

我是怎樣寫“繁星”和“春水”的

How I Wrote *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water*¹

Translated by John Cayley

AMONGST THE MANY forms of New Poetry which arose after the May Fourth Movement can be counted the so-called “mini poem”.² This type of poem can be very short, the shortest having only two lines. All the pieces in my collections *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water* are short poems and so many people consider me to be the first to have written in this way. When I think it over now, I cannot remember whether I had read many mini poems by my contemporaries or not. In any case, when I wrote *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water*, I was not writing poetry. All I did—under the influence of Tagore’s *Stray Birds*—was to gather together my “scattered and fragmentary thoughts”.

What happened was this. At the time of the May Fourth Movement I was still studying at university. In the wake of the New Literature Movement, all sorts of new periodicals were appearing like mushrooms after spring rain. Not only did these carry diatribes against imperialism and feudalism, there were also introductions to and criticism of foreign literature, as well as short stories, new poetry, and prose, all in the vernacular (*baihua*). Then, our thirst for knowledge was at its height, and we greedily devoured these periodicals outside our lessons or even hid them under our textbooks, openly stealing glances at them. If we happened upon some sentence

¹Originally published in *Shi kan*, 1954; reprinted in *Bing Xin lun chuangzuo*, Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 1982, p. 57-60. The last paragraph in the original, which amounts to a self-criticism written in accordance with the political climate of the post Anti-Rightist Movement era, has been omitted.

²Poems such as those in *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water* are known as *duan* “short-” or *xiao* “little-” poems. There is no ready term for this in English, “epigram” being too narrow for reasons which will become clear, and I tend to use “mini poem” as a technical equivalent.

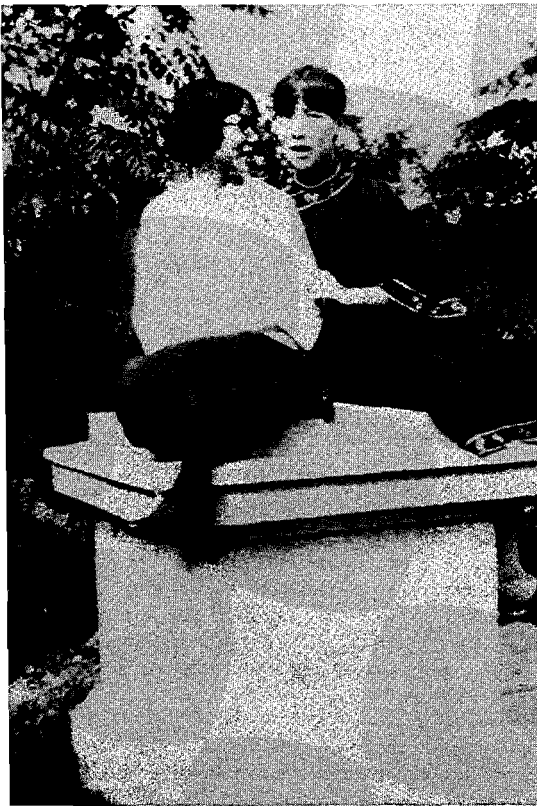
which particularly pleased us we'd note it in a few "oblique" words or phrases in the margins of our notebooks. Soon this became a habit and sometimes we wrote out random jottings about what we felt or remembered of where we'd been and what we'd done, "obliquely" in a few words or phrases. As the days passed these notes accumulated. Although each one might only be three to five lines long, when you arranged them in sequence, they did, after all, seem to relate to your circumstances. Later when you looked these words over they conjured up a true and intimate picture – you couldn't give them up.

Meanwhile in some magazine or other I happened to see serialized Zheng Zhenduo's translation of Tagore's *Stray Birds*³ (Tagore's lyrics make use of forms from folk poetry and song. Their language is both simple and beautiful, has a strong musical quality, and is deeply imbued with his love for the Indian people. When he translated his own poems from Bengali into English, he did not carry over their rhymes or their arrangement into lines, translating them instead as poetic prose in order to preserve their meaning. I only learned this later. Whether *Stray Birds* was originally in the form of folk poetry, I am still uncertain.⁴) *Stray Birds* is a collection of short pieces of few words and phrases but filled with poetic feeling, artistic insight and philosophical understanding. It struck a chord in me. It occurred to me that the jottings in the margins of my notebooks could also be brought together and set in order. As I collected them I chose those which were particularly poetic, those which were particularly resonant and suggestive, and put them in sequence. Because they were scattered and fragmentary thoughts I chose one piece which started with the words "a maze of stars" and placed it at the beginning, calling the whole my "Maze of Stars" collection.

If Tagore's *Stray Birds* was a collection of poetry, then wasn't my "Maze of Stars" also? I don't have much confidence in my own opinion on this point, especially since when I wrote these few words and phrases I was not consciously writing poetry. (When taking a course on New Literature, I had heard the teacher lecture on Greek epigrams, saying various things about them such as that they were brief but pointed and vigorous. Like bees, although their bodies were tiny they had a sting in

³I have been unable to trace the serialization of Zheng Zhenduo's translations of *Stray Birds* in contemporary periodicals available in London. Zheng's translations came out in book form in 1922, the same year that Bing Xin's collections first appeared in *Chen bao fukan*. She may here be simplifying the story of her introduction to Tagore's collection. She and Zheng Zhenduo knew each other well and she may have seen his work, or part of it, before publication. In her preface to *Fan xing*, printed after the text of the poems in *Chen bao fukan*, she calls Tagore's collection *Mitu zhi niao* 迷途之鳥 in Chinese (birds which have lost the way) whereas Zheng Zhenduo eventually entitled his translation *Fei niao ji* 飛鳥集 (flying birds). Bing Xin was, of course, capable of reading the poems in English and her preface to *A Maze of Stars* suggests that she may have.

⁴The Chinese word translated as "folk poetry" here is *min'ge* for which "folk songs" would be a more literal but somewhat more misleading rendering of a term which embraces the apparent reference of both English equivalents. Tagore's *Stray Birds* seems basically to have been an English, rather than a Bengali, text. His early biographer, Edward John Thompson, says that Tagore wrote *Stray Birds* in the summer of 1916, while on the way to Japan, and that it is "partly translated from a collection called *Kanika* (sawdust and chippings of a workshop) which was published in 1900 (*Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, London: Oxford University Press, 1926; new rev. ed. 1948, p. 247. Thompson also gives some translations direct from *Kanika* on pages 142-43). It is clear, in any case, that Zheng Zhenduo's translation follows the English text and that Tagore's *Birds* were never "folk poems" in the sense intended by Bing Xin here.



Bing Xin and a classmate, taken in the USA, 1925.



Bing Xin and Wu Wenzao, Peking, 1930.

their tails, and whether they were satirical or discursive they were capable of drawing blood. However, when writing *A Maze of Stars* I hadn't thought of Greek epigrams.) Thus in my preface to the 1932 collected works there is this paragraph:

Speaking of scattered and fragmentary thoughts, I'd like to go on to talk about *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water*. . . . *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water* are not poetry. At least, at that time I was not setting out to write poetry. I still didn't understand the New Poetry and was very wary and unwilling to experiment. I believe that the essence of poetry is content rather than form, but at the same time a poem which is unrhymed and loosely organized, if not divided into lines, is easily confused with "poetic prose". My writing *A Maze of Stars* was just as set out in its colophon — following Tagore's *Stray Birds* and imitating their form, I collected together my scattered and fragmentary thoughts.... It is something like a collection of "jottings"⁵

I now think that the reason for my unwillingness to call *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water* poetry was that, inwardly, I harboured a belief in standards for poetry. I thought that poetry had to follow formal rules – whether new or old – and that its musicality must be relatively pronounced. The sentiments had equally to be modulated by poetic cadences. If a poem was made from a few words and phrases it could not avoid becoming excessively weak and slovenly. Because of this, apart from those three hundred odd pieces of "scattered and fragmentary thoughts" which I wrote around the age of nineteen, my work contains nothing else like *A Maze of Stars* or *Spring Water*.

Later at Xishan in February 1921, I wrote a short prose piece called "Beloved" and sent it to the *Chen bao* literary supplement. When it appeared it had been split up and arranged in lines like poetry with the following comments by the editor printed beneath it:

This short piece exudes a poetic sensibility. There can be no objection to its having been printed in lines and placed in the poetry column. (After all it is no great matter whether something is written in lines or in paragraphs. To see whether or not a piece is poetry we have to look at the meaning of the words. Luckily this paper's division into columns is simply a loose overall convention, and isn't meant to force certain types of writing to be published in particular columns. The "Jottings" column has previously published some things which were equally charged with poetic sensibility, but then the interrelation of these columns is not new.)

Only after this did I begin to write New Poetry with confidence, sometimes with rhyme and sometimes without, for the time being ceasing to raise the subject.

⁵"Jottings" translates the Chinese term *zagan* 雜感 for a genre of short prose pieces recording, literally, miscellaneous impressions.