

A Shared Bewilderment -

An Imaginary Conversation with Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715)

Though little known outside China, your collection *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* 聊齋誌異 is exceedingly famous with Chinese-language readers, and at the same time hugely misunderstood.

Wouldn't you say?

Absolutely so, I'm afraid. Most readers have no idea what I am up to!

Despite this failure of understanding, most of your Chinese readers and critics continue to trot out the accepted cliché, that yours is the 'pinnacle' of fiction in the classical language 文言小說, the other 'pinnacle' (in the vernacular 白話小說) being of course *The Story of the Stone* 紅樓夢.

Would you not agree that you have been misunderstood, my old friend?

I just said so! I'm not interested in that division between so-called classical and so-called vernacular. What matters is not the shape of the words, but the feeling behind them.

As author of *Tales* you deliberately chose the obsessive texture of a very difficult and exclusive medium, a highly eloquent, witty and allusive form of classical Chinese.

Yours was not for the Common Reader, was it?

Of course it wasn't! I was pleasing myself and my small circle of friends, not the man in the street.

Over forty years of your failed life, you kept exploring in such loving detail the richly sensuous underworld and dream-world of your cultivated *literati* contemporaries, creating your extraordinary gallery of the supernatural-but human, side by side with the natural-but-strange. Yes, I know, you also observed, and made fun of, some of the more appalling and bizarre examples of human frailty.

But you were primarily neither a social critic, nor a humourist, weren't you?

Obviously. I just loved telling stories.

In that brief exchange of poems with your illustrious contemporary Wang Shizhen, both of you confessed to having 'disdained the world's debates' (you didn't bother with politics or social media), preferring instead to enjoy the pure pleasure of stories, 'idle words, idly spoken, idly heard', to 'hear the songs of ghosts issuing from the graves of autumn.'

So you yourself were above all a story-telling artist. Were you not?

Indeed! Such was my destiny!

Jacques Dars, that superb French practitioner of the Noble Art of Translation, once wrote that yours was 'an overriding art such as one finds in the most beautiful Chinese jades, so perfectly carved and polished that one can only caress them with one's eyes and gaze at them for ever in sheer wonder'.

Or in sheer bewilderment? What say you to that my friend?

Yes. Why not? I really like what your Monsieur Jacques said. Maybe a carved walnut as well as a carved jade.

Over the past four centuries you have cast your dizzying, hallucinatory spell, bewitching and bewildering your readers, delving into the dreams, the spiritual, emotional and erotic depths of the Realm of Fantasy you shared with your fellow Chinese.

You are really much too kind! I was just having fun.

As I see it, today's readers of your *Tales* (and all the more so your translators) must surely strive above all to excavate *living experience* from these difficult, sometimes riddling, texts of yours, to shake off the deadening constraints of literary ideology (both Western and Chinese), and embrace instead the naked (often entertaining and shocking) truth of these intensely passionate encounters with irresistible courtesans, tender-hearted fox-spirits, beguiling flower-spirits and ghosts.

Would you agree that this is what we must do? Seek out the living experience?

Of course! There is just life and more life! That's simply what literature's all about!

Yes. Yours were no silly chocolate-box romances, no trivialities to be toyed with. They were part of life. Of your life. And the life of those like-minded spirits around you.

You were wringing these tales from your innermost soul, weren't you?

Yes, over forty years. The greater part of my life.

You remember the heart-rending words of your own Preface?

Midnight finds me here in my desolate studio

By the dim light of my flickering lamp,

Fashioning these tales at my ice-cold table.

I drink to propel my brush,

But can only vent my spleen, my lonely anguish.

What a sad thing it is

To find expression thus?

Alas! I am but a bird trembling at the winter frost...

The few who know me are in the green grove,

They are at the dark frontier.

You were after all yourself a visionary and a poet, an unstoppable poet (I have all four thick volumes of your verse!). In that rhapsodic Preface to your *Tales* you see yourself in the lyrical lineage of the shaman-poet Qu Yuan, of the supreme Taoist raconteur Master Zhuang, and of the ghostly Late-Tang *poète maudit*, Li He.

These were your ancestors. Am I right?

Of course they were! I dream of them all the time.

It was a music you were seeking, an authentic music 'that is what it is for reasons of its own'. That 'spleen' you were venting, that serious intent of yours, your deeply human inspiration, was so well understood by your early commentator-friends – like the wonderful Feng Zhenluan 馮鎮巒 (1760-1830), who wrote:

Read these tales properly, and they will make you brave...

Grasp their spirit, and you will be strong.

If today we are to stand a chance of being 'bewildered' by your *Tales*, of catching the music of your 'irrepressible transports', your 'unbridled folly', your 'wild words', we should surely try to follow in the footsteps of those old commentators. *Shouldn't we?*

What other way is there? They really understood what I was doing. They lived the same life.

With this aspiration in mind, I humbly present here today five of my new (favourite and hitherto unpublished) translations of your wonderful *Tales*: 'Blue Phoenix' 青鳳, 'Fragrant Jade and Crimson Snow' 香玉, 'Flowers of the Chrysanthemum' 黃英, 'Love and the Lute' 宦娘, and 'A Rake's Progress' 韋公子.

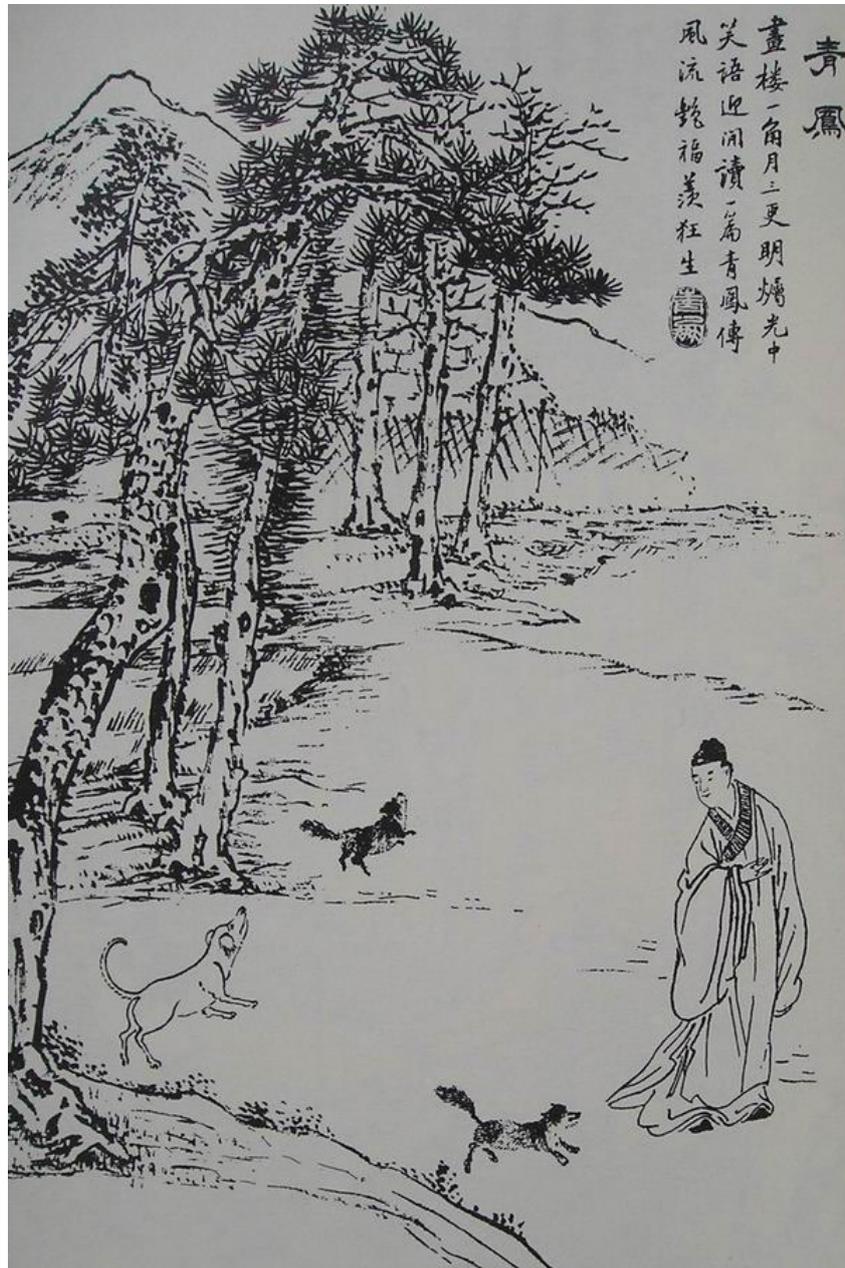


Illustration from *Xiangzhu Liaozhai zhiyi tuyong* 詳註聊齋志異圖詠, 1886