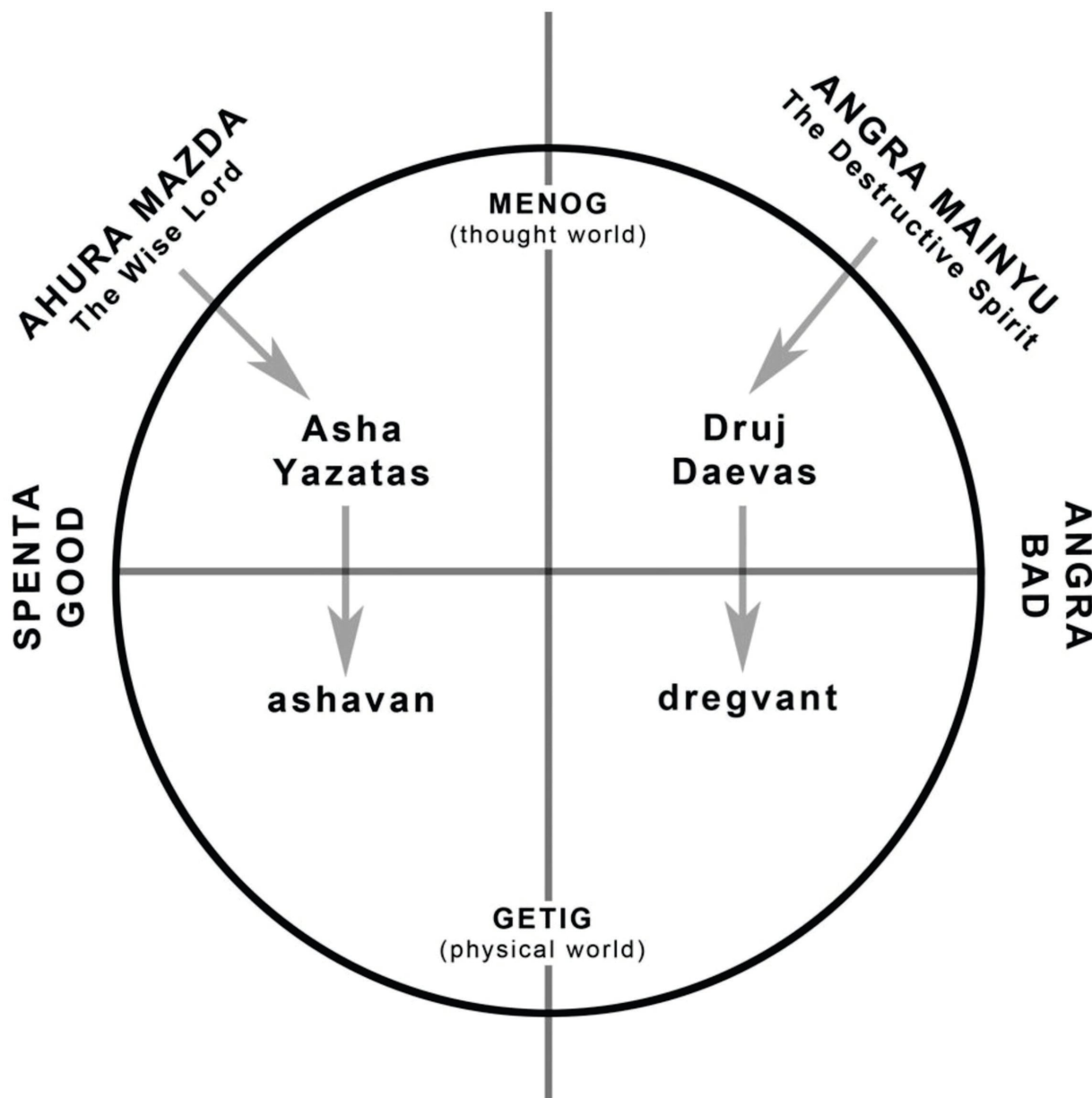
Angra Mainyu is seen both as actively malignant, a militant foe, and also as a mere shadow, a negation of good; for traditionally existence in the kingdom of the dead was characterised by a lack of substance, by a spectral quality without positive capacities, a nothingness.

Henning (1951, p 46) describes how Zoroaster's dualism supplements his monotheism, by explaining the existence of evil and suffering in the universe:

Any claim that the world was created by a good and benevolent god must provoke the question why the world, in the outcome, is so very far from good. Zoroaster's answer, that the world had been created by a good god *and* an evil spirit, of equal power, who set out to spoil the good work, is a complete answer: it is a logical answer, more satisfying to the thinking mind than the one given by the author of the Book of Job, who withdrew to the claim that it did not behove man to inquire into the ways of Omnipotence.

At the beginning Zoroastrianism proposed an ethical rather than an ontological dualism: good (*asha*, *vohu*) versus evil

(*druj*, aka), rather than spirit (*menog*) versus matter (*etig*). However, as the religion evolved, the dualism extended into the ontological as well. However, the two dualisms were orthogonal to each other. Both good and evil beings could be either spiritual or material (or both). The following is an explanatory diagram from Rose (2011b, p 27):



What is special about Zoroastrian dualism is the role played by human beings. The dualism of Zoroastrianism does not remove the basic problem of monotheism: how could an omni-benevolent and omnipotent God allow so much evil and suffering in the world. However, it does allow that human beings play a very

significant role in the fight against evil. By our choices and our actions we can help the forces of good (Nolan, 2025):

The battle between Good and Evil has been in process since Time began and will go on till the end of the world: but as the two powers are evenly matched, its outcome is uncertain. The decisive factor will be the collective action of humanity. Every man or woman is free to choose which side to join: his or her support will add permanent strength to the side chosen, and so, in the long run, the acts of Man will weigh the scales in favour of the one side or the other. Thus Zoroaster, beside his principal two powers, recognizes a third, which, though not of equal rank, holds the balance. (Henning, 1951, pp 45-46).

(iv) Souls and their *Fravashi*

Each human being has a spiritual soul (*urvan*) which exists before birth and which survives the death and decay of the physical body. The *fravashi* are spiritual beings which foster, protect and preserve these individual souls (Boyce, 2015). The concept likely began in relation to the spirits that protect warriors during battle, but in Zoroastrianism, it became applicable to all living things. The *fravashi* are responsible for inserting the soul into the newborn, protecting the individual during his or her life, promoting good thoughts, speech and action, and rescuing the soul after the death of the body. Stausberg (2008, p 38) suggests that they can be considered “guardian angels.”

Various etymologies have been suggested for the word *fravashi* (Boyce 2015). The root *var* can be related to “impregnate,” or to “turn” (which with *fra*, away, could yield the idea of protection), or to “choose” (especially in the sense of confessing a faith).

The relationship between the *fravashi* and the *urvan* is not

clear. In some Zoroastrian writings they are conjoined:

The developed doctrine came to be that each *fravasi* existed from the beginning of time in a spiritual (*menog*) state; that in due course it was born, clad in a physical body, into this world; and that after death it lived once more in a spiritual state, to be re-united again ultimately with its resurrected physical body. In both the second and third states the *fravasi* tended to be identified with the *urvan*, as these concepts merged. The question then was pondered as to which, in the present state of the world, was the most powerful, the unborn *fravasi*, or that of a living person, or that of a dead one? This again suggests the theorising of priestly schools rather than a point of any popular concern. The Zoroastrian answer was that the *fravasis* of the great men of the faith, whether already dead or not yet born, were the most powerful, but that otherwise the *fjfravasis* of the living were the strongest – a doctrine which seems to reflect the profound universal instinct that it is better to be alive in the flesh in the present familiar world than to exist in any other state. (Boyce, 1975, p 128)

(v) The *Faravahar*

The *Faravahar* or *Farohar* has become a prominent symbol of Zoroastrianism. It has its origins in the winged disk that was used in Ancient Egyptian and Assyrian cultures to denote the power and protection of the sun god. In the *Faravahar*, the winged disk supports a god or person, holding a ring. In this form, the symbol first appears during the Achaemenid era.



The following are photographs of the Tomb of Darius the Great at Naqsh-e Rostam (circa 500 BCE) taken by Richard Stone. The upper photograph is the original and the lower has been enhanced to show the relief carvings. Darius stands before the sacred fire and the *faravahar* symbol floats above.



No one is sure exactly what the *faravahar* symbol means. A common interpretation is that it represents Ahura Mazda. Shahbazi (1974) argues against this since the few accepted representations of Ahura Mazda, such as the previously

illustrated relief at Naqsh-e Rostam, show him holding a *barsom*.

There are actually very few representations of Ahura Mazda. My intuition is that the supreme deity Ahura Mazda is far beyond any portrayal by human hands, and that those supposed depictions more likely represent priests in his service, or one of the *Amesha Spentas* such as *Khshathra Vairya*, who confers temporal powers on worthy human leaders.

Another interpretation of the *faravahar* is that the symbol represents the individual human soul and/or its *fravashi*. The following description is along these lines:

It represents the link between the spiritual and physical worlds. The human form in the center is encircled by a ring that represents the eternal soul. The figure's head reminds people that they have free will, a mind and an intellect with which to choose good. The right hand points upward to lead people toward Asha, the path of Truth. In the left hand is a ring symbolizing the just power of Khshathra Vairya. The figure has wings to help the soul fly upward and progress. It has a tail that serves as a rudder to help the soul balance between the opposing forces of good and evil. These forces are represented by the curved hooks on either side of the tail. The three sections of the tail, which appear as layers of feathers, remind people of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. Throughout life, the human soul is caught between good and evil, Truth and the Lie. But with the heavenly help, or wings, of Ahura Mazda, the soul may soar to eternal goodness and light. (Harz, 2004, p 9)

According to this approach, the *faravahars* depicted on the historical reliefs likely represent the the *fravashi* of the king or priest that is the subject of the carving. Shahbazi (1974) argues against this interpretation since the *faravahar* has no individuality. Furthermore, the *fravashi* were initially

considered female whereas the *faravahar* is always male.

Another possibility is that the symbol represents *Khshathra Vairya* the Amesha Spenta of righteous power, who is typically shown holding a ring or diadem.

A final interpretation, and the one that I prefer, is that the *faravahar* symbolizes the concept of *khvarenah* (or *farr* in New Persian) (Shahbazi, 1980; Boyce, 1982, pp 103-105). This is the right to rule conferred by Ahura Mazda upon those deserving dominion over their fellow men. The leader may become radiant (*hvar* means sun), and remain so if he rules in accord with *asha*. The concept of *khvarenah* has also been translated as “divine glory”

In modern times the *faravahar* has been used outside of any religious connotation as a symbol of Iranian nationalism. For example, it formed part of the coat of arms of the Pahlavi dynasty who ruled Iran from 1925 until the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

(vi) Eschatology

Ultimately, Zoroastrians believe that the struggle between good and evil will be won by the forces of good, and the universe will be renewed (Moazami, 2000; Kreyenbroek, 2002; Staussberg, 2008, pp 39-42; Cereti, 2015). This is the doctrine of *frashokereti* (Avestan, making into initial state, restoration; Middle Persian *frashgird*).

When the end-times draw near, a virgin will bathe in the waters of *Kayanse*, a mythical lake that preserves the seed of Zoroaster, and will conceive the savior *Saoshiant* (he who brings strength), who will lead the forces of good. The savior is also named *Astvat-ereta* – ‘the one through whom *Asha* has bones’ (Rose, 2011b, p 44). He will defeat Angra Mainyu in battle, and will cause all who have died to be resurrected.

The Saoshyant will bring about the Resurrection, and will hold an assembly of all men and women in which they will realize their good and wicked deeds. There will be a Final Judgment and those to whom sin still clings will undergo another short period of punishment in hell (this time not as spirits but in the material body), while the righteous will again enjoy the delights of paradise. Then all the metal contained in the mountains of the earth will be melted. A river of molten metal will thus be formed, through which all men must pass; for those who are free of sins, this will be like a bath in warm milk, but those whose sins have not been completely atoned for will experience a fierce burning. All men, thus cleansed, will then meet together and praise Ohrmazd. (Kreyenbroek, 2002, p 46).

There are clear similarities between these Zoroastrian prophecies, which were most fully developed during the Achaemenid era, and the concepts of the Messiah that developed in Judaism at about the same time, and which significantly affected Christianity. Which of the prophecies came first, and how each tradition contributed to the other is not known (Hultgard in Stausberg, 2008, pp 106-110).

Mary Boyce notes that the ideas of an end-time and of a final judgement distinguishes Zoroastrianism from the prevalent idea of eternal reincarnation that is the basis of Hinduism and Buddhism.

With this belief in an end to human history Zoroaster appears to have made another profound break with pagan ideas, whereby (to judge from the Vedas) the generations of men were seen as succeeding one another remorselessly like waves of the sea. The strong sense inculcated by Zoroaster of both time and purpose, of all mankind and all *spenta* being striving towards a common end, a foreseeable goal, has been held by some to be the most remarkable characteristic of his teachings. (Boyce, 1975, p 233).

Another intriguing aspect of the Zoroastrian view of the final judgment is that it provides universal access to paradise. A logical problem in the Christian account of judgment is why an omnibenevolent God would not forgive everyone. In the Zoroastrian account, the good are quickly taken into the new world and those tainted by sin can have their evil erased by some sort of painful purification. The rewards offered in Zoroastrianism are quasi-universal:

The righteous who are barely affected by purification and those who become entirely good without impinging on their continued survival are saved and have the best outcome. Those who undergo so much change in the purification process that it is not entirely determinate whether the post-purification person is the same as the person before purification, and in extreme cases, it is determinate that a new person emerges from the process, albeit one who retains important continuities with the pre-purification individual. (Nolan, 2025, pp 49-50)

There are similarities here to the Catholic concept of Purgatory. However, access to Purgatory is only allowed to Christian believers who repent. Non-believers and those who do not repent remain eternally damned.

Zoroastrian Practices

(i) Fire Temples

Fire (*atar*) is an essential component of all Zoroastrian rituals and religious ceremonies:

The flame is considered to be the visible sign of Ahura Mazda's presence, the symbol of his truth (*asha*). According to tradition, fire was used by Ahura Mazda in the creation of cattle and human beings ... and fire will be used again by him when he brings about the final renovation of the

universe. (Nigosian, 1993, p 112).

In Zoroastrian fire-temples, an eternal fire was kept burning so that worshippers could at any time be in the presence of Ahura Mazda. The fire burns during the *Yazna*, a ceremony wherein the priest recites passages from the Avestan scriptures. The following shows the consecrated flame in a fire-temple in Yazd in central Iran:



The fire must be protected from pollution. Only clean and dry wood (typically sandalwood) should be placed on the fire. Priests tending the fire wear masks so that their mortal breath does not reach the flames.



(ii) Burial

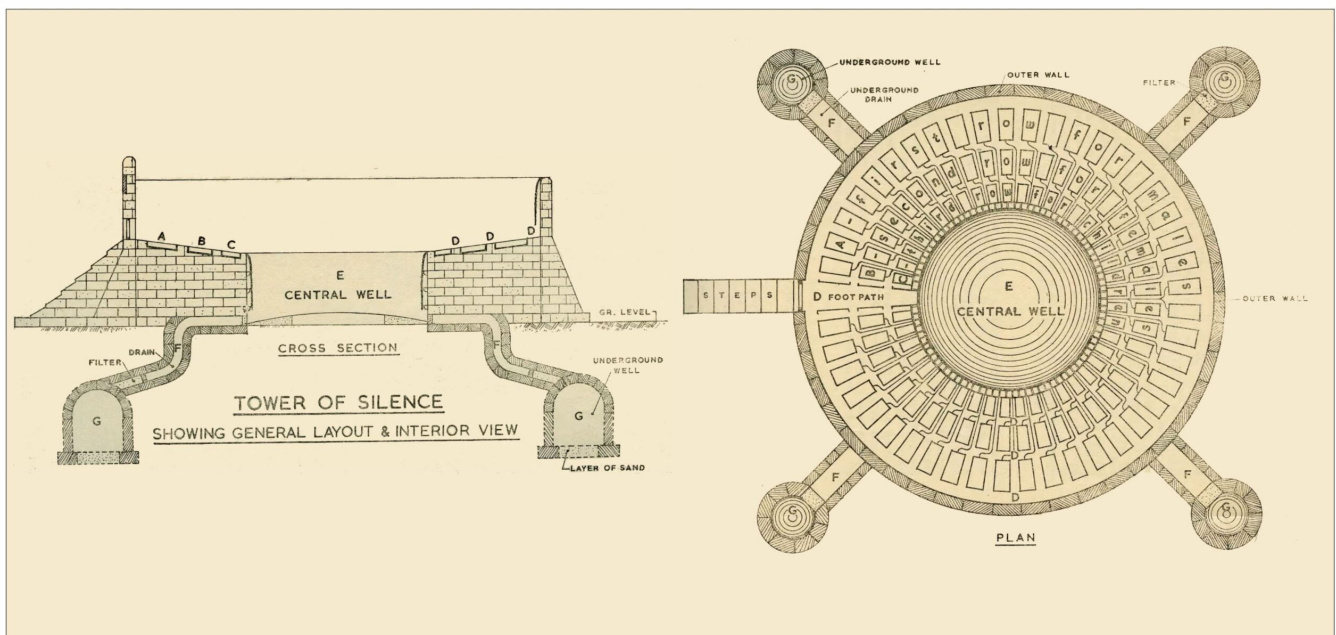
Zoroastrians did not cremate their dead for such a process would defile the fire which they hold sacred. They also did not bury their dead, for such a process would pollute the earth. They resorted to “excarnation:” leaving the corpse out for carrion birds to cleanse. In ancient times this was done in open areas of desert. After the Islamic invasion, Zoroastrians constructed specially raised buildings called *dakhma* (towers of silence) for their dead (Boyce, 1975, pp 325-330; Russell, 2013). These were generally located upon small hilltops.

After the funeral rites the corpse was taken by *dakhma* attendants and laid out on beds arranged in circles around a central pit. Male bodies were relegated to the outer circle, female bodies to the next circle and the bodies of children

were placed in the inner circle. After several days vultures will have stripped the bones of their decaying flesh. The bones are then raked into the central pit where they will be cleansed by the rains. Over time the cleansed bones will disintegrate and be washed by the rains into wells, whence their dust will return to the earth.

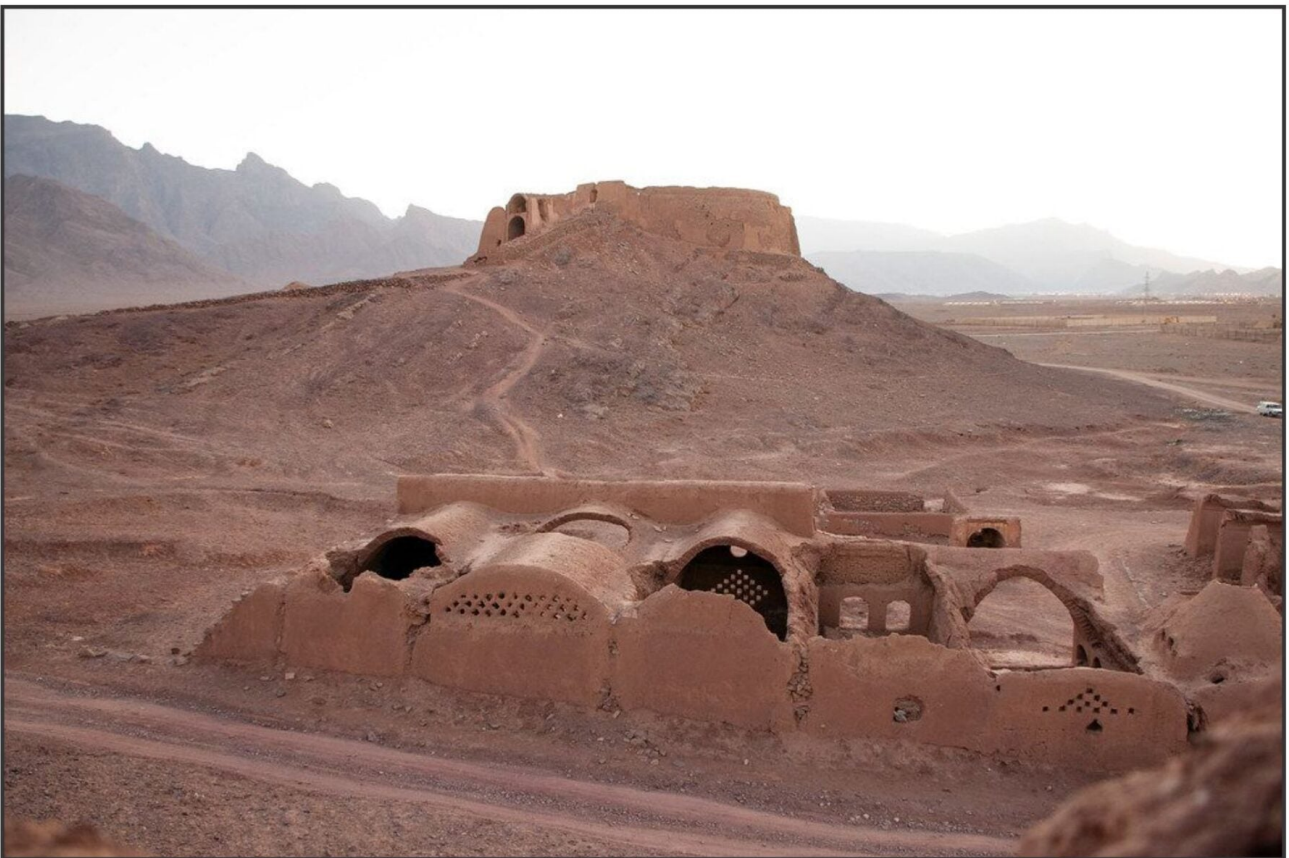
Most of the *dakhmas* in Iran have not been active since the Middle Ages. A few survived but their usage was declared illegal in the 1970s. The Parsis community in Mumbai maintained *dakhmas* in the suburbs of the city. The first tower was consecrated in 1670. With the spread of urbanization and the decline in the population of scavenger birds, these have become inactive (Karkaris, 2015).

The following diagram shows a cross-section and a bird's eye view of a *dakhma*



The following illustration shows two views of the *dakhma* at Yazd in Iran, the first from above and the second from below.

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Nowadays most Zoroastrians are buried in the ground in concrete-sealed tombs to prevent any contamination of the

earth by the decaying corpse.

Descendants of Zoroastrianism

(i) Mithraism

Mithra persisted as a divinity (*yazata*) throughout Zoroastrianism. He is frequently considered as co-equal with Ahura Mazda, and it is often difficult to determine whether a particular representation is of one or the other. The following is a relief sculpture from Taq-e Bostan, near Kermanshah, that was made in the 4th Century CE to commemorate the investiture of Ardashir II who reigned as Shahanshah from 379-383 CE. He was the brother of the Shapur the great who had reigned from 309-379 CE. The relief also celebrates the victory of the Sasanians over the Roman forces of Emperor Julian, who died on his ill-fated expedition into Persia in 363 CE.

The figure on the left represents Mithra, shining with the radiance of the sun. Mithra stands upon a lotus. This might perhaps be related to the influence of Buddhism which had spread from India into the eastern regions of the Sasanian Empire. The figure in the center is Ardashir II. There is some debate about the figure on the right. Some consider this to be Ahura Mazda who is giving the diadem of power to Ardashir. Most current interpretations suggest that it is Shapur the Great who was the Emperor before Ardashir II. At the feet of the two emperors is the defeated body of the Roman Emperor Julian.



The Roman legions fought long and exhaustive campaigns against the Parthians from 54 BCE to 217 CE, and these wars continued when the Parthians were replaced by the Sasanians. As early as the 1st Century CE, Roman Legionnaires established a secret society based on Mithras, the divinity of their enemies in these Persian Wars (Boyce, 1989, pp 469-490). Mithras, the God of the Sun, was known to be never defeated (*Sol Invictus*). As such he had obvious appeal to military men. The society initiates were known as the *syndexi*, "the men who join hands" (Fear, 2022).

Unfortunately, we know little about the nature of this society or of its beliefs. Its inner workings were only understood by

its initiates, and these were sworn to secrecy. The main evidence for the society comes from the numerous temples – Mithraea – that have been unearthed throughout the Roman Empire. Each Mithraeum was constructed in a cave, or in a building made to imitate a cave. Initiates gathered there to worship Mithra and to celebrate a communal meal.

An essential part of the Mithraeum was either a fresco or a carving of Mithra slaying a bull, the “tauroctony.” The following illustration shows a marble bas-relief of the tauroctony found at Fiano Romano near Rome, and now at the Louvre museum in Paris. The carving which dates to the 2nd or 3rd Century CE is not large: 62 cm high and 67 cm wide. The figure of Mithra wears a Phrygian cap. This type of headgear with its forward pointing tip was named after a region of Anatolia, although it was commonly worn throughout the Persian Empire. Mithras half-straddles a bull that has been forced to the ground. The bull appears in profile, with its head on the viewers’ right. With his left hand, Mithras pulls back the head of the bull by the nostrils, and with his right hand, Mithras plunges a short sword into the shoulder of the bull. Mithras turns away from the bull and looks back over his right shoulder to the Sun in the upper left. A raven is with the sun. The Moon is represented in the upper right. A scorpion, serpent, and dog attack the bull from below. The bull’s tale ends in ears of wheat.



Many have tried to interpret what is symbolized by the various elements of the tauroctony. Although there might be some astrological significance to the scorpion, snake and dog, most scholars feel that the general intent is to depict some divine act that provides for human salvation:

It appears that just like the crucifixion in Christianity, the slaying of the bull was seen as opening up a path to salvation that was previously closed. The teachings of how that path had been closed in the past and why the bull needed to be sacrificed to restore the link are tragically lost to us (Fear, 2022, p 181)

The Bundahishn, a Middle Persian Zoroastrian text, recounts how a Ahura Mazda sacrificed a bull (or ox) at the beginning of creation (Chapter 3). However, another sacrifice occurs at the time of the Final Judgment during *frashokereti*:

Soshyant, with his assistants, performs a Yazishn ceremony in preparing the dead, and they slaughter the ox Hadhayosh in that Yazishn; from the fat of that ox and the white Haoma they prepare Hush, and give it to all men, and all men become immortal for ever and everlasting. (Bundahishn, 30, 25) (also discussed in Moazami, 2000)

The tauroctony might therefore represent the longing for the end-times when men will finally become immortal. If so, the slaying of the bull in the Mithraeum would serve a similar purpose to the depiction of the crucified Christ above the altar in a Christian Church.

Mithraism came to its end when Christianity was accepted as the state religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century CE. The mystery religion had lasted for three centuries.

(ii) Mani and Manichaeism

The prophet Mani was born in Ctesiphon (near modern Baghdad) in the Parthian Empire in 216 CE. His father was a Jewish Christian. In his youth Mani travelled to India and became aware to Buddhist teachings. He considered himself the Paraclete that Christ claimed would come to comfort his people, though the Paraclete is generally interpreted to be the Holy Spirit. He preached a new teaching that combined ideas from Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Mani was tolerated by the Sasanian Emperor Shapur I but Bahram I was a zealous Zoroastrian and persecuted the Manichaeans. Mani was imprisoned and died in 274 CE.

Manichaeism was considered a heresy by the Christian Church

and his works were destroyed. He taught a stark dualism between the good spiritual world of light and the evil material world of darkness (Widengren, 1965; Levy, 2005). He urged his followers to renounce the world so that their souls could return to the domain of light after the death of their worldly bodies. Manichaeism became widespread in the Roman Empire. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was a Manichaean before he converted to orthodox Christianity. Much of what we know about Manichaeism comes from Augustine's writings that refute of their beliefs. Manichaeism largely died out in the Roman Empire after Christianity became the state religion in the 4th Century CE, but it persisted in regions of central Asia such as Bactria and in western China.

The dualistic beliefs of Manichaeism also persisted in the west in small groups of believers such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria in the 10th Century CE and the Cathars in southern France between the 12th and 14th Centuries CE.

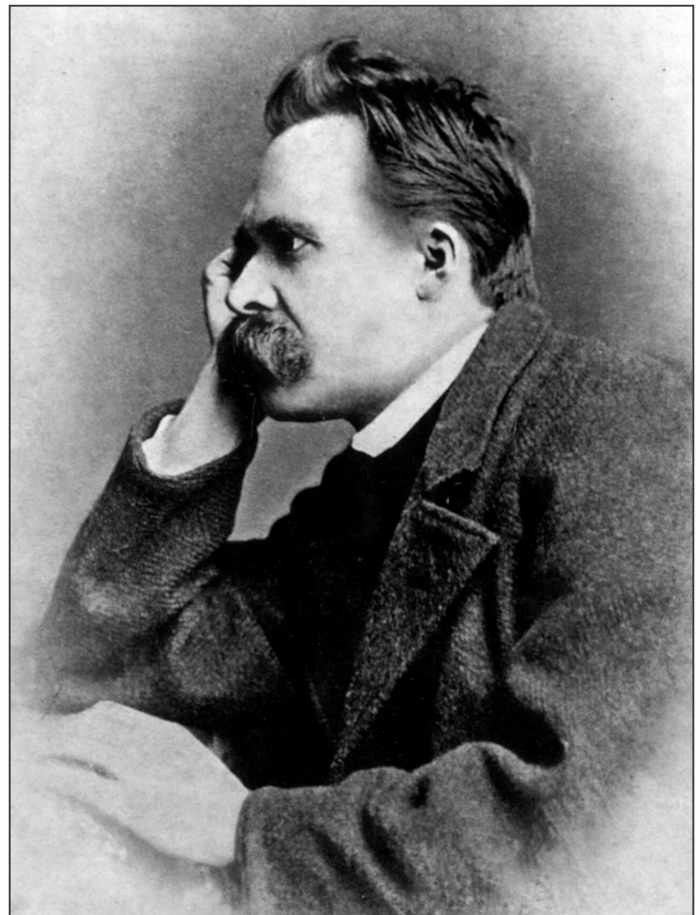
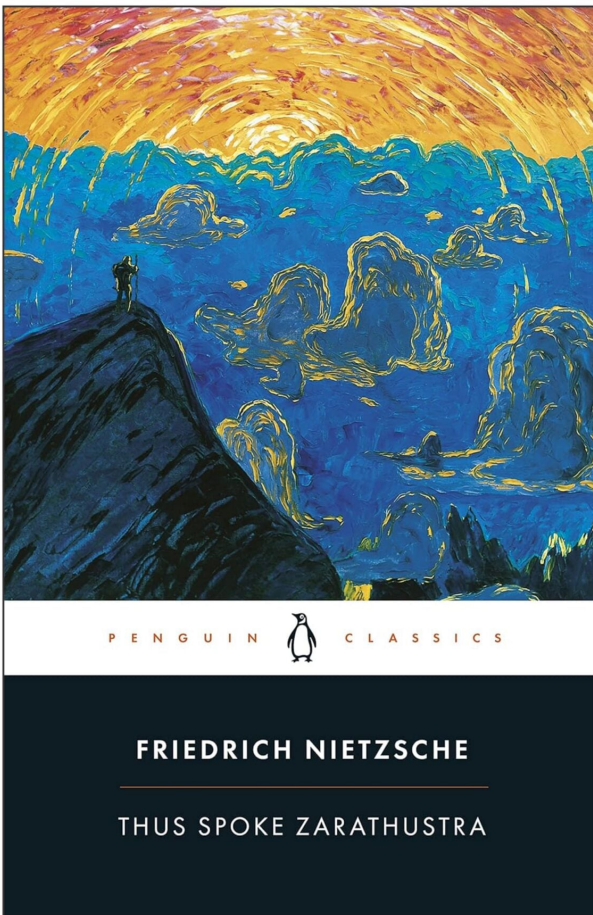
The dualism of Mani differed from that of Zoroaster in that it was "anti-cosmic" rather than "pro-cosmic" (Boyce, 1975, p 230). Mani believed that physical world was irretrievably evil, and that human souls were painfully imprisoned in their physical bodies. By renouncing all worldly desires, they could hope to be released at death back into the spiritual world – the realm of light. Zoroaster believed the physical world basically good and that, although it was now tainted by evil, it was ultimately redeemable. At the Final Resurrection, souls would be rejoined to their now perfect physical bodies.

The following illustration shows on the left a small rock-crystal seal from the 3rd Century CE with a representation of the prophet Mani. This might have been used by Mani to seal his letters with wax. On the right is a manuscript fragment from the 8th to 9th Centuries CE found in Western China showing Manichaean monks.



(iii) Thus Spake Zarathustra

Between 1883 and 1885, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote what was to become his most famous book: *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spake Zarathustra). The following illustration shows a photographic portrait of Nietzsche taken in 1882 by Gustav Adolf Schultze, and the cover of the Penguin edition of the book during the 1960s with its evocative cover: *Sunset Mount Blanc* by Wenzel Hablik (1906).



For many people, their first introduction to Zarathustra comes through this book. Unfortunately, the book has nothing to do with ancient prophet or the religion that he founded.

Nietzsche was aware of the basic principles of Zoroastrianism through classic authors such as Herodotus and Plutarch, and he may have been familiar with some translations of their early scriptures. Nevertheless, the fictional Zarathustra does not proclaim the beliefs of Zoroastrianism. Rather, Nietzsche's Zarathustra wishes to correct what he (or Nietzsche) believed was his great mistakes: the distinction between Good and Evil, and the subsequent foundation of human morality (Aiken, 2003; Ashouri, 2012; Pippin, 2012).

Nietzsche describes this purpose in his autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, written in 1888, just before his mental breakdown, but only published posthumously. The following quotation about Zarathustra shares the verbose and vainglorious character of the rest of the book. The reference to shooting well with

arrows comes from Herodotus.

I have not been asked, as I should have been asked, what the name Zarathustra means in precisely my mouth, in the mouth of the first immoralist: for what constitutes the tremendous uniqueness of that Persian in history is precisely the opposite of this. Zarathustra was the first to see in the struggle between good and evil the actual wheel in the working of things: the translation of morality into the realm of metaphysics, as force, cause, end-in-itself, is his work. But this question is itself at bottom its own answer. Zarathustra created this most fateful of errors, morality: consequently he must also be the first to recognize it. Not only has he had longer and greater experience here than any other thinker – the whole of history is indeed the experimental refutation of the proposition of a so-called ‘moral world-order’ –: what is more important is that Zarathustra is more truthful than any other thinker. His teaching, and his alone, upholds truthfulness as the supreme virtue – that is to say, the opposite of the cowardice of the ‘idealist’, who takes flight in face of reality; Zarathustra has more courage in him than all other thinkers put together. To tell the truth and *to shoot well with arrows*: that is Persian virtue. – Have I been understood? The self-overcoming of morality through truthfulness, the self-overcoming of the moralist into his opposite – into me – that is what the name Zarathustra means in my mouth. (Nietzsche, translated by Hollingdale, pp, 124-5)

Nietzsche had much to say in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, and his attempt to do so through the words and actions of an ancient prophet is wildly creative. However, the book is an incoherent mixture of parables and folktales, that veers erratically from parody to tragedy. Most of its ideas are better expressed in Nietzsche’s other books.

Nietzsche’s main goal was to argue against the “slave-

morality" that had taken hold of society, a morality that promoted humility rather than accomplishment, conformity rather than initiative, weakness rather than strength. He proposed that rather than doing what others want, we should achieve what we can, accept our destiny, fulfill the possibilities within ourselves, and become an *Übermensch*: "your love of your neighbour is your bad love of yourselves" (Part I:16, Hulse translation p 52). Good versus evil (*böse*) is replaced by good versus bad (*schlecht*, often used in the sense of "poorly made, shoddy"). This is a morality based on aesthetics rather than on good and evil (Poellner, 2012; Kronman, 2019).

Unfortunately, Nietzsche did not foresee what this new morality might entail. The Nazis took his ideas to heart, threw off all constraints, and tried to create a world that fulfilled what they considered their destiny (Golomb & Wistrich, 2002).

Modern man has found that world can be understood without the need to postulate a god, and that morality need not follow divine commandments. Nietzsche had famously proposed the idea that "God is dead" in his book *The Gay Science* (1882). In *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche realized the implications of this idea: "Nothing is true; everything is permitted" (Part IV: 9, Hulse translation, p 259). Ivan Karamazov voices a similar fear in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) which was published at about the same time as *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: "If God does not exist, anything is permissible."

Another concept that occurs toward the end of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* involves the circularity of time: that the world continually returns to what it once was and everything recurs:

All truth is crooked. Time itself is a circle...Must we not all have been here before – and must we not come again ... must we not keep coming back forever. (Part III:2, Hulse

translation, pp 146-147)

The idea that time is circular is common in Hinduism and Buddhism, which propose that the universe eternally recurs in cycles lasting many millennia. However, the Zoroastrianism concept of time is linear: the world is created, the world suffers through the battle between good and evil, and with the defeat of evil the world once again becomes as perfect as it was when it was created. One might suggest that this process could then repeat, but that is not really part of the Zoroastrian world view.

Nietzsche becomes reconciled to the eternal recurrence by proposing a variant of Kant's categorical imperative: that one should live one's life in such a manner that one would wish to live it in the same way when it is eternally repeated.

Nietzsche's fictional Zarathustra is both intriguing and frustrating, both charming and frightening. However he is interpreted, he is a far cry from the legendary prophet who founded a new religion based on the struggle between good and evil.

Conclusion

The world is composed of opposites: good and evil, order and chaos, growth and decay, truth and deceit. Zoroaster described this state in terms of the struggle between two opposing forces. One of the appealing aspects of the religion that he founded is its optimism: good will ultimately prevail over evil. Another is the importance of humanity to the outcome of this struggle. By choosing good over evil, we can tilt the balance between the opposing forces and accelerate the final victory.

The religion of Zoroastrianism has persisted for about three millennia, although the number of its present adherents is

vanishingly small in comparison to the dominant religions of the world. Nevertheless, it remains worth our while to remember the ideas of the ancient prophet: to do as much good as we can, to contemplate the fire, and to look forward to when *asha* once again rules the universe.

*Ashem vohu
vahishtem asti
ushta asti
ushta ahmai
hyat ashai vahishtai ashem*

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Antonello da Messina: Sicilian Master

Antonello da Messina (~1430-1479) was born in Messina, Sicily. While studying in Naples, he became aware of a technique of painting using oil-based pigments that had originated in the Netherlands with Jan van Eyck (~1390-1441) and his followers. Antonello soon became a master of this new method. He was an expert portraitist able to capture his sitters' distinct identities and depths of feeling. The illustration shows a

painting from 1473, that was once thought to be a self-portrait, but there is no real evidence for this. Although many of Antonello's works have been lost, three absolute masterpieces have survived: *Saint Jerome in his Study*, *The Virgin Annunciate*, both dated to around 1474, and *Saint Sebastien* from about 1478.

Learning How to Paint with Oils

In his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568), Giorgio Vasari considered Antonello da Messina as pivotal in the transition between tempera and oil painting in Italy. The use of linseed oil in painting began in northern Europe, most particularly in Flanders. First used for painting wood carvings, by around 1400 oil-based pigments were being used for panel paintings. Jan van Eyck is often considered the pioneer of this new technique (Ferrari, 2013). Oil-paints dried more slowly than tempera and were more easily mixed. These advantages led to more exact representations of color and texture. The oil medium allowed for "pictorial second thoughts, enabling the picture to be modified as work on it progressed" (Pope-Hennessy, 1966, p 60). Furthermore, the surface of oil paintings is glossy rather than matte: oil paintings appear to glow with internal light.

Antonello first became aware of some of these new paintings when he was apprenticed to Niccolo Colantonio in Naples in the mid to later 1440s. Alfonso the Magnanimous (1396-1458), king of Aragon, Sicily and Naples, possessed the beautiful *Lomellini Triptych* by Jan van Eyck that is now long lost (Borchert, 2019). This was described by Bartholomeo Facio in 1456:

His is a remarkable picture in the most private apartments of King Alfonso, in which there is a Virgin Mary notably for its grace and modesty, with an Angel Gabriel, of exceptional beauty and with hair surpassing reality, announcing that the Son of God will be born of her; and a

John the Baptist that declares the wonderful sanctity and austerity of his life, and Jerome like a living being in a library done with rare art (quoted by Borchert, 2019, p 36).

The lost triptych was likely a small devotional painting like van Eyck's 1437 *Dresden Triptych* (below). Only 33 cm high, this triptych could be folded up and carried by a travelling merchant for use as a portable altar during daily prayer. The Lomellini triptych was probably of similar size but with an annunciation at the center and Saints Jerome and John in the wings.



Antonello was clearly impressed by this and other Flemish paintings in Alfonso's collection. Vasari claimed that he therefore travelled to Flanders to study with Jan van Eyck:

Having arrived in Bruges, he became very intimate with the

said Johann, making him presents of many drawings in the Italian manner and other things, insomuch that the latter, moved by this and by the respect shown by Antonello, and being now old, was content that he should see his method of coloring in oil; wherefore Antonello did not depart from that place until he had gained a thorough knowledge of that way of coloring, which he desired so greatly to know. And no long time after, Johann having died, Antonello returned from Flanders in order to revisit his native country and to communicate to all Italy a secret so useful, beautiful, and advantageous.

Unfortunately, this would have been impossible. Jan van Eyck died in 1441, when Antonello was only 11 years old. However, nothing is known about Antonello in the 1450s. He might therefore have travelled to Bruges during this time and studied with some of van Eyck's followers (Wright, 1980). As well as learning about oil-painting from the Flemish artists, Antonello may have taught them, in exchange, some of the new Italian insights into perspective (Edgerton, 1975).

Another possibility is that Antonello interacted with Petrus Christus (1410-1476), one of van Eyck's most prominent disciples, in Italy rather than Flanders. There is some evidence that the two painters may have been present at the same time in Milan at the court of Francesco Sforza (Ainsworth & Martens, 1994, p 61).

Antonello returned home to Sicily in 1460, and worked there for several years but nothing is really known about his whereabouts in the late 1460s. Perhaps he travelled at that time to Bruges and interacted there with Petrus and other painters, such as Hans Memling (1430-1494). There are striking similarities between Petrus' *Portrait of a Man* (1465?) on the left side of the following illustration and Antonello's later portrait from 1473.



The following illustration shows Antonello's *Salvator Mundi* from 1465 on the left and a similar painting by Hans Memling from 1475. It appears too close a likeness not to have been the result of personal interaction between the artists.



Compared to the paintings of the Flemish painters, Antonello's are more natural, more distinctive and more emotional. They express themselves. We sense a real person rather than an image.

Antonello stayed in Venice for a brief period beginning in late 1475. While there, he interacted with Venetian artists such as Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516) and Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506). An apocryphal story tells how Bellini posed as a nobleman and had his portrait painted by Antonio so that he could observe the technique of oil painting (Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 29).

An important development that occurred in Venice in the late 15th Century was oil-painting on canvas rather than wood. Sail-canvas was in ready supply in this maritime city. Canvas did not crack or warp like wood, and its light weight allowed for much larger paintings. Though Antonello did not paint on canvas, Bellini painted some of his late paintings on canvas,

and oil on canvas became the usual technique for the next generation of Venetian painters such as Giorgione (1470-1510), and Titian (1488-1576).

In 1476, Antonello was offered a position on the Sforza court in Milan, but he declined and returned to Messina. He died there in 1479, having provided a dowry for his daughter and placed his son Jacobello in charge of his studio. Jacobello's only surviving painting is signed *Jacobus Antonelli, filius non humani pictoris* (son of a painter who was more than human) (Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 39).

Over the years, many of Antonello's works vanished. Some were destroyed in the earthquakes to Messina was prone. Others were lost in the bombing of World War II. Many of his paintings were small and easily lost. Only about 40 paintings remain.

Renaissance Portraits

During the later Middle Ages, the rich and the powerful wished to gain some hold on immortality by having their portraits painted. Initially this was done by giving an altarpiece to a church and having themselves included in the painting as the donors. Over time, painters began to provide portraits independently of the church. Jan van Eyck was again one of the most prominent of the early portraitists. The following illustration shows two of his portraits, both from around 1433. The sitter on the left is holding a ring. This could indicate that the sitter is a goldsmith, that he has just become engaged to be married, or that he has assumed a position of authority requiring the use of a signet ring. On the left the sitter is wearing a striking blue chaperon, and on the right a marvelous red turban. The latter may be a self portrait.



Antonello learned from the Flemish painters, and became the “first Italian painter for whom the independent portrait was an art form in its own right” (Pope-Hennessy, 1966, p 60). He became particularly adept at presenting the individuality of the eyes. In this he was a believer in Saint Jerome:

Speculum mentis est facies, et taciti oculi cordis fatentur arcana.

The face is the mirror of the mind and, without speaking, confesses the secrets of the heart.

The following illustration shows four of his portraits. The upper left is from the late 1460s and the others from the early 1470s. One of Antonello’s characteristic effects was to add his signature in a *cartellino* on a ledge at the bottom of the image (the two lower portraits). This *trompe l’oeil* representation of a folded piece of paper perhaps guarantees the veracity of the portrait: if the artist can represent a

scrap of paper that well, then he must have captured the likeness exactly. The typical message on the *cartellino* read "*Antonello messianus me pinxit*" together with a date (Renzo Villa in Cardona & Villa, 2019, pp 81-107)



We consider ourselves able to read both character and emotion in the human face. For example, in the preceding portraits we might find mockery/amusement, diffidence/cunning, disdain/skepticism, and truculence/stubbornness. Indeed, the last portrait is often known as *Il Condottiero*, the name for an Italian mercenary leader.

The following is an evaluation of the portrait at the lower left by Nicola Gardini, an Italian novelist (in Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 289):

The face is the theatre. And it is doubly so. On the one hand, it provides a stage where events or a story, no matter how slight, can unfold: the eyebrows arch, the eyelids are lowered, a rebellious tuft of eyebrow hairs stands up, a wart is displayed in the centre of his forehead, which creases into furrows that extend down to the side. There is no fixity: that face reveals an expression, a current frame of mind or psychological circumstance. On the other hand, the mask, the moral core of the expression, the underlying truth behind events elevating the circumstance to a natural truth. This is where the man reveals himself, both as he is and as he appears with all his distinctive features: the smugness, the miserly smile (Antonello has managed to make his eyebrows smile far more than his mouth), a sense of condescension and satisfaction, his robustness, that air of good health, cleanliness, prosperity ... Clearly pleased with himself and full of self-worth, this man certainly knows a thing or two. And he keeps as far away as he can from death.

However, we should be careful. Though we can recognize the most striking of human emotions, we often miss subtle changes. And we are more often wrong than right about the underlying character.

The portrait in the upper left is particularly appealing.

Though it has been considered the portrait of a sailor or a pirate, it is almost certainly a portrait of a Sicilian aristocrat, willing to have his representation immortalized by the talented artist. He is not dressed in a modern maritime uniform but wearing a Sicilian woolen cape or *cappuloro* (Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 32). The Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciasia notes that we recognize the face but really do not know the person behind it:

Who does the unknown man resemble? A mafioso from the countryside or one from the best neighborhoods, the member of parliament who sits on the right, or on the left, the peasant or the lawyer? He looks like the writer of these notes (it's been said), and he certainly looks like Antonello. And just try to pin down the social status and the individual human nature of this personage. Impossible. Is he a noble or a plebeian? A notary or a farmer? A gentleman or a lout? A painter, a poet, an assassin? "He resembles." There you have it. (translated and quoted by Ingrid Rowland, 2024, pp 21-22)

Antonello's portraits are easily approachable. They all make clear eye contact:

Antonello is also sensitive to the humanity of the viewer, who is given consistent points of entry into the work. These entry points are established not only with eye contact, but with the parapet, which gives a clear boundary between observer and observed, and the *cartellino*, which looks as if one has just unfolded it. (House, 2025, p 41)

When Antonello was in Venice in 1475-6, he was able to show the Venetian painters the techniques of oil-based portraits. The following are two portraits by Giovanni Bellini. The *Portrait of a Young Man* on the left dates to around the time of Antonello's visit. It is clearly similar to Antonello's paintings. The *Portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan* is from 1501. Antonello's technique has been supplemented by the amazing

color sense that characterizes Venetian painting. Interestingly, Bellini has added to his masterpiece a painted *cartellino* in the style of Antonello:



Ecco Homo

Antonello used the abilities he had developed in portraiture to create representations of the face of Christ that are utterly convincing in their humanity and depth of feeling. One of his favorite themes was that of *Ecco Homo* (Behold the man) as described in the Gospel of John:

Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him.

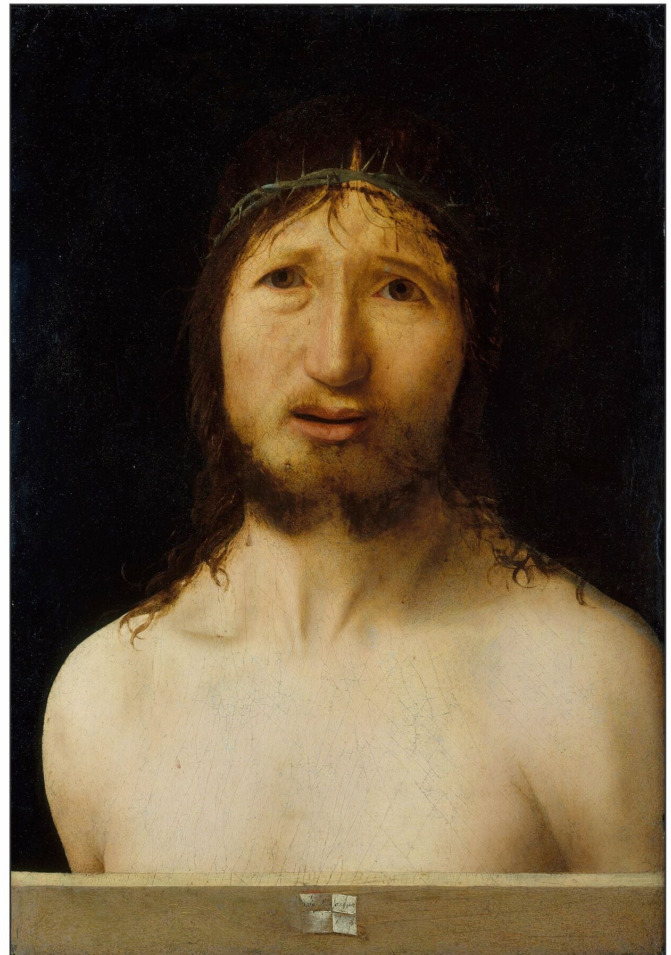
And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe,

And said, Hail, King of the Jews! and they smote him with their hands.

Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him.

Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man! (*John 19 1-5*)

The following illustration shows two of Antonello's paintings of *Ecco Homo*, the left from 1476 and the right from 1470.



Saint Sebastian

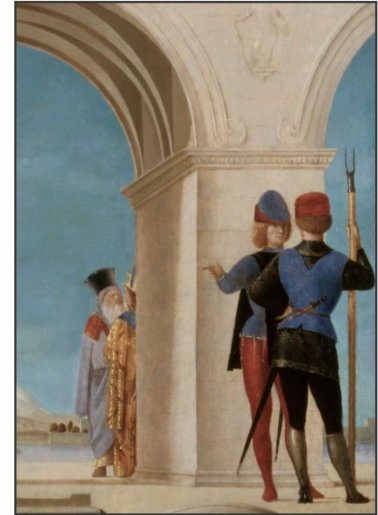
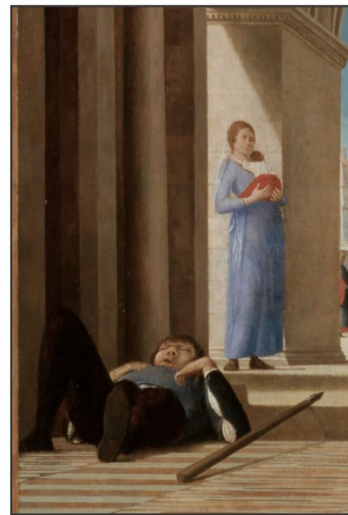
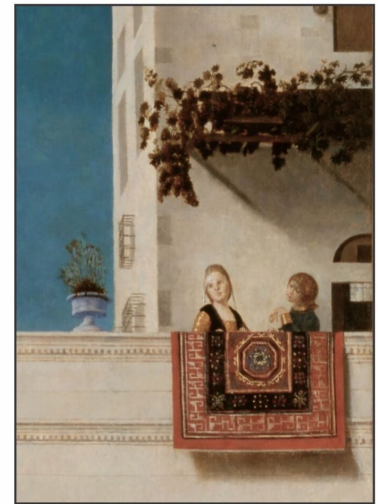
Saint Sebastian was a 3rd Century Roman Christian martyred during the Diocletian Persecutions. Initially, he was shot with arrows, but this miraculously did not kill him, and he was nursed back to health by Saint Irene. Later, he was clubbed to death and thrown into the *Cloaca Maxima* – Rome's main sewer. During the Middle Ages, Saint Sebastian was invoked as a defender against the plague. If he could survive being shot with arrows, surely he could help those who were afflicted by the disease. Depictions of Saint Sebastian allowed painters to portray the nude male body. Antonello's depiction is probably the most sensuous of the early representations of the saint. In recent years, the saint has become a gay icon and the patron of the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer communities.

Antonello's *Saint Sebastian* was painted in the mid 1470s for the altar of the Church of San Guliano in Venice at the height of one of the plague epidemics to which Venice was so susceptible (Humphrey, 1993, pp 195-229). The altarpiece also contained a representation of Saint Christopher, probably painted by Antonello's son, and a carved sculpture of Saint Rocco, another saint who offered protection from the plague. The latter was also the patron of the Scuola di San Rocco which was established in 1478. The altarpiece did not last long: the statue and the painting of Saint Christopher have been lost, and Antonello's painting is now in Dresden.

Antonello's painting owed much to an earlier altar triptych of Saint Sebastian (1470). However, Antonello's saint is much more convincing than Bellini's flatly outlined figure.

The Saint stands in a serenely ordered space that recalls the paintings of Piero della Francesca, who wrote a treatise *De prospectiva pingendi* (On the Perspective of Painting) in the mid 1470s. Perhaps Antonello visited him in Urbino during his travels (Campbell, 2021). House (2025, p 131) quotes Roberto Longhi as claiming that Antonello assimilated Piero's

teachings and brought them to Venice.



On the left a guard sleeps in a marvel of foreshortening. Elsewhere the people of the city converse, and go about their appointed ways. Though the saint is being martyred, everything is as it should be according to divine perspective.

Saint Jerome

Jerome (342-420) CE) was a Christian saint who in his youth spent a prolonged period of ascetic penance in the deserts of Syria. Legend has it that during this time he removed a thorn from the paw of a lion, and that the lion then became his lifelong companion. After his sojourn in the desert, he came

to Rome where he translated the Bible into Latin, and made extensive commentaries on scripture. His version of the Bible – the Vulgate (from *versio vulgata*, the commonly used version) – remains the official Latin version of the Bible in the Catholic Church. Jerome became the patron saint of translators, librarians, and students.

Jerome became a popular subject in the paintings of the early Renaissance. The following illustration shows on the left a painting of Saint Jerome by Jan van Eyck that was likely finished by Petrus Christus in 1442, and on the right a 1444 painting by Niccolo Colantonio, with whom Antonello was apprenticed in Naples.



The late Middle Ages ushered in the “Humanities” as a field of study. Initially, this concerned the language, history and philosophy of the Greek, Roman and Hebrew civilizations. The goal of these studies was to facilitate a deeper interpretation of Biblical texts. Study of the humanities (*humanitas*) was thus considered a handmaiden to the study of divinity (*divinitas*). Saint Jerome with his immense knowledge of the ancient languages came to personify this new field of

study. Over the years the Humanities expanded to include study of all texts. The Humanities then became was distinguished from both Theology – the study of sacred rather than secular scriptures –and the Sciences – the study of observed data.

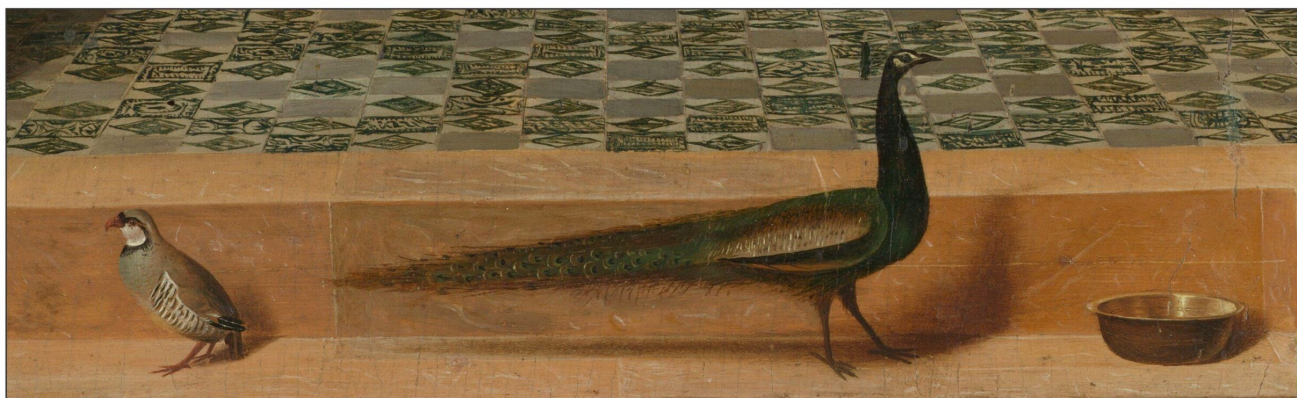
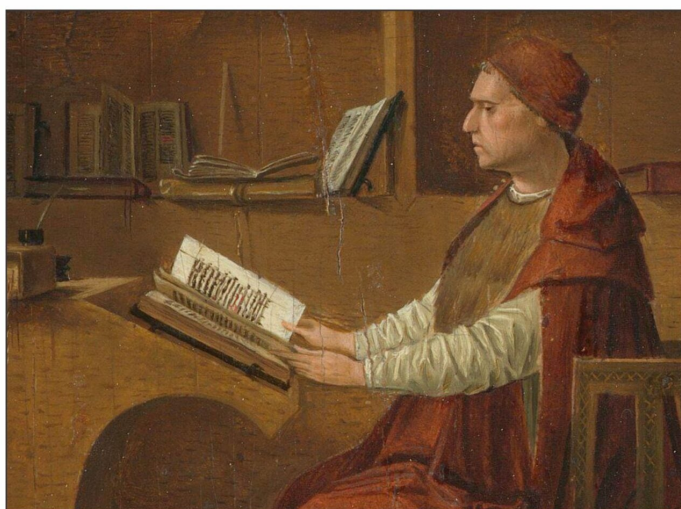
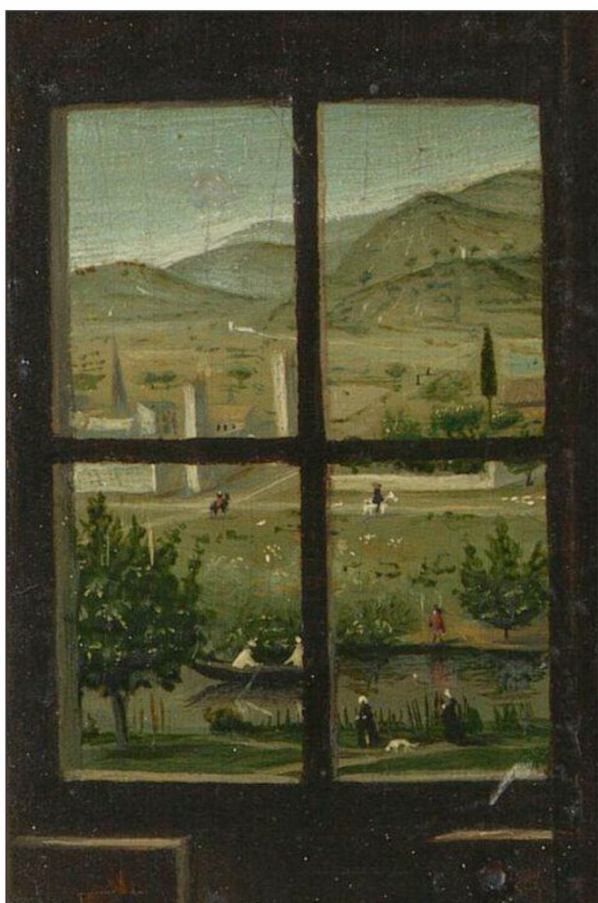
Antonello painted his *Saint Jerome in his Study* in 1474. The painting is not large (46 by 36 cm) but it is intricately detailed (Jolly, 1983):



The painting shows Jerome reading in his study, as revealed through a monastery doorway. In the foreground the partridge, peacock, and water-bowl symbolize worldliness, immortality and ascetic purity. His lion can be seen in the shadows to the

right of the study. A peaceful countryside rests beyond the monastic windows:

The following illustration shows some of the details in the painting. The landscape seen through the window on the left contains people walking with a dog, rowing a boat, and riding a horse – all going about their normal lives independently of the saint in his isolated study.



The Italian writer Elizabetta Rasy (In Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 78) comments on the figure of the saint

Unlike Jan van Eyck's Saint Jerome blissfully reading with his cheek resting on his hand, Antonello's saint is not particularly relaxed nor is he sitting properly. In fact, he seems to be almost on the edge of his seat, stretching his arms out towards the book rest like someone carrying out an action or making an effort. Reading may not always be an effort, but it is certainly an action. It is this very tension that gives rise to the power of a figure who does not appear conventionally devotional or indeed anything like the kind old monk depicted by Colantonio, Antonello's master.

She further comments on the painting's tension between reality and imagination (in Cardona & Frederico Villa, 2019, p79):

Yet the entire space of the work suggests something else. Let's take look at the lion. Instead of holding his paw out for the saint to remove the famous thorn or sitting crouched at his feet, he is roaming aimlessly in the corridor, nothing like a lion, not even the lion in the legend, but more like those animals appearing in dreams, in places and in ways they shouldn't, like incongruous presences. That lion standing in the shade, a forest but of an elegant marble corridor, is an apparition that shifts the entire scene into the realm of dreams. Over on the other side is a paper label attached to the wooden wall of Jerome's cell, in plain sight. Is it the artist's signature? A message for the observer? No, it is impossible to read those words, they are just a series of illegible scribbles that do not belong to any human alphabet. Have you ever tried to read something in your dreams? It's impossible. Those forever unknowable words are written in the language of the most secret nocturnal images. This is the time-less stance of Antonello's Saint Jerome in the study: every element in this setting, saint included, is here, now, near, tangible and shamelessly real. Yet every element in the entire conspicuously asymmetrical space of

the picture is mysterious and represents a distant Beyond that enchants us and draws us out.

Virgin Annunciate

During the Middle Ages in Europe the veneration of the Virgin Mary underwent an extraordinary growth. This was partly related to the writings of Bernard de Clairvaux, who experienced visions of the Virgin, and who founded the Cistercian Order, and partly the need for solace during the terrible years of the Black Death. If the plague had been sent by a God of Justice and Judgment, the people could not really appeal to him for relief. So they asked the Virgin Mary to intercede, the divine feminine being far more compassionate than the male. Many of the great cathedrals were named after Notre Dame or Santa Maria. The virgin appeared to her followers, and, at the sites of these visions, shrines were established to attract pilgrims. Walsingham in Norfolk, England is one of the earliest Marian shrines

Artists celebrated the many different aspects of Mary's life from the Annunciation to the Assumption (Verdon, 2005). One of the most popular subjects was the Annunciation as described in the Gospel of Luke (1:26-31):

...the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.

The paintings typically showed Gabriel interrupting Mary as she read from the scriptures. The angel is usually on the left and in profile; the virgin on the right and turned toward the viewer. The following illustration shows the 1333 *Annunciation Altarpiece* of Simoni Martini and Lippo Lemmi now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The words of the angel float across the gold background through the olive branch of divine peace and the lily of virgin purity:

Ave [Maria] gratia plena dominus tecum

Hail [Mary] full of grace, the lord is with you.



Sometimes the annunciation was painted on two panels and that representing Mary was called the *Vergine Annunziata* (Virgin Annunciate). Antonello da Messina was the first painter to represent the *Virgin Annunciate* alone.



His 1476 painting shows the virgin in a simple blue shawl. The background is dark rather than gold. Mary looks down and to

the left at a kneeling Gabriel who is not represented, and perhaps not clearly visible in the real world. Her expression is as enigmatic as that of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (1506). Mary's right hand is lifted partly in surprise, partly in reluctance. Her right hand gathers her shawl close.

The painting represents the miraculous moment of the incarnation, of the divine becoming human. The following are comments by Klaus Krüger (2015):

The image presents the Virgin in a tranquil, clearly structured composition. The strict symmetry and frontality are reminiscent of an icon. Only the implied movement of the right hand, which reaches forward into the pictorial space, and the direction of the Virgin's gaze, which almost imperceptibly follows the turning of her body, subtly indicate that a scenic incident, namely the Annunciation, is taking place. Antonello radically reduces the event of the Annunciation by depicting only the very moment in which the Virgin receives the Word of God, and with it the divine fruit of her womb. The actual descent of the divine Logos remains imperceptible to the eyes. It can only be inferred from Mary's reaction and from the reflection of the light that shines on her from above, and which appears to radiate all the more intensely against the dark background. The actual subject of the image is thus the paradoxical manifestation of the invisible in the visible, of light amidst darkness, of the Word in the flesh, in sum: of the divine in the temporal.

Humanism

As the Middle Ages developed into the Renaissance, the study of the Humanities, which initially were concerned with the languages in which the scriptures were written, broadened to include philosophy, ethics and history. Scholars became more familiar with the ancient texts, and took to heart the

statement of Protagoras (490-420 BCE) that "Man is the measure of all things." They found that they could order their lives through the exercise of human reason as well as or instead of through faith in divine instruction. The Humanities thus gave birth to the philosophy of Humanism (Davies, 2001, pp 125-135).

Renaissance Humanism was facilitated by several developments. Beginning in the mid 15th Century, the printing press gave people ready access to books and ideas. No longer were thoughts locked up in the libraries of the church. The new sciences provided ways to look at the world in relation to human beings rather than as divinely determined. And painting became more realistic, the spaces more three-dimensional, and the faces more human.

Antonello da Messina infused his paintings with this new humanism. His portraits show real people who run the gamut of human emotions. His depictions of Christ show a man of sorrow rather than a suffering God. His saints live out their lives in a world that is seen from a human rather than a divine perspective. His Virgin Mary is a wonderfully realized young woman rather than a pious saint.

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The Letter of Lord Chandos: Hugo von Hofmannsthal

In 1901, Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929) wrote an essay on the inadequacy of language in the form of a letter (*Ein Brief*) from the fictional Philip Lord Chandos to the actual Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a famous English philosopher of science, essayist and statesman. The letter is a response to Bacon's inquiry about the two years of unexpected silence that following Chandos' early success as a poet. Chandos replies that he has "completely lost the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently." He feels a deep sympathy with the world, but finds no words whereby to express this experience. He seeks but has not yet, found a language "in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge." The illustration shows a 1916 portrait of von Hofmannsthal by Karl Bauer.

Synopsis of the Letter

Chandos thanks Bacon for his concern. He says he is no longer the same person who wrote his early poems. He remembers that he had planned to write about the reign of Henry VIII. "Was ist der Mensch, daß er Pläne macht!" (But what is man that he should make plans!). Another scheme that he had entertained was a collection of *Apothegmata* that he would have called

Nosce te ipsum (Know thyself). However, his thoughts ran ahead of his actions, and the world that was once open to him now evades his grasp:

Wie soll ich es versuchen, Ihnen diese seltsamen geistigen Qualen zu schildern, dies Emporschnellen der Fruchtzweige über meinen ausgereckten Händen, dies Zurückweichendes murmelnden Wassers vor meinen dürstenden Lippen?

Mein Fall ist, in Kürze, dieser: Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/chandos-mein-fall.mp3>

(This and the following audio clips are from a recitation of *Ein Brief* by Martin Ploderer.)

How shall I try to describe to you these strange spiritual torments, this rebounding of the fruit-branches above my outstretched hands, this recession of the murmuring stream from my thirsting lips?

My case, in short, is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently.

The German language has two ways to express the idea of loss. The common translation of “to lose” is *verlieren*. Another way to say that something “has come away from my hands” – *ist mir abhanden gekommen*. Any blame is on that which has been lost rather than on the loser. A famous use of this idiom is in Mahler’s 1902 setting of Rückert’s *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (I am lost to the world).

Chandos’ inability to think or speak is not complete. He is still able to take care of his estate. He has just lost the ability (or the will) to communicate poetically.

Chandos describes an intense, almost mystical, involvement with even the most mundane of his experiences:

Es wird mir nicht leicht, Ihnen anzudeuten, worin diese guten Augenblicke bestehen; die Worte lassen mich wiederum im Stich. Denn es ist ja etwas völlig Unbenanntes, und auch wohl kaum Benennbares, das in solchen Augenblicken, irgendeine Erscheinung meiner alltäglichen Umgebung mit einer überschwellenden Flut höheren Leben wie ein Gefäß erfüllend, mir sich ankündet. Ich kann nicht erwarten, daß Sie mich ohne Beispiel verstehen, und ich muß Sie um Nachsicht für die Kläglichkeit meiner Beispiele bitten. Eine Gießkanne, eine auf dem Feld verlassene Egge, ein Hund in der Sonne, ein ärmlicher Kirchhof, ein Krüppel, ein kleines Bauernhaus, alles dies kann das Gefäß meiner Offenbarung werden. Jeder dieser Gegenstände und die tausend anderen ähnlichen, über die sonst ein Auge mit selbstverständlicher Gleichgültigkeit hinweggleitet, kann für mich plötzlich in irgendeinem Moment, den herbeizuführen auf keine Weise in meiner Gewalt steht, ein erhabenes undrührendes Gepräge annehmen, das auszudrücken mir alle Worte zu arm scheinen.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/chandos-alle-Worte-zu-arm-scheinen.mp3>

It is not easy for me to indicate wherein these good moments subsist; once again words desert me. For it is, indeed, something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable which, at such moments, reveals itself to me, filling like a vessel any casual object of my daily surroundings with an overflowing flood of higher life. I cannot expect you to understand me without examples, and I must plead your indulgence for their absurdity. A pitcher, a harrow abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a neglected cemetery, a cripple, a peasant's hut, all these can become the vessel of my revelation. Each of these objects and a thousand others similar, over which the eye usually glides with a natural indifference, can suddenly, at any moment (which I am utterly powerless to evoke), assume for me a

character so exalted and moving that words seem too poor to describe it. Even the distinct image of an absent object, in fact, can acquire the mysterious function of being filled to the brim with this silent but suddenly rising flood of divine sensation.

Chandos concludes the letter by thanking Bacon for his kindness:

Sie waren so gütig, Ihre Unzufriedenheit darüber zu äußern, daß kein von mir verfaßtes Buch mehr zu Ihnen kommt, »Sie für das Entbehren meines Umgangs zu entschädigen«. Ich fühlte in diesem Augenblick mit einer Bestimmtheit, die nicht ganz ohne ein schmerzliches Beigefühl war, daß ich auch im kommenden und im folgenden und in allen Jahren dieses meines Lebens kein englisches und kein lateinisches Buch schreiben werde: und dies ausdem einen Grund, dessen mir peinliche Seltsamkeit mit ungeblendetem Blick dem vor Ihnen harmonisch ausgebreiteten Reiche der geistigen und leiblichen Erscheinungen an seiner Stelle einzuordnen ich Ihrer unendlichen geistigen Überlegenheit überlasse: nämlich weil die Sprache, in welcher nicht nur zu schreiben, sondern auch zu denken mir vielleicht gegeben wäre, weder die lateinische noch die englische, noch die italienische oder spanische ist, sondern eine Sprache, in welcher die stummen Dinge zuweilen zu mir sprechen, und in welcher ich vielleicht einst im Grabe vor einem unbekanntem Richter mich verantworten werde.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/chandos-unbekanntem-Richter.mp3>

You were kind enough to express your dissatisfaction that no book written by me reaches you any more, “to compensate for the loss of our relationship.” Reading that, I felt, with a certainty not entirely bereft of a feeling of sorrow, that neither in the coming year nor in the following nor in all the years of this my life shall I

write a book, whether in English or in Latin: and this for an odd and embarrassing reason which I must leave to the boundless superiority of your mind to place in the realm of physical and spiritual values spread out harmoniously before your unprejudiced eye: to wit, because the language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, neither Italian nor Spanish, but a language none of whose words is known to me, a language in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge.

Fictional Context

Hofmannsthal wrote his essay in the form of a letter from Philip Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon. The letter is dated August 22, 1603. James I had just assumed the throne of England. Shakespeare was at the height of his career: *Hamlet* was performed in 1600, *Othello* in 1603, and *Measure for Measure* in 1604. The work of Copernicus on the *Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* (1543) had marked the beginning of the Scientific Revolution. Knowledge was becoming free of doctrine, and art becoming independent of religion.

Francis Bacon was an English statesman and philosopher of science. His *Novum Organum* of 1620 described how new knowledge could be induced from observations rather than deducted from axioms. He also wrote essays on a variety of topics in philosophy and religion. In 1603 there was a young Baron Chandos: Grey Bridges (1580-1621), a politician and a possible author of an anonymous collection of essays entitled *Horae Subsecivae* (Spare Time). The following illustration shows portraits of Bacon (left, Paul van Somer, 1617) and Bridges (right, William Larkin, 1615). However, Grey Bridges was not a poet. Though Bacon is an actual person, the Lord Chandos of Hofmannstahl's letter is completely fictional.



Though not an actual person, Lord Chandos serves as an effective counterpoint to Bacon, representing the aesthetic approach to life as opposed to the scientific. Both forces had become strong in English Society at the time of the fictional letter.

Personal Context

The Lord Chandos of the letter is far more similar to Hofmannsthal than to any young Jacobean lord. Hofmannsthal had begun his career as a lyric poet. His poetry was “romantic” in its stress on the individual’s emotional response and “symbolist” in its search for meanings beyond reality. The 1892 poem *Erlebnis* (Experience) describes a vision of death and time:

*Mit silbergrauem Dufte war das Tal
Der Dämmerung erfüllt, wie wenn der Mond*

*Durch Wolken sickert. Doch es war nicht Nacht.
Mit silbergrauem Duft des dunklen Tales
Verschwammen meine dämmernden Gedanken,
Und still versank ich in dem webenden,
Durchsichtgen Meere und verließ das Leben.
Wie wunderbare Blumen waren da,
Mit Kelchen dunkelglühend! Pflanzendickicht,
Durch das ein gelbrot Licht wie von Topasen
In warmen Strömen drang und glomm.
Das Ganze war angefüllt mit einem tiefen Schwellen
Schwermütiger Musik. Und dieses wußt ich,
Obgleich ichs nicht begreife, doch ich wußt es:
Das ist der Tod. Der ist Musik geworden,
Gewaltig sehrend, süß und dunkelglühend,
Verwandt der tiefsten Schwermut.*

Aber seltsam!

*Ein namenloses Heimweh weinte lautlos
In meiner Seele nach dem Leben, weinte,
Wie einer weint, wenn er auf großem Seeschiff
Mit gelben Riesensegeln gegen Abend
Auf dunkelblauem Wasser an der Stadt,
Der Vaterstadt, vorüberfährt. Da sieht er
Die Gassen, hört die Brunnen rauschen, riecht
Den Duft der Fliederbüsche, sieht sich selber.
Ein Kind, am Ufer stehn, mit Kindesaugen,
Die ängstlich sind und weinen wollen, sieht
Durchs offene Fenster Licht in seinem Zimmer –
Das große Seeschiff aber trägt ihn weiter,
Auf dunkelblauem Wasser lautlos gleitend
Mit gelben, fremdgeformten Riesensegeln.*

This is a recitation of the poem by Wort Krämer

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/erlebnis.mp3>

And a translation by J. D. McClatchy (2008, pp 24-5):

At dusk a silvery fragrance filled the valley,
As when the moon is viewed through a veil of cloud.
But it was not yet night. In the darkening valley
That fragrance drifted through my shadowy thoughts
And silently I sank into the wavering,
Diaphanous sea, and left my life behind.
What wondrous flowers had bloomed there,
Cups of colors darkly glowing! And a thicket
Amidst which a flame like topaz rushed,
Now surging, now gleaming in its molten course.
All of it seemed filled with the deep swell
Of a mournful music. This much I knew,
Though I cannot understand it—I knew
That this was Death, transmuted into music,
Violently yearning, sweet, dark, burning,
Akin to deepest sadness.

Yet how

strange!

A nameless longing after life now wept
Inside my soul without a sound, wept
As one might weep who on a galleon
With giant gilded sails of an evening slides
Over the indigo waters past a town,
His native town. And there he spies again
The streets, hears the fountains splash, breathes
In the scent of lilacs, and sees himself again,
A child standing on the shore, wide-eyed,
Anxious and close to tears, and looks then through
An open window to see a light on in his room—
But the huge ship is bearing out to sea
Without a sound over the indigo waters
With its giant gilded unearthly sails.

As the 19th Century came to an end, Hofmannsthal began to feel uneasy about his writing, which no longer seemed to capture what he wanted to say about the world.

There is no question that Chandos' crisis reflects a crisis of Hofmannsthal's own; after a decade of astonishing facility and productivity, Hofmannsthal suddenly finds himself unsure of his own verbal mastery. (Bennett, 1988, p 129)

Hofmannsthal composed only a few isolated poems after 1898 (Kovach, 2002, p 86; Schaber, 1970). However, unlike the fictional Lord Chandos, he did not forsake writing. Rather he turned to drama and to opera. His 1903 play *Elektra* was successful, and was converted into an opera in 1909 with music by Richard Strauss. Over the next two decades continued to write libretti for Strauss operas, among them *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) and *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912/1916), and *Arabella* (1933).

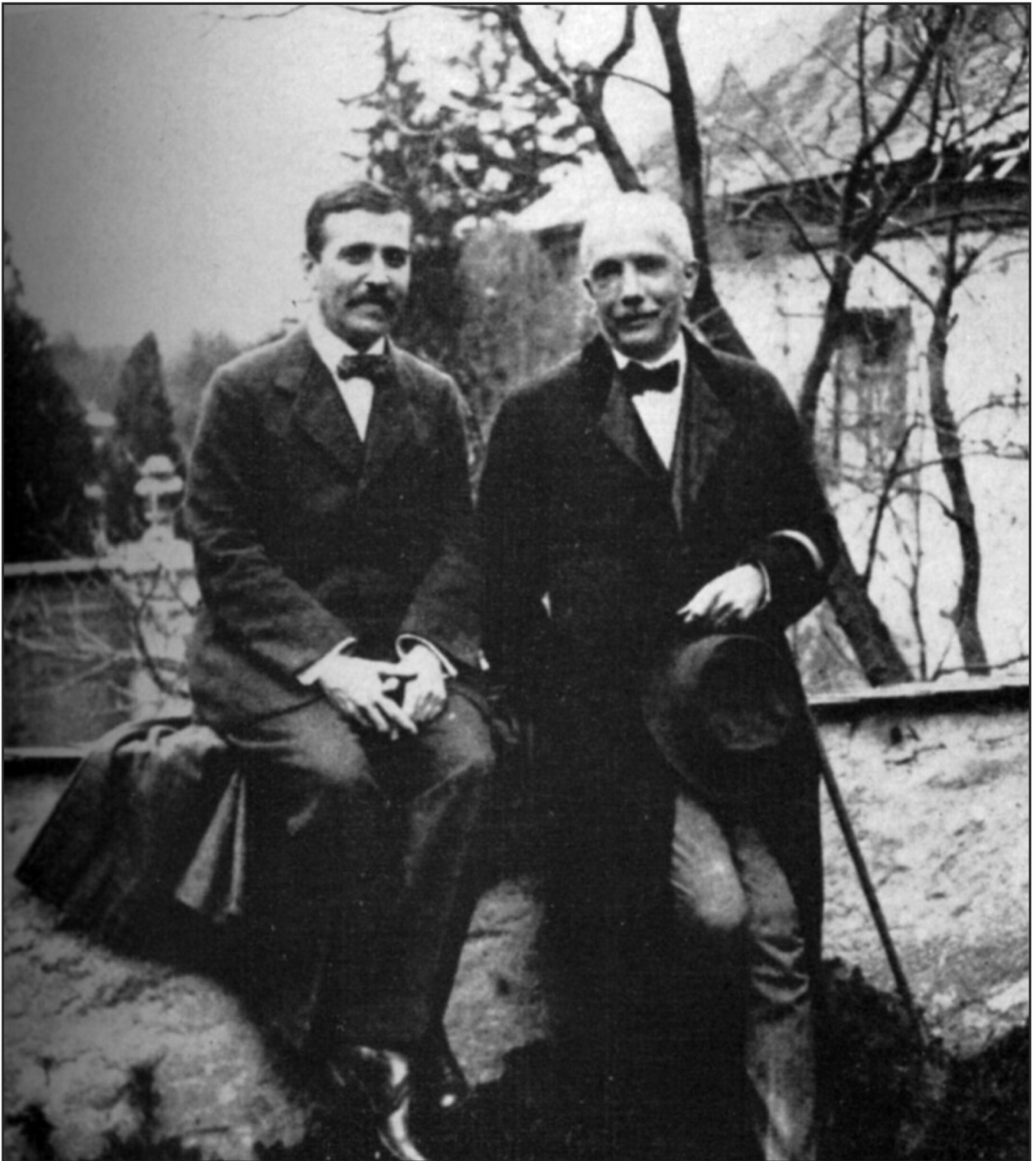
Hofmannsthal stopped trying to figure out what is the mystery of life, and began to consider how people live their lives. Toward the end of Act I of *Der Rosenkavalier*, the Marschallin remarks

*Das alles ist geheim, so viel geheim.
Und man ist dazu da, daß man's entragt.
Und in dem "Wie" da liegt der ganze Unterschied—*

It's all a mystery, so much is mysterious.
And we are here to endure it.
And in the How, there lies the whole difference—

McClatchy (2008) used this quotation as the epigraph to a selection of Hofmannsthal's writings.

The following is a photograph of Hofmannsthal and Strauss from 1912:



The Paradox of the Letter

Many critics have noted that, given that his inability to think or speak coherently, Lord Chandos could not possibly have written his letter to Francis Bacon:

Perhaps the most peculiar thing about the Chandos letter is

its inherent paradox. While the fictitious author claims to be unable to employ language effectively, the essay itself is a masterpiece of literary artistry. The images are bright, colorful, and vibrant. The selection of words and the organization of ideas are flawless. Each sentence, each phrase is constructed with care and precision, is impregnated with life and meaning. The whole is ordered so as to allow each detail to convey its message with power. In short, it is not the work of a spiritually disturbed Chandos, but of the virtuoso Hofmannsthal. (Bangerter, 1977, p 28)

The Chandos letter, taken literally, rests on the impossible condition, the absurdity, in fact, that a man in Chandos' condition could write any letter, not to mention one involving such complexity of thought. When Chandos states that he has completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently, he precludes the possibility of writing anything, including the letter in which he makes such a statement. The point is that Chandos, who is an invented figure, did not write the letter, Hofmannsthal did. Hofmannsthal, who does not have Chandos' problem of disorientation, is able to compose the letter that he imagines Chandos would have written had he been able to write. (Daviau, 1971, p 30)

The letter describes the state of mind of a man who can no longer communicate what he experiences to others. Hofmannsthal has to imagine what this was like. It remains problematic that one so capable of communication could really understand what it is like to have lost that ability.

The Language Crisis

For Chandos expressing his experiences in language has become impossible. Any attempt to do so leads to a whirlpool of

words:

Es zerfiel mir alles in Teile, die Teile wieder in Teile und nichts mehr ließ sich mit einem Begriff umspannen. Die einzelnen Worte schwammen um mich; sie gerannen zu Augen die mich anstarrten und in die ich wieder hineinstarren muß: Wirbel sind sie, in die hinabzusehen mich schwindelt, die sich unaufhaltsam drehen und durch die hindurch man ins Leere kommt.

For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea. Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back – whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.

Chandos' description of his difficulty with language relates to the *Sprachkrise* (language crisis) experienced by Austrian philosophers and writers at the beginning of the 20th Century (Gray, 1986). This was clearly not an aspect of writing in England in 1603: at that time, the English language had no reservations about its ability to discover knowledge or to portray beauty. As the 19th Century came to an end, however, our trust in language was beginning to crumble. Hofmannsthal wished to consider this problem in the context of a time when poets and scientists still had full command of their words.

With the industrial revolution, the place of art in society changed. Poetry was no longer the darling of the aristocracy – elevated thoughts in elevated language. To continue to have any meaning, poetry needed to become more like everyday speech and to consider everyday problems.

Chandos's letter suggests a real pessimism about the possibility of revivifying language, indicating both that the future lies with a language which is no language and that, until this language is found, the only possibility is silence.

Chandos's pessimism can be seen in the list of objects which, in an imaginative desert, still ignite in him an occasional and momentary vision of eternity: a watering can, a deserted harrow in the fields, a dog in the sun, a wretched churchyard, a cripple, a peasant cottage. All of these ciphers suggest tiredness, desertedness, decrepitude and pathos: all seem residues of a lost unity rather than pointers to a unity to come. A similar sense of pessimism about the possibility of revivifying language, a similar sense that all that remains are a few isolated and arbitrary symbols, runs through the writings of Eliot, Yeats and Rake. Eliot ends *The Waste Land* by shoring a few arcane fragments of language against the ruin of the present. (Sheppard, 1976, p 324).

The language crisis extended beyond poetry. At about the same time as Hofmannsthal's letter, Franz Mauthner (1849-1923) published his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (Contributions to a Critique of Language, 1901-2). This called into question the very basis of language as a means of representing reality. Gray (1986, p 335) remarks

Mauthner conceives of language as a fundamentally metaphorical, and thus "mendacious," phenomenon. The very act in which language is created, the transformation of sense data into articulated sounds, is an act of metaphorization. Due to this inherent metaphoricity, language cannot express "truth," which, for Mauthner, can only consist in the perfect identity of language with the objective reality it is intended to express.

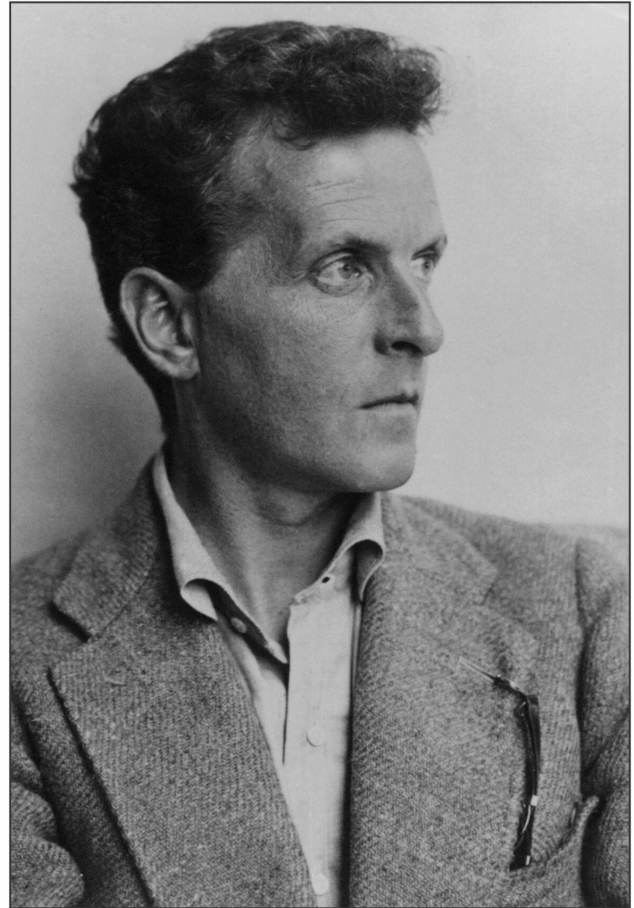
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was significantly affected by the work of Mauthner, though he was less pessimistic about the possibilities of language. He mentions Mauthner in his *Tactatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922, 4.0031)

Alle Philosophie ist "Sprachkritik". (Allerdings nicht im Sinne Mauthners.)

All philosophy is "Critique of language" (but not at all in

Mauthner's sense)

The following illustration shows portraits of Mauthner (from the 1900s) and Wittgenstein (from the 1920s)



Though mainly related to poetic language, Hofmannsthal's letter also suggests the more general problem of the relationship between language and experience:

Chandos' crisis points to what was to become a central philosophical preoccupation of the twentieth century, reflected in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein as well as in more recent developments such as Jacques Derrida's deconstruction: namely, the demonstration that language can no longer be relied on as a valid signifier of a reality which exists outside itself, and in fact that we cannot ever experience a "reality" which is not already mediated by our language. (Kovach, 2002, p 94)

Like Staring into the Sun

Although Chandos concentrates on his linguistic difficulties, he also describes his recent experiences as overwhelming:

Ja, es kann auch die bestimmte Vorstellung eines abwesenden Gegenstandes sein, der die unbegreifliche Auserwählung zu Theil wird, mit jener sanft oder jäh steigenden Flut göttlichen Gefühles bis an den Rand gefüllt zu werden.

Even the distinct image of an absent object, in fact, can acquire the mysterious function of being filled to the brim with this silent but suddenly rising flood of divine sensation.

Though he does not acknowledge it, these experiences are inherently mystical. And as such they are perhaps ineffable. Far be it for human minds to put into words the experience of the divine. The concluding proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is

Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen
Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

However, an experience that cannot be put into words – something that is impossible to understand – can be terrifying. The mystical vision of Lord Chandos is not easy to bear. In a postscript to *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) J. M. Coetzee imagined what it might have been like to be Chandos' wife, who tried to share his experiences. She writes a follow-up letter to Bacon, stressing how much they need his help:

All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation. And perhaps he speaks the truth, perhaps in the mind of our Creator (*our Creator*, I

say) where we whirl about as if in a millrace we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousand. But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how? *We are not made for revelation*, I want to cry out, *nor I nor you, my Philip*, revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun. Save me, dear Sir, save my husband! (Coetzee, 2003, p 229)

Envoi

The *Letter of Lord Chandos* has had far-reaching effects. Many writers have provided responses to the letter (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Spahr et al., 2002; Quignard, 2020). None have completely resolved the issues that were raised in Hofmannsthal's letter. Modernism found a way to allow poetry in an age where language had to communicate present truth rather than talk beautifully about lofty ideas. However, we still have not really found a way to combine beauty with truth. And we have come to realize that there is much in this world that we still do not understand and cannot describe in words. We can keep trying.

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Wu Wei: Effortless Action

One of the central ideas in the *Daodjing* of Laozi is the idea of *wu wei* (无为, simplified 无为; *wúwéi*). This has been translated in many ways: “non-action,” “actionlessness,” “effortless action,” and “doing nothing.” The 37th chapter of the *Daodjing* considers *wu wei* an attribute of the eternal *Dao*. The 48th chapter promotes *wu wei* as a human virtue. The illustration shows *wu wei* in regular script (left) and in cursive (right).

Being True to Oneself

A foundational concept in Daoism is 自然, *zìrán*. This word is composed of 自 (self, oneself, from, since) and 然 (right, correct, so, in this manner). Almost impossible to translate, the word has been variously rendered simply as “self-so” (Ziporyn, 2009) or more abstractly as “as-it-is-ness” (Fu, 1973, p 382). The meaning contains the idea of acting “naturally” or “spontaneously.” An underlying concept is “authenticity” – one’s action should be true to one’s nature.

Laozi uses the word in the ending to Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* (with translation by Wu, 2016):

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Man follows the ways of Earth;
Earth follows the ways of Heaven;
Heaven follows the ways of *Dao*;
Dao follows its own ways.

Several aspects of *zìrán* need consideration. First, the *Dao* acts through all things. As well as ordering the cosmos, the *Dao* acts through each individual object it contains. Human

beings must ultimately follow their own *zìrán*. Zhuang Zhou, commonly known as Zhuangzi (莊子), a Daoist philosopher from the 4th Century BCE, begins his writings with a description of all the different things in the universe from the mythological great Peng bird to the morning mushroom, and recommends that one must act “on the rectitude (正, *zhèng*) of Heaven and Earth” (Lynn, 2022, p 8). Guo Xiang (郭象, 265-312 CE) commented on this section of the *Zhuangzi*

“Heaven and earth” is just a blanket term used to indicate all beings. It is all individual beings that form the very substance of heaven and earth, and it is each being’s self-so [*ziran*] that aligns true to itself. “Self-so” [*ziran*] means what is so of itself [*ziran*], without being done by anyone or for any purpose. Thus, Peng’s ability to fly high and the sparrow’s ability to stay low, the great tree’s ability to last long and the mushroom’s ability to perish quickly, all these are done spontaneously, all are self-so [*ziran*] (Ziporyn, 2009, p 132.)

Second, the concept of *zìrán* does not mean that all things passively accept their lot in the universe. Misha Tadd (2019) argues that *zìrán* has as much to do with “authority” as with “authenticity.” We need to be true to our ideal selves: to seek what we should be rather than accept what we are.

Third, the idea of acting “naturally” means acting in accord with the *Dao*. However, human beings do not need to return to the simple state of primitive societies to do so (Tadd, 2019, p 4). Although the idea of the “noble savage” was popular when the *Daodejing* was initially translated into Western languages, *Laozi* was not being nostalgic for a lost Eden; rather he was imagining a future utopia (Stamatov, 2023).

Yet Nothing is Left Undone

How the *Dao* “follows its own ways” is described in the 37th chapter of the *Daodejing*. This is the final chapter in the section of the book that deals with the nature of the *Dao*

The commonly accepted version of the *Daodejing* is divided into two parts. The first 37 chapters are concerned with the *Dao* (way), and the next 44 with the nature of *De* (virtue). Some recently discovered early versions reverse the ordering of the two parts (Chan, 2025). However, for our purposes it is appropriate to follow the traditional order and to understand the nature of the *Dao* before we propose a way for human virtue.

The last chapter of the first part states that the eternal *Dao* – the principle that governs the universe – exercises its power by means of *wu wei*. The following is the Chinese text of Chapter 37 together with a translation by Wu (2016) and calligraphy by Ken Wong:

道常無為而無不為
侯王貴者將欲用
此道者
必虛其心
實其腹
弱其質
強其骨
天門自開
地門自闢
天籟自鳴
地籟自應

Dao in its eternity does nothing, yet nothing is not done.
If lords and kings can all abide by that, all things will
change of themselves.
As they change, their desires start to grow;
I calm them down with the nameless pristine timber.
Calmed by the nameless pristine timber, they will have no
more desire.
Desireless and calm, the world will correct its own course.

道常

以



為而

無不

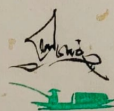
為

侯王若能守之萬物將自化
化而後作
吾將鎮之以無名之樸
夫亦將無欲
不欲以靜天下將自定

老子道德經卷之章第三十



敬由於己已秋分



The phrase 無名無為 is usually translated as “nameless simplicity” (e.g., Fischer, 2023). The character 朴 (*pǔ*), another version of which is 樸, generally means “simple.” However, it once meant “unworked wood” – hence the “nameless pristine timber” of Wu’s translation.

The famous first line is shown below in a character-by-character translation:

道	恆	無(无)	為(为)	而	無(无)	不	為(为)
dào	héng	wú	wèi	ér	wú	bù	wèi
way path	eternal constant enduring	nothing	do act govern	and yet but	nothing	not	do act govern

The translation of *wu wei* (無為) is problematic. A simple translation is “doing nothing” but that is not *Laozi*’s meaning. In Chapter 37 the *Dao* does nothing and yet somehow everything is done. The following are suggested translations of *wu wei*: “non-action” (Moeller, 2016), “effortless action” (Slingerland, 2003), “unself-conscious action” (Lynn, 2022, p 3), “non-contrivance” (Fischer, 2023, p 27), and “no purposive action” (Hansard, 2003).

Loy (1985) proposed that *wu wei* represent “nondual action:” the activity of an individual that has no self (with intentions and goals) but is rather part of a universal self. This can eliminate the problem of free will in a deterministic universe:

whenever “I” act it is not “I” but the whole universe that “does” the action or rather is the action. If we accept that the universe is self-caused, then it acts freely whenever anything is done. Thus, from the nondualist perspective, complete determinism turns out to be equivalent to absolute freedom.

Slingerland (2003, p 7) comments

It is important to realize, however, that *wu-wei* properly refers not to what is actually happening (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to the state of mind of the actor. That is, it refers not to what is or is not being done but to the phenomenological state of the doer. ... It describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one’s spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and yet nonetheless accord perfectly with the dictates of the situation at hand, display an almost supernatural efficacy, and (in the Confucian context at least) harmonize with the demands of conventional morality.

Fischer (2023, p 27) describes the mental concomitant of *wu*

wei:

It describes the state of acting genuinely, unselfconsciously, or, as we might say, “from the heart,” as opposed to doing something self-consciously, because others expect you to, or because you are coerced.

Decreasing Day by Day

In the 48th chapter of the *Daodejing* Laozi proposes *wu wei* as the ideal of human behavior. The following is the Chinese text together with a translation by Wu (2016):

□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□
□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□□□

To pursue learning you increase day by day; to pursue *Dao* you decrease day by day.

Decrease and yet again decrease, till you reach the state of Non-doing.

Do nothing and yet nothing is not done.

The world is often won without busying around;

When busying around occurs, the world cannot be won.

The third line repeats the first line of Chapter 37 as an injunction for human behavior. We must follow the same principle as the *Dao*. Although it is easy to say that the *Dao* can act according to its own self, how exactly human beings can do so is clear. The chapter states that the world can only be won without □ (*shì*, business/work/responsibility).

The *Zhuangzi* provides several examples of acting in accord with *wu wei*, the most famous example being butcher Ding. The story is introduced with the comments:

The flow of my life is always channeled by its own boundaries, but the mind bent on knowledge never is. A flow channeled by its own boundaries is endangered when forced to follow something that is not, and trying to rescue it with the doings of the knowing mind only makes the danger worse. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 21).

King Hui of Liang was very impressed with the skill of his butcher Ding who was able to cut up an ox with remarkable speed and agility. When asked how he had become so adept, Ding replied:

What I love is the Course [*Dao*], something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow. I depend on Heaven's unwrought perforations and strike the larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by how they already are, playing them as they lay. So my knife has never had to cut through the knotted nodes where the warp hits the weave, much less the gnarled joints of bone. A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks. I have been using this same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. For the joints have spaces within them, and the very edge of the blade has no thickness at all. When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast and open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade. That is why my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years. (Ziporyn, 2009, p 22).

One might simply understand that through years of study and

Where there is insufficient good faith,
there is loss of faith.

Relax and spare your words.

When the goal is achieved and the job is done,
everyone says, "We did it."

Laozi favors the ruler who exercises *wu wei*, who allows his ministers to exercise their responsibilities, and who lets his people to be true to their own selves: 自然, *ziran*. Another translation of the final line is: The people all say: "We have done it by ourselves." (Lin, 1977)

These ideas on government were extensively discussed in the *Huainanzi*, a collection of writings collected to assist the Prince of Huainan in the 2nd Century BCE (Ames, 1981). The following is from one of the essays entitled *The Art of Rulership*:

Thus, the ruler in possession of the Way extinguishes thought and dispenses with guessing, and waiting in limpidity and vacuity, he uses words that do not boast and takes action that does not rob subordinates of responsibility. He makes demands of fulfilment according to claims made. He lets them get on with their duties without telling them how; he expects them to fulfil their duties without instructing them. He takes not knowing as his Way and being at a loss as to what to do as his treasure. Acting in this way, each of the various officials has his appointed tasks. (Ames, 1981, p 202)

The Concept of Flow

Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi (1934-2021), a Hungarian-American psychologist, became interested in why people can become so completely involved in difficult, time-consuming and sometimes dangerous activities, that they lose all sense of self and time. He described the experience as one of "flow"

(Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi (in Csíkszentmihályi, 2014, p 240) describe the following subjective characteristics of being “in flow:”

1. Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment
2. Merging of action and awarenessLoss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
3. A sense that one can control one’s actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
4. Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
5. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process.

Athletes during peak performance, musicians during virtuoso recitals, and scientists formulating a new theory all experience this state of flow. Other terms that have been used to describe it are “in the zone” or “being locked in.” The individual in the flow is fully conscious of what is going on, but there is little if any self-consciousness. The game is being played, the music is being made, the theory is being grasped.

This state can only come after one has become an expert. Only when the actions can occur automatically, can consciousness move to a higher level – directing the strategy of the game rather than making individual movements, conveying the meaning rather than playing the notes, finding the underlying pattern rather than simply recording what is happening.

A person in a state of flow is very similar to a person acting according to the principle of *wu wei* (De Pryker, 2011). Both are acting effortlessly and without self-consciousness. In

both action and awareness are fused. There are differences – flow empowers the individual self, whereas *wu wei* leads to a decrease in personal desires as one seeks greater union with the universal self. Nevertheless, the two states are far more similar than different.

In recent years, the concepts of *wu wei* have been used to promote higher achievements in sports (Kee et al. 2021) and to find happiness in normal human behavior through “effortless living” (Gregory, 2018). A major difficulty is in deciding how to attain *wu wei*. One must become highly skilled and then become so completely involved in something that one loses oneself in the endeavor. One can try to be “mindful,” to live in the present, to eliminate personal desires, but such advice is imprecise.

The Flow of Calligraphy

Chapters 37 and 48 of the *Daodejing* – the chapters that are crucial to the concept of *wu wei* are shown below in the calligraphy of the 13th Century Zhao Mengfu in regular script, and of the 14th Century Sheng Mao in clerical script):

為學日益為道日損損之又損以至於無為
無為而無不為矣故取天下者常以無事及
其有事不足以取天下

為學日益為道日損損之又損以至於無為無為而
無不為矣故取天下者常以無事及其事不足以
取天下

道常無為而無不為侯王若能守萬
物將自化而欲作吾將鎮之以無名之樸無
名之樸亦將不欲不欲以靜天下將自正

道常無為而無不為侯王若能守萬物將自化而
欲作吾將鎮之以無名之樸無名之樸亦將不欲不
欲以靜天下將自正

The esthetics of Chinese calligraphy depends on the flow from one character to another. The true calligrapher follows the principle of *wu wei* and writes effortlessly. Chiang Yee (1973, p 117) describes the essential characteristics of Chinese calligraphy:

The beauty of Chinese calligraphy is essentially the beauty of plastic movement, not of designed and motionless shape. A finished piece of it is not a symmetrical arrangement of

conventional shapes, but something like the co-ordinated movements of a skilfully composed dance –impulse, momentum, momentary poise, and the interplay of active forces combining to form a balanced whole.

Envoi

We can conclude with some comments of the poet and Trappist monk Thomas Merton in his introduction to his free translations from the *Zhuangzi* (2004, p 21):

The true character of wu wei is not mere inactivity but perfect action—because it is act without activity. In other words, it is action not carried out independently of Heaven and earth and in conflict with the dynamism of the whole, but in perfect harmony with the whole. It is not mere passivity, but it is action that seems both effortless and spontaneous because performed “rightly,” in perfect accord with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things. It is completely free because there is in it no force and no violence. It is not “conditioned” or “limited” by our own individual needs and desires, or even by our own theories and ideas.

And an excerpt from his translation (p. 69):

If man, born in Tao,
Sinks into the deep shadow
Of non-action
To forget aggression and concern,
He lacks nothing
His life is secure.

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Laozi: the Nature of the Dao

Laozi (老子, *lǎozǐ*, “the old master”) was a legendary character from the 6th Century BCE who put together a collection of philosophical and ethical sayings that has come to be known as the *Dàodéjing* (道德經 simplified: 道德经; or *Tao Te Ching* in the Wade-Giles romanization, “The Book of the Way and of Virtue”) or *Laozi* after the name of the author. The illustration shows a depiction of Laozi from a scroll by Sheng Mao. Following the discovery of early versions of the text written on silk and bamboo slips dating to the 2nd Century BCE (Chan, 2016, 2025), several new translations and annotated editions have been published. This essay presents a close reading of the first chapter.

The First Chapter

The following is the Chinese text of the first chapter (which can be followed at the websites of the Chinese Text Project or Wikibooks) and a recent English translation by Fischer (2023).

道可道也，非恒道也。
名可名也，非恒名也。
無名，萬物之始。
有名，萬物之母。
無有，天地之始。

The way that can be (fully) conveyed is not the abiding Way; a name that can be (fully) descriptive is not an abiding name.

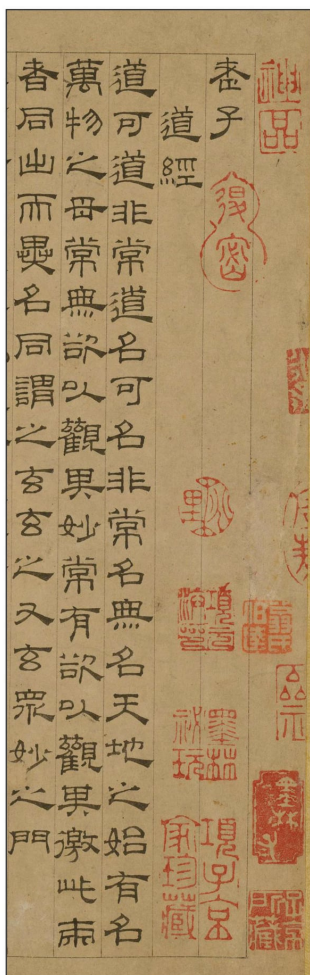
“Formlessness” is the name of the beginning of Heaven and Earth; “form” is the name of the mother of the myriad things.

Thus, if you abide in formlessness, you may thereby observe its wonders; and if you abide in form, you may thereby

observe its manifestations.

These two appear together but have different names. This togetherness, we call it “mysterious” mystery and more mystery: the gateway to many wonders.

The following illustration shows on the left the first chapter in clerical script from a scroll by Sheng Mao (生毛, fl. 14th Century) in the Palace Museum in Beijing, and on the right in regular script from a scroll by Zhao Mengfu (趙孟頫, 1254–1322). The latter includes a portrait of Laozi as a benevolent old gentleman.

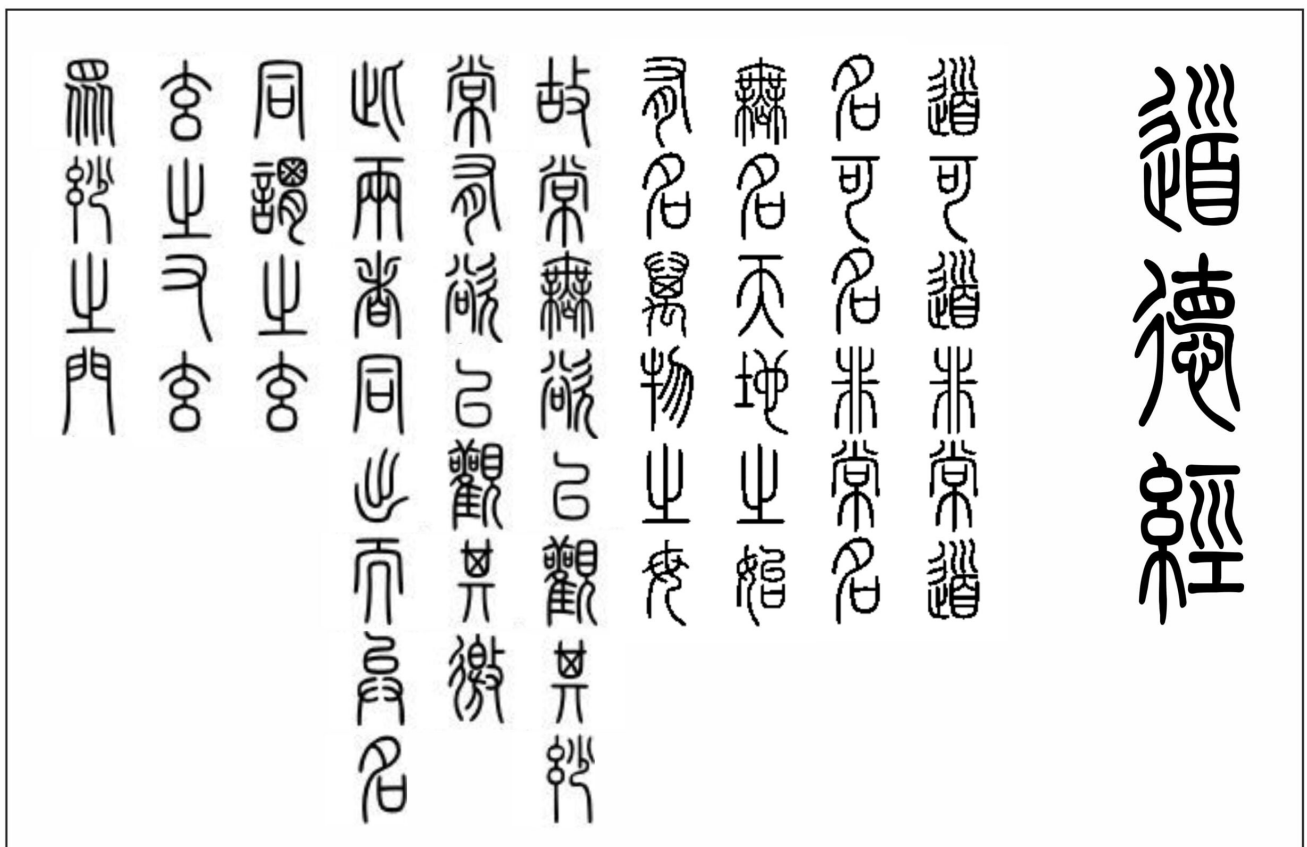


The following is a recitation of the first chapter from the dao-de-jing website, and the text in pinyin romanization:

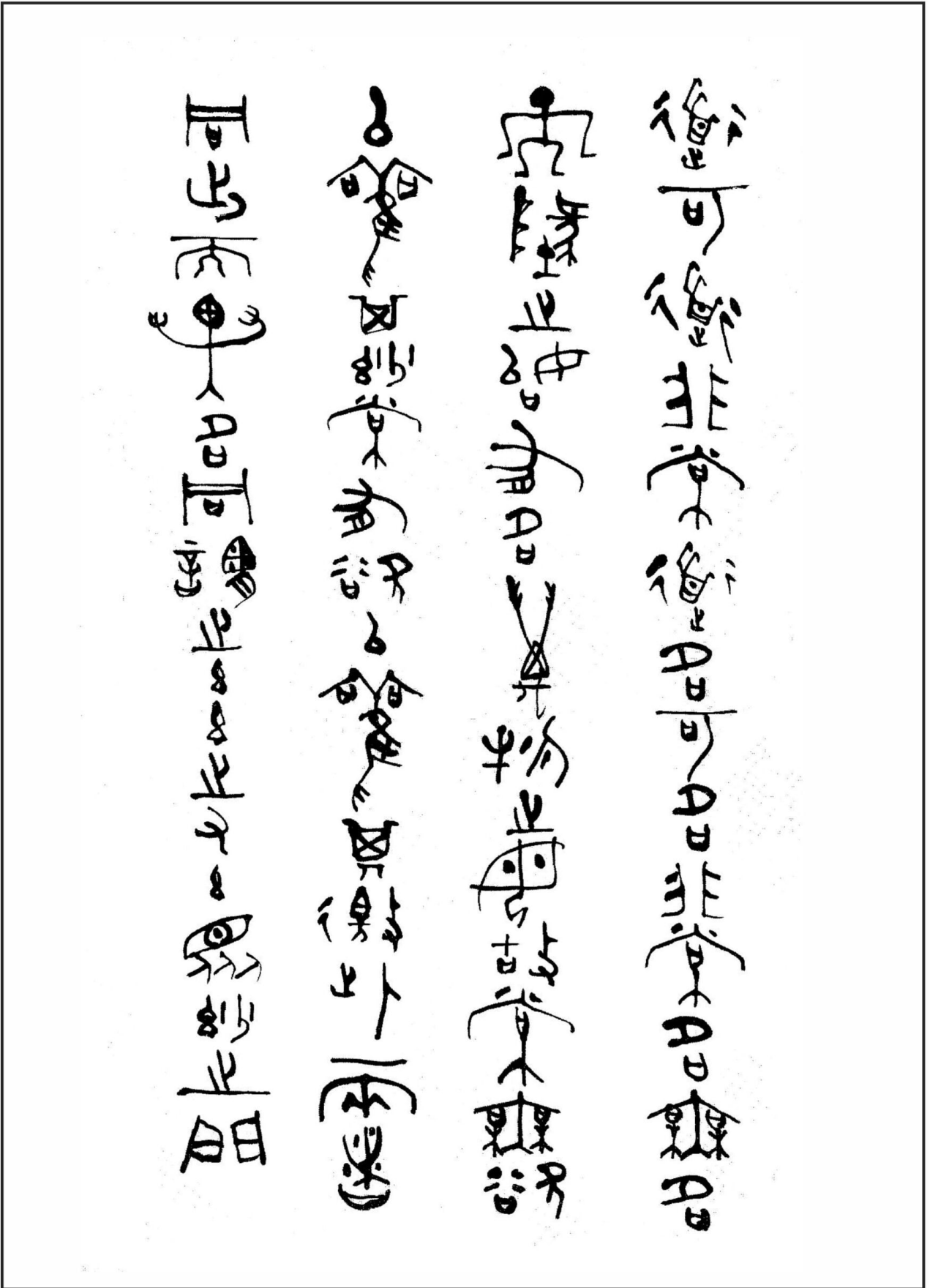
<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/chapt>

dào kě dào fēi cháng dào
míng kě míng fēi cháng míng
wú míng tiān dì zhī shǐ
yǒu míng wàn wù zhī mǔ
gù cháng wú yù yǐ guān qí miào
cháng yǒu yù yǐ guān qí jiào
cǐ liǎng zhě tóng chū ér yì míng
tóng wèi zhī xuán xuán zhī yòu xuán
zhòng miào zhī mén

The original book of sayings was likely handed down orally. The earliest extant versions were written in clerical script. However, it is possible that there might have been versions of the book written in the Small Seal script, such as imagined in the following illustration:



Or even versions written in the earlier Great Seal or Bronze script, which was used at the time that the book was supposedly created. The illustration on the right shows a Great Seal version of Chapter 1 as imagined by Wilson (2010):



This essay will concern itself with the first chapter (or

verse) of Laozi's book. Red Pine quotes De Qing (1546-1623), a Buddhist commentator, on this chapter:

Laozi's philosophy is all here. The remaining 5000 words only expand on this first verse.

The Ineffable Dao

The first section of the chapter concerns the difficulty in expressing the nature of Dao:

道	可	道	非	恆	道
<i>dào</i>	<i>kě</i>	<i>dào</i>	<i>fēi</i>	<i>héng</i>	<i>dào</i>
way, path road speak doctrine	can may	speak	not	constant enduring (常, <i>cháng</i> eternal)	way

名	可	名	非	恆	名
<i>míng</i>	<i>kě</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>fēi</i>	<i>héng</i>	<i>míng</i>
name describe	can	name	not	constant eternal	name

**The way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.**

Much of Daoist philosophy is related to the opposing concepts of *Yīn* (阴 simplified 阴 lunar, feminine, passive, cool) and *Yáng* (阳 simplified 阳 solar, masculine, active, warm). The prototypical examples of Yin and Yan are the shady north side of a hill and its sunny south side. Yin and Yang are the two opposite but interacting forces that underly the harmony of the



universe. They can be represented by the *tàijítú* (太极图, utmost extreme symbol), one version of which is shown on the right. The small contrasting circles within in each half show how the opposites are complementary rather than antagonistic.

The first two lines of the *Daodejing* provides two parallel statements on the *Dao* and on its name. These lines thus concern the actual *Dao* and its abstract name, both of which cannot be fully understood by finite beings. Actual and abstract can be considered as one of the dualities composing Yin and Yang.

The first line uses the character 道 *dao* in three ways: first as a noun describing a way or path, second as a verb in the sense of speaking (telling how to follow a path), and third to express the concept of an eternal *Dao* underlying all things. The second line acts in the same way for the character 名 (name). All languages can use the same word as noun and verb, e.g. “change” in English, but this is more common in Chinese.

In later versions of the *Daodejing* the character 恒 (constant) was replaced by 恒 (with a similar meaning), probably because the former was the name of the fifth emperor of the Han dynasty, Lui Heng (203-157 BCE), and therefore a taboo word.

The *Dao* is eternal or everlasting. However,

While everlasting seems apt, describing the Dao as unchanging does not fit. This is because Laozi's Dao serves as the substance of the cosmos and fundamental source and basis of the things of the world. It is eternally transforming and dynamic. (Chen et al., 2020, p 47)

The following is a description of the *Dao* by *Zhuangzi* (莊子, Master Zhuang, Chuang-tzu in the Wade-Giles romanization) a Daoist philosopher who lived in the 4th Century BCE (Palmer et al. 1996, pp 50-51):

The great Tao has both reality and expression,
but it does nothing and has no form.
It can be passed on, but not received.
It can be obtained, but not seen.
It is rooted in its own self,
existing before Heaven and Earth were born, indeed for
eternity.
It gives divinity to the spirits and to the gods.
It brought to life Heaven and Earth.
It was before the primal air, yet it cannot be called
lofty;
it was below all space and direction, yet it cannot be
called deep.
It comes before either Heaven or Earth, yet it cannot be
called old.

Alan Watts (1975, pp 41-42) commented on the difficulty in describing the *Dao*:

Thus the Tao is the course, the flow, the drift, or the process of nature, and I call it the Watercourse Way because both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu use the flow of water as its principal metaphor. But it is of the essence of their philosophy that the Tao cannot be defined in words and is not an idea or concept. As Chuang-tzu says, "It may be attained but not seen," or, in other words, felt but not conceived, intuited but not categorized, divined but not

explained. In a similar way, air and water cannot be cut or clutched, and their flow ceases when they are enclosed. There is no way of putting a stream in a bucket or the wind in a bag. Verbal description and definition may be compared to the latitudinal and longitudinal nets which we visualize upon the earth and the heavens to define and enclose the positions of mountains and lakes, planets and stars. But earth and heaven are not cut by these imaginary strings. As Wittgenstein [*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922] said, "Laws, like the law of causation, etc., treat of the network and not of what the network describes."

Chapter 32 of the *Daodejing* ends with the statement (translated by Pepper and Wang, 2021):

Dao in this world is like a stream in the valley
Flowing into a river,
into the sea

Being and Nothingness

The second part of the first chapter presents a brief cosmogony

無(无)	名	天	地	之	始
<i>wú</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>tiān</i>	<i>dì</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>shǐ</i>
not nothing nonbeing without empty	name	heaven sky	earth ground	of (genitive marker)	begin start

有	名	萬(万)	物	之	母
<i>yǒu</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>wàn</i>	<i>wù</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>mǔ</i>
have possess exist being	name	myriad 10000	thing object matter	of	mother

These lines have been interpreted in two distinct ways. The first

reads *wu* 无 [non-presence, lacking, non-being] and *you* 有 [presence, having, being] as the subjects of statements, and name (名) as part of the predicate. The alternative reading takes *wuming* 无名 [without name, nameless] and *youming* 有名 [having name] as the subjects of the statements (Chen et al. 2020, pp 48-49).

Thus we could have

**Nothingness is the name for the origin of heaven and earth
Being is the name for the mother of all things.**

or

Nameless is the origin of heaven and earth
Named is the mother of all things.

Since Yin and Yang is basic to Laozi's thinking, I have opted to use the first reading which stresses the dichotomy of being

and non-being. Similar ideas are stated in Chapter 40 of the Daodejing:

□□□□□□□□□□

All the things in the world are generated from *you* □,
you □ is generated from *wu* □

There is a difference between □□ (heaven and earth), which encompasses the whole cosmos, and □□ (myriad things), which refers to the many different things within it. However, this distinction may not be necessary since some early sources used □□ in both lines. (Huang, 2024, p 14)

The dichotomy between *you* and *wu* (Hall & Ames, 1998) reflects a foundational issue in philosophy: the nature of Being. This goes back to some of the very earliest records of human thought. The creation hymn of the Hindu RgVeda (composed around 2000 BCE) states that at the beginning of time there was neither existence nor non-existence. The ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides (5th Century BCE) worried about “What is and what is not.” Shakespeare’s Hamlet considered “To be, or not to be, that is the question” and Jean-Paul Sartre compared *L’être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness).

The following is a comment by *Zhuangzi* (Palmer et al. 1996, p 15) on the origins of the universe:

There is the beginning; there is not as yet any beginning of the beginning; there is not as yet a beginning not to be a beginning of the beginning. There is what is, and there is what is not, and it is not easy to say whether what is not, is not; or whether what is, is.

The Mother of All Things

The fourth line of the first chapter proposes a feminine

origin (道, mother) for all things. This idea is repeated in Chapter 6 which describes 玄牝 (xuán pìn, the mysterious female):

谷神不死
是謂玄牝
玄牝之門
是謂天地之根

The spirit of the valley does not die; it has been called the mysterious female

The gate of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.

It is continuous and uninterrupted; its functioning is inexhaustible.

(my translation)

Chapter 25 mentions the 天母 (tiān xià mǔ, the mother of all under heaven):

有物混成
先天地生
寂兮寥兮
獨立而不改

Which has been translated (Wu, 2016, p 57)

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, born before Heaven and Earth,

Soundless and formless, independent and unchanging.

Revolving endlessly, it may be thought of as the Mother of all under Heaven.

I do not know its name; so I just call it *Dao*, and arbitrarily name it Great

Anderson (2021) has noted how the *Daodejing* fully recognizes the female nature of the *Dao*. Most of the world's religions are androcentric: they ignore the divine feminine. At its beginning Daoism understood that the world is based on interacting male and female forces. And that creation comes

from the female.

From One to Many

The first chapter distinguishes between being and nothingness (*yǒu* 有 and *wu* 无). The 42nd chapter recounts the actual process of creation (translation by Wu, 2016):

道生一，
一生二，
二生三，
三生万物。

Dao gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two;
Two gives birth to Three; Three gives birth to Ten Thousand things.
All things have Yin on their back and Yang in their embrace;
The *Qi* of the two converge and become harmony.

The idea of *Yin* on their back and *Yang* in their embrace refers to how we prefer to sit facing the sun with the shadow at our back.

The basic cosmogeny is that the primordial energy of the universe – *qì* (气) – becomes differentiated into two opposing forces of *yin* and *yang*. These then interact to produce the myriad things of the world that exist in harmony *hé* (和).

The one-two-three progression probably just represents the evolution of the many things in the universe. However, Fischer (2023) also considers the possibility

that the “one, two, three” refer to physical energies (一), Yin-Yang, and harmonized physical energies (二). That is: one, a semblance of a form emerges from formless-ness; two, the physical energy that constitutes that semblance is

influenced by the Yin and Yang states that characterize all physical energies; three, once the semblance has morphed, chrysalis-like, into its final “harmonious” form, it has become a stable entity.

Mystery and Manifestation

The third section of the first chapter has led to several different translations.

故	常	無(无)	欲	以	觀(观)	其	妙
<i>gù</i>	<i>cháng</i>	<i>wú</i>	<i>yù</i>	<i>yǐ</i>	<i>guān</i>	<i>qí</i>	<i>miào</i>
reason cause old	eternal normal usual	without not nothing empty	desire wish want	by in order to	observe see	its	mystery wonder

常	有	欲	以	觀(观)	其	徼
<i>cháng</i>	<i>yǒu</i>	<i>yù</i>	<i>yǐ</i>	<i>guān</i>	<i>qí</i>	<i>jiào</i>
eternal normal usual	have possess exist being	desire wish want	by in order to	observe	its	border edge

Some editions (e.g. Huang, 2024) substitute 眇 (*miǎo*, tiny, minute) for 妙 and 徼 (*jiào*, pursue) for 妙. This leads to the idea of the development from minute origins toward the mature things of the present.

Another difficult is whether the character 欲 acts as a noun meaning “desire” or as an adverb casting the following parts of the sentences in the subjunctive as “may observe.” This would make 欲 and 觀 the subjects of the sentences rather than

modifiers of 无. The Fischer translation quoted at the beginning of this essay follows this approach, as do the versions of Yu (2003), Chen et al. (2020) and Wu (2016).

Translators have more commonly considered that these two sentences compare what happens with or without desire (e.g., Addiss & Lombardo;1993; Leguin & Seaton, 1998; Lin, 2020; Liu, 2024; Loy, 1985; Red Pine, 2004; Wilson 2012). This approach fits with the Buddhist idea that one can find release from suffering by relinquishing desire. As pointed out by Watts (1975, p 96), however, the idea that virtue comes from an absence of desire is paradoxical:

Trying to get rid of desire is, surely, desiring not to desire.

If we follow this approach to the translation, we find that Laozi makes no moral judgement about desire: he just points out the differences between having it or not. Both are possible and both serve a purpose. Relinquishing desire can allow the mind a mystical vision of the origin of everything. Exercising desire allows us to understand the nature of the things of the world:

Free from desire, you can realize the mystery;
Following desire, you can see the manifestations.

However, if the chapter is to be consistent, it is probably best to keep to the duality of *wu* 无(无) and *you* 有:

**Therefore in nothingness you may see the mystery;
In being you may see the manifestations.**

Nevertheless, the different translations are not that distinct. A person can see the mystery by attuning his or her mind to nothingness. One way of doing this might be to relinquish desire.

Yin and Yang

The fourth section of the chapter tells us these two states are just different aspects of the universe, part of the union of interacting opposites that makes up the concept of Yin-Yang:

此	兩	者	同	出	而	異(异)	名
<i>cǐ</i>	<i>liǎng</i>	<i>zhě</i>	<i>tóng</i>	<i>chū</i>	<i>ér</i>	<i>yì</i>	<i>míng</i>
this	two	this	same	exit	yet	different	name
these	different	(referring to things)	identical together	out	but	separate	describe

同	謂(谓)	之	玄	玄	之	又	玄
<i>tóng</i>	<i>wèi</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>xuán</i>	<i>xuán</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>yòu</i>	<i>xuán</i>
same	say	of	mystery	mystery	of	again	mystery
identical together	tell name		black deep			also	

Whether these lines refer to (☐) the concepts of being and nothingness or to the states of desire and non-desire depends on how the previous lines were translated. I have opted for the former.

**These two are but different aspects of the same idea
This is the mystery of mysteries**

The Gateway

The final section of the chapter proclaims the mystery of the *Dao*:

玄	之	又	玄
<i>xuán</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>yòu</i>	<i>xuán</i>
mystery dark	of	again	mystery dark

眾(众)	妙	之	門(門)
<i>zhòng</i>	<i>miào</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>mén</i>
many multitude	mystery wonder marvel	of	gate door entrance

Laozi uses two words for mystery:

□ (*xuán*) is *dark, mysterious, unseen, withdrawn, deep*. But
 □ (*miào*) is *lighter, a wonderful mystery*. (Pepper & Wang,
 2021, p 17)

We can stress the “darkness,” as in Denecke (2010, p 223)

Where the dark is darker than darkness, that’s the Gateway
 of Subtleties.

Or simply stay with “mystery”

Mystery of mystery: the gateway to many wonders

Relations to Western Pantheism

The concept of the Dao has many similarities to Western
 pantheism, particularly to that proposed by Spinoza (Stamatov,
 2019, 2025). Fu (1973, p 390) remarks

Both philosophers think that the ultimate way of freeing
 oneself from human bondage and attaining total emancipation is
 to have an ontological insight (Lao Tzu) into or intellectual

intuition (Spinoza) of the as-it-is-ness of the world and man.

One significant difference is that Spinoza clearly names the principle underlying the universe as God.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was particularly intrigued by the writings of the Domingo Fernandez Navarrete (1610-1689), a Dominican friar who had spent many years in China and had described the principles of Daoism for Western readers (Murray, 2020). Coleridge and his close colleague William Wordsworth (1770-1850) were responsible for initiating the movement of Romanticism in English literature Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798* describes a romantic pantheism that is very similar to the Dao of Laozi:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Envoi

We can conclude by putting together the complete chapter:

**The way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.**

**Nothingness is the name for the origin of heaven and earth
Being is the name for the mother of all things.**

**Therefore through nothingness you can see the mystery;
Through being you can see the manifestations.**

**These two are but different aspects of the same idea
This is the mystery of mysteries**

Mystery of mystery: the gateway to many wonders.

The character is our introduction to the *Dao*. The character 道 is composed of two radicals. In the upper right is a representation of the head 首 (*shǒu*), and in the left and below is a radical denoting walking 辵 (*chuò*). The combination perhaps represents “to go ahead.” As such it depicts the principle that underlies the universe: the way things should and do turn out.

The *Dao* has several meanings:

In some places the character “*dao* 道” refers to a metaphysical entity understood as ultimate true existence. In other places, it seems to refer to a type of rule or principle, often reflected in natural laws or patterns. In yet other locations, *dao* refers to standards, norms or exemplary models for human life. (Chen et al, 2020, p 2),

Fu (1973) describes six dimensions of the *Dao*:

- (i) reality – a metaphysical symbol of things as they are
- (ii) origin – the source of all there is
- (iii) principle – that whereby all things become what they are
- (iv) function – the laws governing the processes of change
- (v) virtue – that which completes the being of each and every individual
- (vi) technique – the way in which people are governed

The *Dao* in metaphysical terms should be considered in relation to time. As time passes, things change. Our science indicates that such changes are not random but follow general rules. Most people also believe that these changes ultimately progress toward something: that the universe has some purpose and is in the process of becoming better. The *Dao* instantiates

these two ideas. It is the overall principle leading the universe toward harmony. Human beings can live their lives best by attuning themselves to this movement.

The final illustration shows on the right □written in an ecstatic cursive script by Al Chung-liang Huang for Alan Watt's book on *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (1975). The fluidity of the calligraphy fits with the idea of water finding its way. On the left is shown the first chapter of the *Daodejing* as created by Lee Chi-Chang for the same book:

道可道非常道 名可名非常名
無名天地之始有名萬物之母故
常無欲以觀其妙常有欲以觀其
微此兩者同出而異名同謂之玄
玄之又玄衆妙之門



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A Way of Writing: The Art of Chinese Calligraphy

Chinese calligraphy (书法, simplified 书法, *shūfǎ*, literally 'way of writing') is the art of writing Chinese characters (汉字, simplified 汉字, *hànzì*) with a brush. Together with poetry and painting, calligraphy is considered one of the "Three Perfections" (三绝 *sānjué*) of Chinese art. This essay reviews the development of calligraphy and provides some examples of its beauty. The illustration shows the calligraphy of the characters of *shūfǎ* in regular and semi-cursive styles.

A Brief History

According to legend, Chinese writing began during the reign of the Yellow Emperor in the 3rd Millennium BCE. The emperor asked Cangjie (仓颉) one of his ministers to create a way to record knowledge. Cangjie was blessed with two pairs of eyes. This allowed him to see the basic shapes and patterns underlying the perceived world.

The first clear evidence for writing in China, however, comes from symbols found on the shoulder blades of oxen and the shells or tortoises. These date to around 1250 BCE. The symbols appear to have been used during divination, and the writing is therefore called **Oracle Script** (甲骨文, *jiǎgǔwén*, "shell and bone script").

Beginning around 1000 BCE, characters were being cast onto or incised into various ritual bronze containers. This type of writing is called **Bronze Script**, (金文, *jīnwén*).

Over the years various styles of writing were used. Legend has it that the First Emperor Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BCE)

established a standard writing style to be used across his newly unified empire: the **Small Seal Script**, 小篆 (*xiǎozhuàn*). Although the histories attribute this to the First Emperor, the script likely developed incrementally rather than by fiat. The script is characterized by thin lines that do not vary in width. The characters tend toward right-left symmetry, and the shapes are curved rather than rectilinear.

The invention of paper (in China in 105 BCE) and the use of writing brushes led to the development of the **Clerical Script** (隸書, simplified 隶书, *lìshū*) by around 100 BCE. The lines vary in thickness as befits the use of a brush. The characters show a tendency for the lines to sweep toward the right. The script is rectilinear rather than curved, and the width of the characters tends to be greater than their height.

Over the following years clerks and scholars modified the clerical script to be lighter and more regular. The characters tended to occupy a square form. The individual strokes making up the different characters became standardized. This development occurred over several centuries beginning in the Second Century CE. The final version of **Regular Script** (楷書, simplified 楷书, *kǎishū*) became established during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE).

While the regular script was being perfected, the needs of writing speed and emotional expression led to the development of **Cursive Script** (草書, simplified 草书, *cǎoshū*, literally “grass writing”). As well as denoting “grass” the character 草 can also mean “careless, hasty, draft.” The characters are no longer created by discrete strokes, but formed with one or several continuous movements of the brush. The characters are curved and tend to



have widths less than their height. The illustration on the right shows 天 written in regular script and in cursive script. Regular script requires 20 separate strokes, but cursive uses only 3. Cursive script is variable from one writer to another.

A more legible version of cursive script soon developed: **Semi-cursive Script** (半草书 simplified 半草, *xíngshū*, “running script”). This script is a compromise between the regular and cursive scripts. Characters are clearly demarcated from each other. Nevertheless, the individual strokes within the character become connected and flow together. There are conventions for depicting various sets of strokes. For example, parallel lines are represented as a z form rather than as = and dots are connected into a line. The style is analog rather than digital.

After the Chinese Communist Revolution, the new government of the People’s Republic of China simplified many of the commonly used highly complex characters. From 1949 to 1986, these changes led to the current **Simplified Characters** (简体字; *jiǎnhuàzì*, literally “simple transformed characters”). In writing this name, the traditional character 天 has been simplified to 天. In the names of the earlier scripts, the traditional 天 was simplified to 天.

The following illustration of the different scripts shows the evolution of the characters 天 *tiān* sky/heaven, 马 *mǎ* horse, 旅 *lǚ* travel/journey, and 正 *zhèng* straight/correct. Of these, only the character for horse underwent modern simplification. The dates show the approximate times when the different scripts began.

	tiān heaven sky	mā horse	lǚ travel journey	zhěng straight correct
Oracle 1250 BCE				
Bronze 1000 BCE				
Small Seal 200 BCE				
Clerical 100 BCE				
Cursive 100 CE				
Semi-Cursive 200 CE				
Regular 250 CE				
Simplified 1960 CE				

More information about the evolution of Chinese characters is available in Chiang (1973), Qui (2000), Shi (2003) and Li (2010)

Thousand Character Classic (千字文 qiānzì wén)

The *Thousand Character Classic* is a long poem that uses a thousand different characters (Paar, 1963; Sturman, accessed 2025). The poem contains 250 lines, each four characters long, arranged in rhyming quatrains to facilitate memorization. Legend has it that in the 6th Century CE, the Emperor Wu commissioned the poem to teach children the rudiments of writing. Since the text was learned by any literate person, the order of its characters could be used to put documents in sequence in the same way that alphabetical order is used in alphabetic languages. Copybooks showing the thousand characters in different writing styles soon became popular. The following example shows the beginning of the poem in a modern version (“The sky was black and the earth was yellow; space and time vast and limitless”):

千字文

qiānzì wén

tiān sky
 dì earth
 xuán black
 huáng yellow
 yǔ space
 zhòu time
 hóng vast
 huāng limitless

Cursive

Regular

Semi-cursive

Clerical

Seal

Bronze

天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒
 天 地 玄 黄 宇 宙 洪 荒

Zhang Xu (张旭, ca 675-750 CE)

Zhang Xu was a court scholar and calligrapher. Although adept in regular script, he became renowned for his works in a wild cursive style (狂草 *kuángcǎo* 'crazy cursive'), often created under the influence of wine (Jagger, 2023). His friend the poet Du Fu considered him one of the *Eight Immortals of the Wine-cup* (Li Bai was another):

张旭草书
 张旭草书

Zhang Xu, the Sage of Cursive Script, after three cups of wine,
Would doff his cap from his head before princes and dukes,
And let his brushstrokes fall on the paper like misty clouds

The most famous work attributed to him is his *Four Ancient Poems* (四古詩) a scroll (29.5 x 195.2 cm) on multi-colored paper now in the Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang (Ouyang, & Wang, 2008 pp 217-223). The first poem by Yu Xin (513–581) is about the beginning of spring and the New Year celebrations:

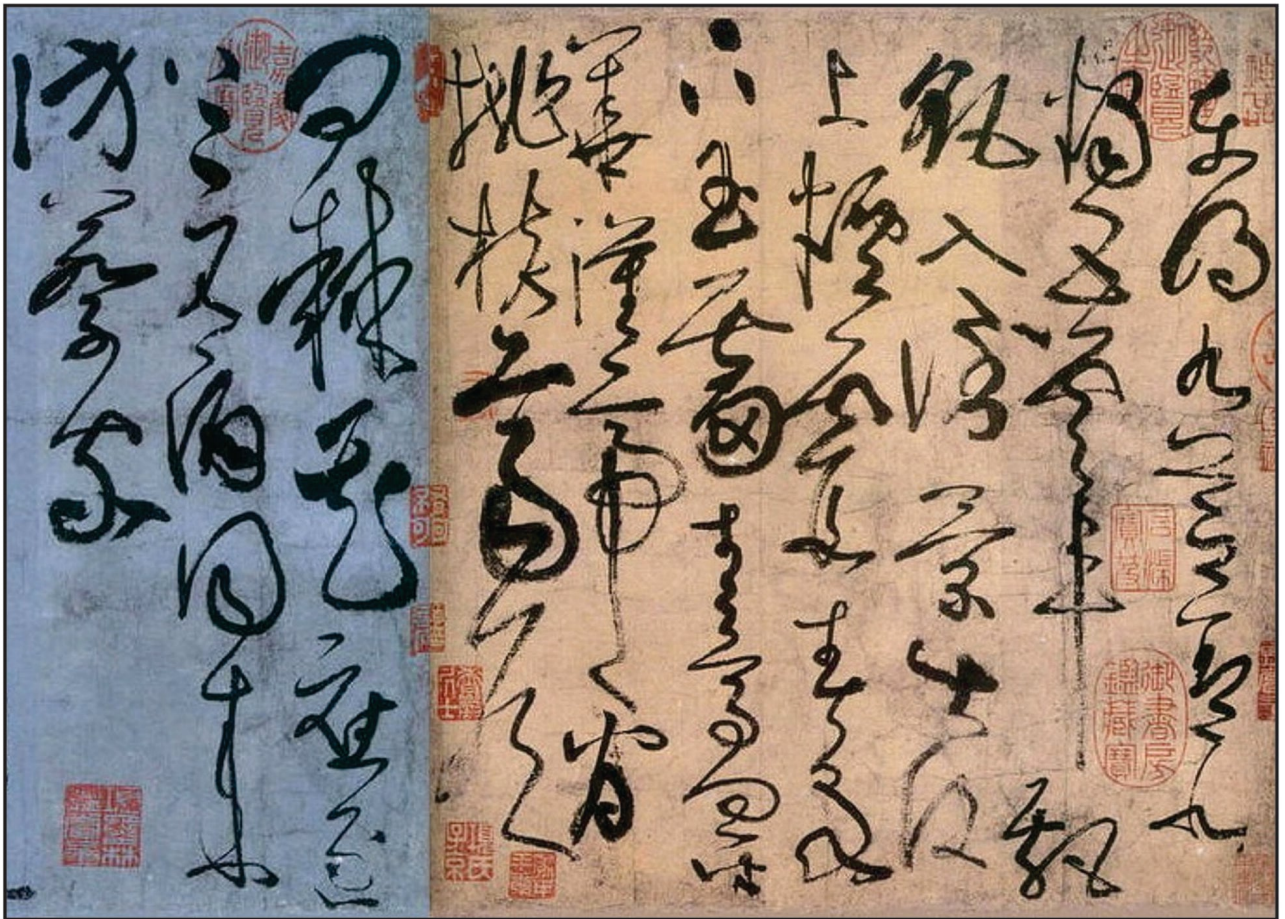
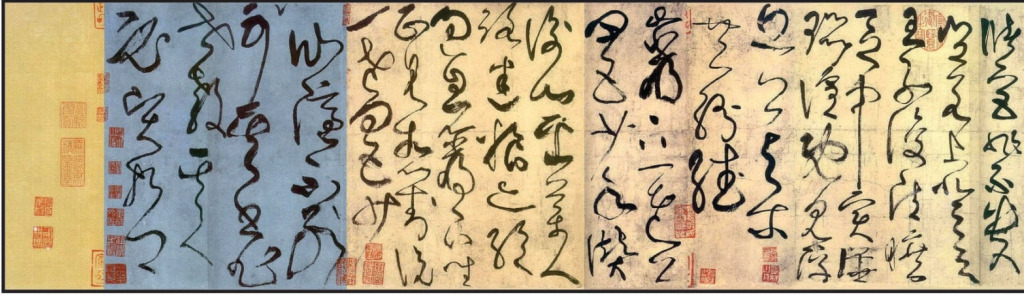
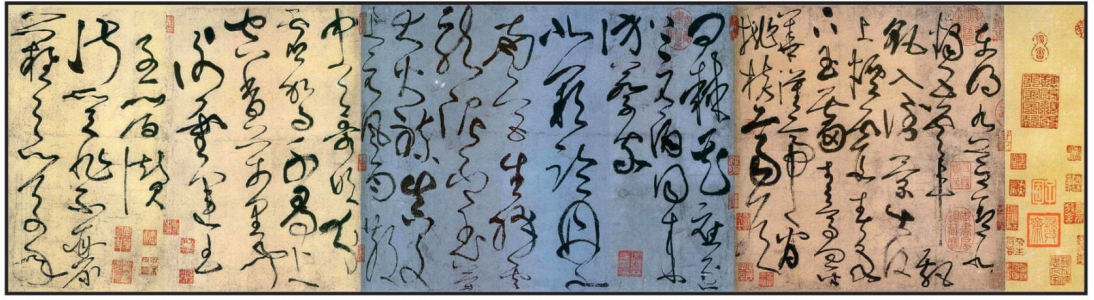
東明九芝蓋，北燭五雲車。
飄颻入倒景，出沒上煙霞。
春泉下玉雷，青鳥向金華。
漢帝看桃核，齊侯問棘花。
應逐上元酒，同來訪蔡家。

The Eastern Light with his nine-petal mushroom canopy
And the Northern Candle with her five-hued cloud-chariot
Descend and drift into the light of sunset
Appearing and disappearing among the clouds.
Spring water flows like rain falling on jade,
And bluebirds fly towards the Jinhua mountain

The Han Emperor examines the peach-tree seeds,
And the Qi Marquis inquires about the jujube blossoms.
We drink the wine of the Lantern Festival
And visit with the Cai family.

The Eastern Light and the Northern Candle are the names of Daoist deities (Luo, 2019, pp 320-321). The ecstatic energy of the Zhang Xu's calligraphy befits the poem's enthusiastic enjoyment of the beginning of spring.

The following illustration shows the complete scroll divided into two parts, and an enlargement of the first poem. To compare the characters, note that the calligraphy moves from top to bottom and from right to left, whereas the text above is written from left to right.

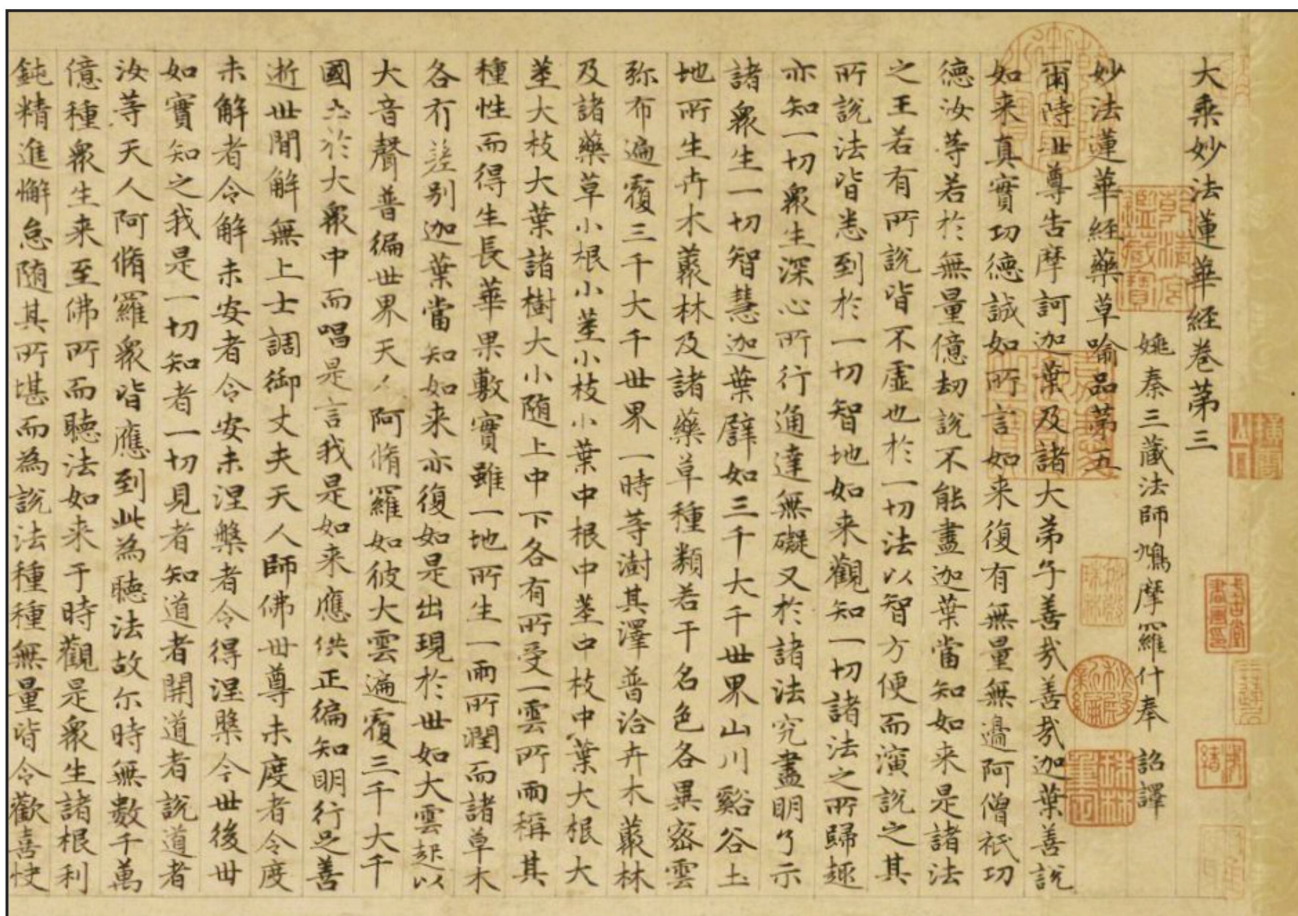


Zhao Mengfu (赵孟頫, 1254–1322)

Zhao Mengfu was a calligrapher and painter at the time when the Mongols conquered China and established the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). Since he worked for the Mongol emperors, his

politics were considered suspect by later historians. However, he is recognized as China's most talented calligrapher (McCausland, 2011). He wrote in all styles, but was an absolute master of the regular script. Copybooks of his calligraphy are still widely used by students wishing to master *kaishu*.

The following illustration shows the beginning of the third scroll in an original set of seven for the *Sutra on the Lotus of the True Dharma* (Chinese: 妙法蓮華經 *miàofǎ liánhuá jīng*), a basic text in Mahayana or "Great Vehicle" (Chinese: 大乘 *dàshèng*) Buddhism. The scroll, written in small regular script, is now in the collection of the technology entrepreneur Jerry Yang (Wang Lianqi in Chang & Knight, 2012, pp 70-103). The scroll is 28 cm wide and 275 cm long.



The beginning of the text (4th line from the right) reads 爾時世尊告摩訶迦葉及諸大弟子善哉善哉迦葉善說如來真實功德誠如所言如來復有無量無邊阿僧祇劫德汝等若於無量億劫說不能盡迦葉當知如來是諸法之王若有所說皆不虛也於一切法以智方便而演說之其所說法皆悉到於一切智地如來觀知一切諸法之所歸趣亦知一切衆生深心所行通達無礙又於諸法究盡明了示諸衆生一切智慧迦葉譬如三千大千世界山川谿谷土地所生卉木叢林及諸藥草種類若干名色各異密雲彌布遍覆三千大千世界一時等樹其澤普洽卉木叢林及諸藥草小根小莖小枝小葉中根中莖中葉大根大莖大枝大葉諸樹大小隨上中下各有所受一雲所潤其種性而得生長華果敷實雖一地所生一雨所潤而諸草木各有差別迦葉當知如來亦復如是出現於世如大雲起以大音聲普徧世界天人阿脩羅如彼大雲適覆三千大千國土於大衆中而唱是言我是如來應供正徧知明行之善逝世間解無上士調御丈夫天人師佛世尊未度者令度未解者令解未安者令安未涅槃者令得涅槃今世後世如實知之我是一切知者一切見者知道者開道者說道者汝等天人阿脩羅衆皆應到此為聽法故爾時無數千萬億種衆生來至佛所而聽法如來于時觀是衆生諸根利鈍精進懈怠隨其所堪而為說法種種無量皆令歡喜使

spoke to Mahakasyapa [one of his disciples] and the other major disciples “Excellent, excellent ...” This is the beginning of Chapter 5 in the Sutra.

Wang Lianqi (Chang & Knight, 2012, pp 98-99) remarks about the calligraphy:

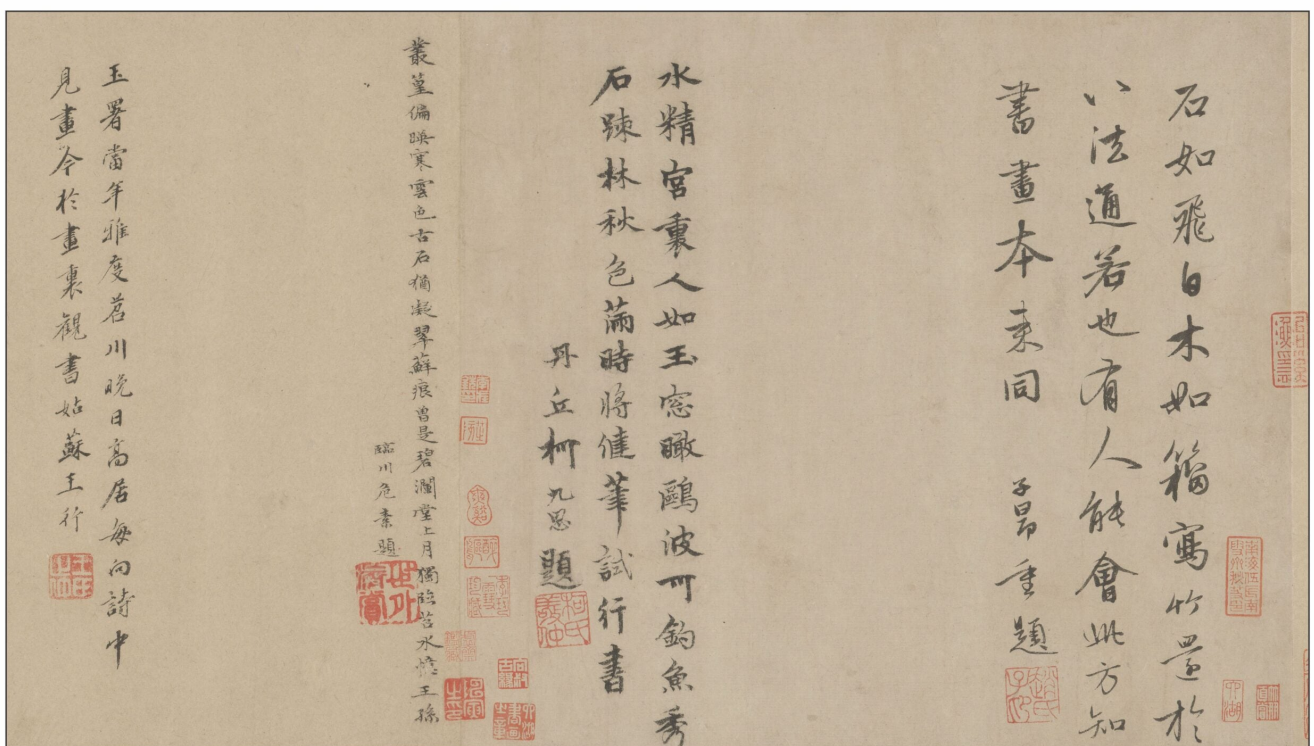
This scroll by Zhao Mengfu has more than ten thousand characters written with seeming effortlessness, and from start to finish they are consistent in that they are steady yet agile at the same time. Unless one has exceptional skill, something like this would be utterly impossible. But what is especially exceptional here—apart from the refined beauty of its dots and strokes, the stability of its composition, the comfortable spacing, and the openness of its forms (all achieved while adhering strictly to the principles of standard script)—is that Zhao is able to impart freshness and vitality to the forms, so that strength emerges amid their graceful charms. As a result, viewers forget the concentration and care that went into their structure and brushwork and see only their naturalness and serenity.

Zhao Mengfu was also a brilliant painter. The following illustration shows his depiction of *Elegant Rocks and Sparse Trees* on a scroll 28 cm wide now in the Palace Museum in Beijing. The painting shows a scene in early spring. Two large rocks are painted in “flying white” (皴féibái) style, with the upper edge of the right rock accentuated, provide the main structure of the painting. “Flying white” is a style of painting or calligraphy that uses a lightly loaded brush to leave lines with white streaks showing through. Between the rocks are two lightly traced leafless trees. At the outer edge of each rock are trees more darkly inscribed. The tree on the right is leafless but the one on the left has new buds on its sinuous branches. Young bamboo shoots grow in clumps on the ground and between the rocks. On the ground are sprouts of new

grass. This is a marvelous portrayal of the transition between winter and spring.



The scroll includes colophons by the painter (right) and three colleagues:



Zhao Mengfu's colophon reads:

石如飛白木如籀、寫竹還於八法通。
若也有人能會此、方知書畫本來同。

The rocks are like “flying-white,” the trees like “seal script.”

Depicting the bamboo draws upon the “eight clerical” method.

If indeed there are people that can make these associations,

They will understand that calligraphy and painting have the same root.

The “eight” style of clerical script was right-left symmetrical with long sweeping strokes as in the character 八 *bā* for eight.

The painting and poem provide a fine example of the “Three Perfections” (三絕 *sānjué*): the combination of poetry painting and calligraphy.

Ni Zan (倪瓚 simplified 倪, 1301–1374)

Ni Zan was another gifted painter and calligrapher who worked during the Yuan Dynasty. One of his most famous paintings, now in the Shanghai Museum has come to be known as *The Six Gentleman* (1345):

遠望雲山隔秋水近看古木

擁波掩屋然相對六君子

正直特立無偏頗大癡贊

雲林畫

江頭碧樹動秋風江

上青山接遠空若向

波心添釣艇還須且

我作漁翁

松木居士

風起雲林象對

為秋色仙人格不

來空山倚晴碧

激三趙觀

黃公別上已多年如

見雲林畫裏傳二老

風流遠鶴語悠長

卷對江天吳興錢雲



廬山甫每見韓宋作畫至五年四月八日
泊舟丹河之上而山甫筆意此紙苦微
畫時已憶甚二得免以覆
此紙老師見之必大嘆也倪



painting. This likened the foreground trees to six gentlemen:

□□□□□□,
□□□□□□,
□□□□□□,
□□□□□□

In the distance cloudy mountains are separated by the autumn river.

Close by, old trees huddle along the sloping shore,
Calmly facing one another, the Six Gentlemen,
Who stand upright, outstanding, without being lopsided.

Shen Zhou (□□, 1427–1509)

Shen Zhou was a painter, poet and calligrapher during the early Ming Dynasty. His painting *Poet on a Mountaintop* (□□□□, 39 by 60 cm), currently held by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, is probably the most famous example of the three perfections. The painting shows the poet reaching the peak of a mountain and looking out over the mist in the valley below. He speaks a poem, the words of which are written on the sky.



A transcription and translation of the poem follow

□□□□□□□□
 □□□□□□□□
 □□□□□□□□
 □□□□□□□□

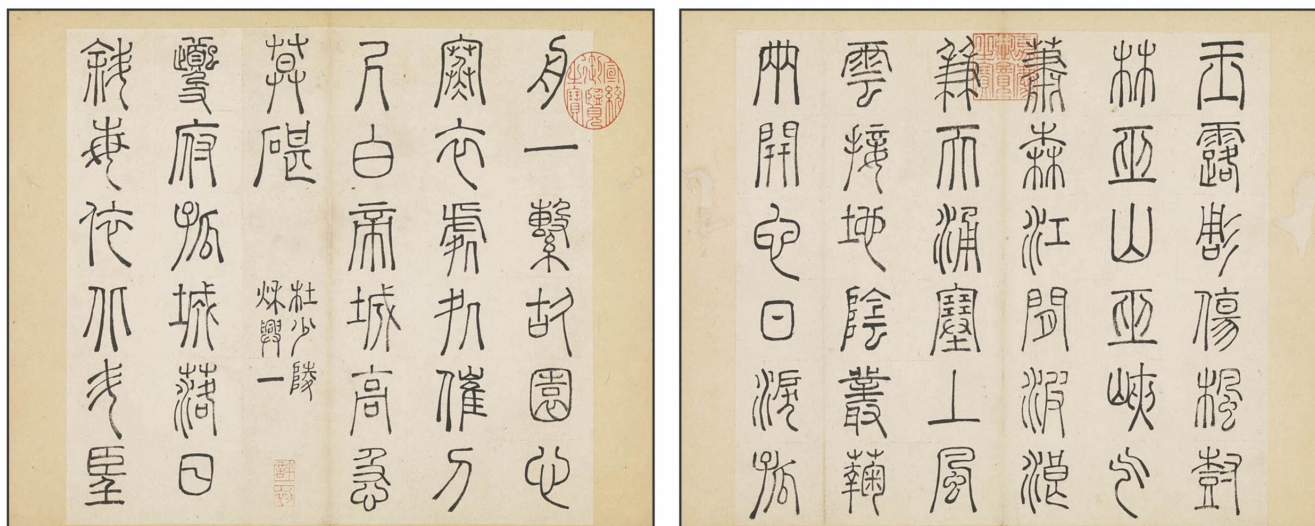
White clouds sash-like wrap round the waists of mountains,
 The rock terrace soars into space over a distant narrow path.

Leaning on a bramble staff, I gaze far and free;
 I will reply to the sound of the mountain stream with my flute.

Xu Chu (沈月, fl 16th Century CE)

Xu Chu created an album of the *Autumn Meditations* of the Tang poet Du Fu (712-770 CE) using seal script. The illustration

shows the first two leaves of the album, now in the Palace Museum in Beijing. The first poem of the sequence (beginning on the right leaf and extending through much of the second) transcribes the first meditation:



The text of the poem with a translation by Mark Alexander follows:

玉露凋伤枫树林	Jade dew withers and wounds the groves of maple trees,
巫山巫峡气萧森	On Wu mountain, in Wu gorge, the air is dull and drear
江间波浪兼天涌	On the river surging waves rise to meet the sky,
塞上风云接地阴	Above the pass wind and cloud join the earth with darkness
丛菊两开他日泪	Chrysanthemum bushes open twice, weeping for their days
孤舟一系故园心	A lonely boat, a single line, my heart is full of home
寒衣处处催刀尺	Winter clothes everywhere are urgently cut and measured
白帝城高急暮砧	Baidicheng above, the evening's driven by beating on stones

Wu Gorge is the second of the Three Gorges on the Yangtze River. Chrysanthemums are short-day flowers that can bloom twice a year, once in the spring and a second time in autumn. Baidicheng (White Emperor City) is a hill-top fortress between Wu Gorge and the upstream Qutang Gorge. During the Tang

Dynasty heavy cloth was prepared for winter clothes by being beaten on stone.

Zhu Da (朱大, 1626-1705)

Zhu Da, also known by his pen name Bada Shanren (八大山人) came from an aristocratic family who served in the Ming Court. When the Manchus took over the capital and established the Qing Dynasty in 1644, Bada found refuge in a Chan Buddhist temple and became a monk. Over the years he rose to become an abbot. However, he returned to secular life in 1680, producing numerous works of calligraphy and painting in his later years (Chang et al., 2003).

The following is *Falling Flower* (落花 luòhuā) from an album of paintings created in 1692. The cursive calligraphy gives a sense of gentle falling and the signature in the center of the page appears like another blossom.



In 1699 Bada Shanren transcribed a poem by Geng Wei (fl 8th Century) in memory of Wang Wei (701-761 CE) using a semi-cursive script that was both beautiful and restrained. The poem was dear to Bada, who shared Wang Wei's Buddhist philosophy and love of nature.

The following provides a transcription of the calligraphy and translation of the poem:

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Blending Ruism, Moism, and the Holy Religion,
By the cloudy spring, he built his former hut;
But Meng Wall Cove is desolate now and still,
And Wheel Rim Creek just winds naturally away.
The inner teachings dissolved his many cares,
The western garden transformed his old abode;
In the deep chamber, spring bamboo grows old,
In the thin rain, the night bell seldom tolls.
His dusty tracks remain in the golden earth,
His writings are kept beside the Stone Canal;
Still I do not know which of his companions,
Has inherited the books of this Cai Yong!

“Ruism” is the philosophy of Confucius (5th and 6th Centuries BCE); “Moism” refers to the teachings of Mozi (3rd Century BCE) who promoted asceticism and self-restraint; and the “Holy Religion” refers to Buddhism. Meng Wall Cove is located near Wang Wei’s country estate and was described in the set of poems entitled *Wangchuan Ji* (Wheel River Poems). The Stone Canal is the name of one of the imperial libraries. Cai Yong was a famous scholar and politician from the 2nd Century CE.

Bada Shanren’s calligraphy expresses the meaning and emotion of the text. The character 深, “deep” (fifth from top in the third column from left) extends its tail into the depths of sadness.

Deng Shiru (□□□, simplified: □□□ 1743-1805)

Deng Shiru became adept in calligraphy in the style of seal script and clerical script. The following illustration below shows a pair of homiletic sayings in clerical script on hanging scrolls each 1.7 meters high:

心
化
良
田
百
世
耕
之
不
盡

嘉慶甲子秋中節書於任城寓齋

書
為
至
寶
一
生
用
則
有
餘

古曉聲石

The calligraphy is powerful and serious (Ho Chuan-hsing in Chang and Knight, 2012). The strokes are broad and the characters wider than they are high. The beginning and end of each stroke are cleanly demarcated: the brush is turned to “conceal the tip.” The sayings read:

□□□□□□□□

The heart is a good field – plow it for a hundred generations and it’s never depleted.

□□□□□□□□

Goodness is a perfect treasure – use it for a lifetime and some will still be left over

Epilogue

Chinese calligraphy has continued through the years as an artform that appeals to both the eye and the mind. The writing of Chinese characters with a brush became popular throughout East Asia as a way of combining art and meditation (Tanahashi, 2016). Modern artists still produce calligraphy. They use new forms but still maintain links to past masters.

Wang Jiqian (王季千, Westernized name C. C. Wang, 1907-2003) was both a major collector of Chinese art and calligraphy and an artist. The illustration shows his calligraphy of a *Poem by Du Fu*:



The calligraphy presents a line from a poem by Du Fu (712-770 CE):

□□□□□□

Without belittling the moderns, I love the ancients

The full poem can be found in Owen (2016, Vol III p 114-115).

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Wang Wei: the Wheel River Poems

Wang Wei (王维; traditional 王維; pinyin, *Wáng Wéi*; 699–761) was a Chinese musician, painter, and poet during the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907). He was a devout Buddhist and used the courtesy name Wang Weimojie in homage to the early Buddhist teacher and bodhisattva *Vimalakirti* (Chinese name 維摩詰 *Wéimójí*). *Vimalakirti* taught the practice of *sunyata* (Sanskrit, emptiness; Chinese 空 *Kōng xìng*), a meditative state wherein the mind is emptied of the self and becomes one with the universe. After a tumultuous life, Wang Wei retired to his villa on the Wang River about 40 km southeast of the imperial

capital Chang'an (present day Xi'an). There he composed the *Wǎngchūān jí* (-wheel River Collection): a set of twenty quatrains describing various locations near his villa. Each quatrain was accompanied by a reply from his protégé Pei Di (裴迪 pinyin, *Péi Dí*, 714-?).

A Poet of the High Tang

Wang Wei was born to an aristocratic family in Shanxi province in northeast China. He was a precocious child and quickly showed his talents for music and painting. By 721 he had passed his imperial exams and was appointed as Court Musician in Chang'an. Over the following years he continued with his music and painting, while serving in various official positions in the imperial court. In 755, the general *An Lushan* instigated a revolt against the emperor. Within a year the rebels advanced on Chang'an. The emperor and his court fled over the mountains to Sichuan in the West, but Wang Wei was captured and taken to the rebel capital of Luoyang some 350 km to the East. The imperial forces regrouped and defeated the rebels in 757, releasing Wang Wei. However, since Wang Wei had been forced to serve in the rebel government, he was indicted for treason. After finally being exonerated, Wang Wei retired to his villa on the Wang River, where he wrote the poems in the *Wangchuan Ji* (Wheel River Collection). Wang Wei died in 761. Followers of *An Lushan* continued fighting against the empire until 763.

Although plagued by intense civil disorder, these times were remarkable for the glorious poetry that was written. Li Bai (701-762), Du Fu (712-770) and Wang Wei were the three greatest poets of a period that became known as the "High Tang" (Owen, 1981). Each of these poets had their own view of life:

Wang Wei became known as the Poet-Buddha, Li Bai as the Poet-Immortal, and Du Fu as the Poet-Sage, respectively

symbolizing Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian approaches in their poems. Accordingly, Wang Wei was characterized as the contemplative, Li Bai as the visionary, and Du Fu as the social conscience of the age. (Cartelli, 2019).

However, Cartelli notes that these differences are far from categorical. The religious threads of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism are fully intertwined both in Chinese society (Ching, 1993; Hinton, 2020) and in the poetry of these three writers.

Wang Wei's nature poetry simply describes his experience of the world with little if any interpretation or metaphorical explanation:

Wang's quatrains often ended in enigmatic understatement – a statement, a question, or an image that was so simple or seemed so incomplete that the reader was compelled to look beneath it for the importance. (Owen, 1981, p 38)

Owen (1981, p 45) describes Wang Wei's state of mind as "unselfconsciousness" and relates it to the Buddhist idea of *sunyata* (emptiness). Only if the mind is emptied can one become aware of truth. And truth perhaps differs between East and West:

in contrast to the West, in the Chinese tradition truth usually lay not behind a mask of orphic complexity but rather behind a mask of guileless simplicity. To draw on this philosophical tradition was to alter entirely the way in which poetry was read: what was said was no longer necessarily all that was meant, and the surface mood might not be the real mood. Particularly in the *Wang Stream Collection*, we find poems that are visually complete but intellectually incomplete, which tease the reader to decipher some hidden truth. (Owen, 1981, p 39)

Yip (1972, p xi) remarks

In a mode of consciousness in which there is no disturbance of intellectual impositions, no hurry-scurry to establish causal relations, each object or moment is given the fullest chance to emerge in spotlighting distinctiveness very much the way everything appears keenly fresh in the orbit of a child's vision.

Paintings

Although Wang Wei was a renowned painter, none of his paintings have survived to the present day. Nevertheless, later artists made many copies and interpretations of his work. One of his most famous paintings was a scroll depicting the various locations mentioned in the *Wangchuan Ji*. This essay will include images from three such copies: one by Guo Zhongshu (929-279) now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, a copy of the Zhongshu scroll in The Freer Gallery in Washington, and a much later scroll by Wang Yuanqi, dated 1711, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. An intriguing website provides images of a scroll together with translations of the *Wangchun Ji* poems.

Wheel River Poems

The *Wǎngchuān jí* (望川集) is a collection of poems containing 20 quatrains (四句 *juéjù*, literal meaning "cut-off lines") by Wang Wei and 20 replies by his young protégé Pei Di. Each line is composed of 5 characters in a format is known as 五言 (Wǔyán). The poems describe various locations near Wang Wei's villa on the Wang River. The name of the river (望 *Wǎng*, a different character from that in the poet's name) specifically refers to the rim (felloes or felly) of a wagon wheel, and Hinton (2006) translates the title "Wheel-Rim River." The river was so named

because of its small eddies and whirlpools which resembled wheels, or because of the spot at the mouth of the river where the current flowed around an island like a wheel

(Wagner, 1981, p 88).

Many authors have translated Wang Wei's contributions to the collection (e.g., Yu, 1980; Barnstone et al., 1991; Hinton, 2020), but only a few include the replies of Pei Di (Yip, 1972, Powell, 2019; Rouzer & Nugent, 2020). The general evaluation has been that Pei Di's poems were inferior to those Wang Wei. However, Pei Di was a talented young scholar, and a close reading of the poems shows that the pairing of the poems enhances their overall effect (Warner, 2005). This essay will consider five of the poems in the collection. For consistency and because of the sensitivity and precision of the translations, the English versions will all be from *Hiding the Universe* by Wai-lim Yip (1972). The poems will be presented with Wang Wei on the left and Pei Di on the right. The translations will then be followed by the Chinese text, with Wang Wei above and Pei Di below.

Deer Park

Empty mountain: no man is seen, out, cold mountain in view.	Day in, day
But voices of men are heard.	A
wayfarer comes and goes alone;	
Sun's reflection reaches into the woods	Knows no
things of the pine-forests	
And shines upon the green moss.	But tracks
of buck and doe.	

鹿 lù deer	柴 chái fence			
空 kōng empty	山 shān mountain	不 bù not	見 jiàn see	人 rén person
但 dàn but/only	聞 wén listen	人 rén person	語 yǔ speech	響 xiǎng sound
返 fǎn return	景 jǐng sunlight	入 rù enter	深 shēn deep	林 lín forest
復 fù return	照 zhào shine	青 qīng green	苔 tái moss	上 shàng up/upon
日 rì sun/day	夕 xī night	見 jiàn see	寒 hán cold	山 shān mountain
便 biàn ordinary	為 wéi do/make	獨 dú alone	往 wǎng towards	客 kè visitor
不 bù not	知 zhī know	深 shēn deep	林 lín forest	事 shì thing
但 dàn but/only	有 yǒu exist	麋 jūn deer	麋 jiā stag	跡 jì footprint

The following is a reading of this poem from a website associated with Zong-qi Cai's book on *How to Read Chinese Poetry in Context* (2018).

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ww-deer-park.mp3>

The difficulty of translating this poem into English was the subject of Eliot Weinberger's book *Seventeen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (1987). Chinese characters often have many meanings, and can be translated as nouns, verbs or adjectives, depending on the context. One difficulty with Wang Wei is his lack of a personal viewpoint. The ending of the first line is therefore better translated "no one is seen" rather than "I see no one."

The presence of a deer park on Wang Wei's estate was probably related to Buddhist teachings. Gautama gave his first sermon, wherein he delineated the four noble truths and the eightfold way, at a deer park in Sarnath in Northern India. The Chinese character 柴 *chái* now means "firewood," although it likely once also meant a "fence," such as that enclosing a park.

The opening word of the poem 空, *kōng* means empty or emptiness. Wang Wei is clearly alluding to the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* (Yang, 2001; Stepien, 2014).

The characters 夕夕 translated as "returning or reflected sunlight" might simply mean the light from the setting sun.

The complementary poem by Pei Di makes Wang Wei's feeling of emptiness extend over time as well as space. He also comments on the difference between the human wayfarer who knows nothing of the way of the forest, and the deer who are naturally attuned to its secrets.

The following illustration of the Deer Park is from the Zhongshu scroll in Tapei:



Lakeside Pavilion

Light barge to welcome guests.
Freely from the lake.
Before windows, toasting bottles of wine.
Hibiscus blooms on all four sides.

The window is brimming with ripples.
The moon, by itself, lingers, back and forth.
At the gorge, bursts of monkey cries.
Wind sends them into the room.

臨 湖 亭
lín overlook hú lake tíng pavilion

輕 舸 迎 上客
qīng light gě boat/barge yíng welcome shàng high/above kè guest
悠 悠 湖 上 來
yōu distant yōu distant hú lake shàng high/above lái come
當 軒 對 尊 酒
dāng face xuān window duì deal with zūn pot jiǔ wine
四 面 芙蓉 開
sì four miàn face/aspect fúróng hibiscus kāi bloom/open

當 軒 彌 滉 漾
dāng face xuān window mí fill huàng deep yàng ripple
孤 月 正 徘徊 徊
gū alone yuè moon zhèng up(right) páihuái walk back and forth
谷 口 猿 聲 發
gǔ gorge kǒu mouth yuán monkey shēng voice fā emit
風 傳 入 戶 來
fēng wind chuán deliver rù enter hù door lái come



The Chinese hibiscus (*Hibiscus x rosa sinensis*) is the most common variant of this showy flower. In China it often symbolizes success. The poem by Pei Di seems to occur after the party with the invited guests. The lake is now windswept, and the lonely cries of monkeys echo through the night.

The following illustration shows the lakeside pavilion in the Wang Yuanqi scroll:



Lake Yi

Flute music rides beyond water's reach.
lake has no limits.

Vast emptiness:

Sun at dusk: to see my lord off.
glimmer: sky's hue merges.

Blue

On the lake, merely turning my head:
with a long whistle:

Moor the boat

Mountain's green-curling, white clouds.
clear winds come.

From four sides

欵 湖
yī Yi hú lake

吹	簫	凌	極	浦
chuī blow/play	xiāo flute	líng cross	jí end/furthest	pǔ shore
日	暮	送	夫	君
rì sun/day	mù sunset	sòng see off	fū man	jūn lord
湖	上	一	迴	首
hú lake	shàng above	yī one/alone	huí rotate/turn	shǒu head
山	青	卷	白	雲
shān mountain	qīng blue/green	juǎn scroll/curve	bái white	yún cloud

空	闊	湖	水	廣
kōng empty	kuò wide	hú lake	shuǐ water	guǎng vast
青	熒	天	色	同
qīng blue/green	yíng shine	tiān sky/heaven	sè color	tóng same
艤	舟	一	長	嘯
yī moor (boat)	zhōu boat	yī one/alone	cháng long	xiào whistle
四	面	來	清	風
sì four	miàn face/aspect	lái come/arrive	qīng clear/pure	fēng wind

The Chinese character 青 *qīng* can describe colors ranging from light green to deep blue. Many languages do not discriminate between green and blue, and the term “grue” has been used for this range of colors (Bogushevsaya, 2015). One then takes the color from the context: in this pair of poems, one assumes that Wang Wei’s mountain is green and that Pei Di’s sky is blue. Modern Chinese has evolved the terms 藍 *lán* for blue and 綠 *lǜ* for green, but the older word is still used. In following illustration of Lake Yi from Wang Yuanqi’s scroll, the colors blue and green shade into each other. Pei Di mentions in his poem how the colors of the sky and the lake merge.



Wang Wei's poem is set in peaceful weather. By the time of Pei Di's quatrain, a blustery wind has risen. The sound of the flute has changed to the more strident whistle.

Bamboo Grove

I sit alone among dark bamboos,	Have been to
the Bamboo Grove,	
Strum the lute and unloose my voice.	Daily to get
close to the Way.	
Grove so deep, no one knows.	In and out,
only mountain birds.	
The moon comes to shine upon me.	Deep solitude: no
men of the world.	

竹 zhú bamboo	里 lǐ within	館 guǎn guesthouse		
獨 dú alone	坐 zuò sit	幽 yōu dark	篁 huáng bamboo grove	裏 lǐ within
彈 tán play (music)	琴 qín zither	復 fù again/return	長 zhǎng increase	嘯 xiào hum
深 shēn deep	林 lín forest	人 rén person	不 bù not	知 zhī know
明 míng bright	月 yuè moon	來 lái come	相 xiàng appear	照 zhào shine
來 lái come	過 guò pass by	竹 zhú bamboo	里 lǐ within	館 guǎn guesthouse
日 rì day/sun	與 yǔ approach	道 dào way/path	相 xiàng appear	親 qīn close
出 chū exit	入 rù enter	惟 wéi but/only	山 shān mountain	鳥 niǎo bird
幽 yōu quiet	深 shēn deep	無 wú not (hing)	世 shì world	人 rén person

The Chinese *guqin* is a plucked seven-stringed instrument favored by Chinese scholars. The illustration below shows an example (c 1700) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The upper board of *wutong* wood represents heaven, and the bottom board of *zi* wood earth. The 13 studs (*hui*) indicate positions for fingering. The strings are made of twisted silk.

The following is a reading of the Wang Wei poem from Librivox:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ww-bamboo-grove.mp3>

Yu (1980, p 191) points out that the *xiào* referred to in the second line was

a combination of Taoist breathing techniques and whistling

which was said to express feelings and was associated with harmonizing with nature and achieving immortality; the word has also been translated as “humming,” “singing,” and “crooning.” The tradition of the Xiao began during the Jin dynasty and has always been linked with Taoism. Its most famous practitioner was Sun Deng, a friend of the poet Ruan Jiu whose Xiao was said to sound like a phoenix.

The ideas of solitude and emptiness in the Wang Wei quatrain are extended in Pei Di’s reply. He talks specifically about the *Dao* (道) commonly translated as “The Way” – the underlying principle of the universe considered in Taoism. The character 无 *wu*, a negative term (“not” or “no”), is used in Taoism and Chan Buddhism to denote “nonbeing” or “absence” (Hinton, 2020, pp 49-55). Thus, the ending of Pei Di’s poem might be describing the state of mind wherein the world and its people have become nothing.

The following illustration shows the lodge in the bamboo grove as represented in the Freer gallery scroll:



Poetry, calligraphy and painting – the “three perfections” – are often combined in Chinese art (Sullivan 1974). The following illustration shows Wang Wei’s poem about the Bamboo Grove as written by different calligraphers. On the right is regular script from Yip’s *Hiding the Universe*: this presents the quatrains of both Wang Wei and Pei Di. The other examples show only Wang Wei’s contribution. From right to left: calligraphy from the *Wangchuan Ji* scroll of Guo Zhongshu; from the scroll of Wang Yuanqi; modern cursive calligraphy by the Japanese artist Nakamura Furetsu from around 1915.

竹里館

獨坐幽篁裏
彈琴復長嘯
深林人不知
明月來相照

同詠

裴迪

來過竹里館
日與道相親
出入惟山鳥
幽深無世人

獨坐幽篁裏
彈琴復長嘯
深林人不知
明月來相照

竹里館

獨坐幽篁裏
彈琴復長嘯
深林人不知
明月來相照

獨坐幽篁裏
彈琴復長嘯
深林人不知
明月來相照

不杪書

Pepper Orchard

Cassia wine to welcome the Lord's child.
Sweet pollia to give to the Beauty.
Nectar of pepper for libation at a jewelled mat.
About to descend, Lord of Clouds.

Scarlet thorns catch one's clothes.
Sweet scent stays with transient guests.
Happily, they are good for spice-cooking.
Please bend down and pick a few.

椒 園
jiāo pepper yuán orchard

桂 尊 迎 帝 子
guì cassia zūn pot/cup yíng welcome dì lord/god zǐ child
杜 若 贈 佳 人
dù pollia ruò pollia zèng present jiā beautiful rén person
椒 漿 尊 瑤 席
jiāo pepper jiāng juice zūn pot/cup yáo jade xí seat
欲 下 雲 中 君
yù desire xià descend yún cloud zhōng center jūn lord

丹 刺 胃 人 衣
dān red cì thorn juàn tangle rén person yī clothes
芳 香 留 過 客
fāng fragrant xiāng fragrant liú remain guò pass kè visitor
幸 堪 調 鼎 用
xìng lucky kān be able to tiáo cook/mix dǐng cauldron yòng use/eat
願 君 垂 採 摘
yuàn desire jūn lord chuí bend cǎi pick zhāi select

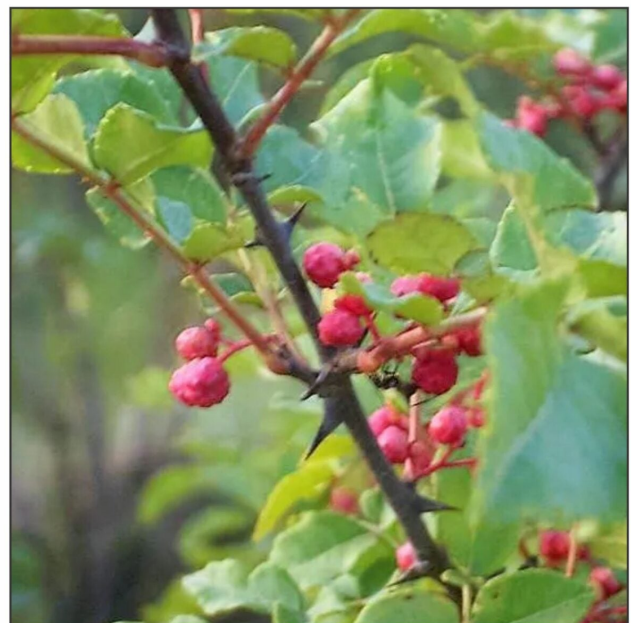
Wang Wei's quatrain alludes to some ancient Chinese songs used to invoke the appearance of the Gods. Several of these songs were included in the *Juejie* ("Nine Songs") which were anthologized in the collection called *Chuci* ("Songs of the South," or "Songs of Chu"). The following is from the first of these songs (as translated by Hawkes and Liu, 1959, p 36):

Song to the Great Lord of the Eastern World

On a lucky day with an auspicious name.
Reverently we come to delight the Lord on High
We grasp the long sword's haft of jade.
And our girdle pendants clash and chime
Jade weights fasten the god's jewelled mat.

Now take the rich and fragrant flower offerings
The meats cooked in melilotus, served on orchid
mats,
And libations of cinnamon wine and pepper sauces!
Flourish the drumsticks and beat all the drums!

Many different plants are used as gifts and food for the Gods. *Cinnamomum cassia* is Chinese cinnamon, the bark of which is used as a spice. *Pollia japonica* is a Chinese flowering plant that gives a strikingly beautiful (but inedible) iridescent purple fruit. Sichuan peppers are used to add spice to Chinese dishes. *Melilotus* or sweet clover is a herb with an aroma like vanilla. The following illustration shows *Pollia* fruit on the left and Sichuan peppers on the right.



Pei Di's poem describes the pepper trees in the orchard without making any allusions to the invocation of the Gods. The thorns on the pepper tree are very prominent.

The following illustration shows a *zun* and a *ding*, ceremonial bronze vessels from the Shang dynasty (second millennium BCE). The *zun* is from the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the *ding* from the Shanghai Museum:



The following illustration shows (on the left) the Pepper Tree Orchard from the scroll in the Freer Gallery. The neighbouring orchard (on the right) contains Lacquer Trees (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*), the sap of which is used in the production of lacquer. These trees are the subject of another pair of quatrains in the *Wangchuan Ji*.



Illusion and Reality

Ferguson (1927, pp 73-74) suggested that the Wangchuan estate described in the poems and depicted on the scroll was more imaginary than real:

The poem and the picture both represent Wang Ch'uan as a place of splendor and magnificence, but this was the product solely of poetical license ... Wang Wei could only have had a very humble cottage in this secluded spot. If it had been otherwise he would have attracted the attention of the rapacious myrmidons of the court, and the place would have been confiscated ... Wang Wei's imagination ... clothed a barren hillside with beautiful rare trees, with spacious courtyards, with a broad stream upon which boats plied and on whose bank stood a pretty fishing pavilion, with a deer park, with storks and birds—all of the delights of eye and ear were brought together in this one lovely spot by the fancy of a brilliant genius. Life had been hard and severe for him, but his spirit was untamed. It reveled in all of the sensuous delights which it could spiritualize, even though it had spurned them when they were thrust upon it.

However, Ferguson probably exaggerated the simplicity of Wang Wei's country home. Wagner (1981) claimed that it was far more than a "humble cottage"

The villa had previously belonged to the Early T'ang poet Sung Chih-wen (ca. 663-712), but was apparently unoccupied for about thirty years between owners. When Wang Wei acquired the estate he had it repaired, and he may have personally supervised the design and reconstruction of its various houses, pavilions, gardens, and parks. Paintings and poems depict the estate as a large piece of property with elaborate residential buildings and landscape architecture: it was by no means a simple rustic hut hidden in the woods.

Nevertheless, the scenes that Wang Wei and Pei Di described in the poems owe as much to poetic imagination as to reality. In this regard, we must wonder how the poems relate to Buddhism. The Buddhist idea of the perceived world is that it is illusion (*maya*). What then is the imagined world? Does the imagination exaggerate our illusions, or does it provide insight into what might be the true reality beneath them? Wagner (1981, p 140) remarks:

Wang Wei aspires to transcendence of the particular, and of the visual physical world, at the same time that he is attached to the sensual delights which he so sensitively perceives in that world. Through visual imagery he achieves metaphoric representation of that realm which cannot be seen, a realm which transcends the material world, the perceiving senses, the definitions of language, and the discerning consciousness. Wang Wei's vision, then, moves through the world of concrete natural objects to attain a glimpse of "distant emptiness."

Epilogue

We can conclude this brief discussion of Wang Wei's poetry

with another poem wherein he describes a trip to the *Zhongnan* (“far south”) Mountain near his Wangchuan Villa (translation by Rouzer, 2020, Volume I, p. 79):

終南別業 My villa at Mt. Zhongnan

中歲頗好道 In middle age I grow rather fond of the Way;

晚家南山陲 My late home is in a corner of Mt. Zhongnan.

興來每獨往 When the mood comes, I always go out alone;

勝事空自知 I myself know, emptily, of these splendid things.

行到水窮處 I walk to where the waters begin,

坐看雲起時 I sit and watch when the clouds arise.

偶然值林叟 By chance I meet an old man of the woods;

談笑無還期 We chat and laugh, no time we have to go home.

The Cleveland Museum of Art possesses a beautiful fan created in about 1256. On one side is calligraphy by Emperor Lizong (1205-1264) presenting the 5th and 6th lines of Wang Wei’s poem. On the other side is a painting by Ma Lin (~1180-1260) showing *A Scholar Reclining and Watching Rising Clouds*. The illustration at the beginning of this essay is a high-contrast rendition of the Ma Lin painting.



Stephen Owen relates the description of the rising clouds to another Wang Wei poem (*Floating on the Han River*) which contains the lines

江流天地外	The river flows out beyond Heaven and Earth
山色有无中	The mountain's color between Being and Nonbeing

what this describes is a mountain in a mist in that peculiar way in which you can just barely see a color space in the mist, and you think there's a mountain there, but in the Buddhist sense of the illusions of the world, you have this huge thing, this mountain and all of a sudden, its presence, its very existence, sort of half fades in and out. It's between being there and not being there.

The lines describe the ideas of yǒu (有, being/possession/existence) and wú (无, simplified 无, nonbeing, nothingness). A central idea in Chan Buddhism is *sunyata*: the meditative practice of emptying oneself of being to become one with the universe.

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