

CHAPTER III

Memory of the I: Disengagement, Assertion, and Interrogation of the Subject—Mu Dan

Mu Dan 穆旦 (1918–1977), whose real name was Zha Liangzheng 查良錚, was born in a large traditional family from Haining, Zhejiang province. One of his ancestors, Zha Shenxing 查慎行 was a literary assistant (*wenxue shicong* 文學侍從) to the Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (1662–1722). The poet's father, Zha Xiehe 查燮和 (1891–1977), having a short memory, was not appreciated by the family. He was a petty clerk. He died the same year as his son. On 16th March, 1924, at the age of 6, Mu Dan published for the first time a text in prose in Tianjin's *Funü ribao* 婦女日報 (Women daily).

The pen name of the poet was Mu Dan 慕旦, probably used for the first time in 1936 for a poem entitled “Gengfu” 更夫 (Night watchman) and published in *Qinghua zhoukan* 清華周刊 (Qinghua weekly).¹ *Mu* means to love, esteem, aspire to, long for or even covet. *Dan* refers to the dawn, the first light of day. Therefore, Mu Dan literally means “love of the first light.” The poet had used sometime before another phonetically identical pen name.² It was in 1934, for the publication of a text in prose entitled “Meng” 夢 (The dream). The only difference between the two pen names is to be found in the first character: *mu* 穆 instead of *mu* 慕 meaning “sweet,” “affable,” “accommodating,” or on the contrary “serious,” “grave,” “thoughtful.” These are “grave and pensive lights, towering, accommodating to the human world.” If the poet resorted alternately to both pen names between 1935 and 1937, for the rest of his life, he used in his writings “grave and pensive dawn light.” This pen name reveals a completely mapped out destiny.

Mu Dan was known in the 1940s as a modernist poet and translator of Goethe and Byron. He fell out of favour in the 1950s and for the following twenty years, for depending too much on Western sources. He was severely criticised and accused of failing to remain true to himself, for ever drawing from

one language or another. To pour Western wine into a Chinese cup, was to pour an extremely dangerous poison for the people and the revolution.

Youth (1934–1937): Grave and Pensive Dawn-Light

In “The Dream,” the poet says that he often has dreams or nightmares, nightmares that he prefers to ordinary dreams, since ordinary dreams have no flavour. What seems most pleasant to him, is to mull over his experiences in the dream or nightmare:

In reality my dreams are far from perfect. I know dreams are never perfect, but when I wake up those few imperfections leave me with an ever so sweet taste.

I often had nightmares, it was not nice at all while I was having them. I dreamed of scary things, which left me in a trance, even when I awoke, heart pounding, feeling in danger for quite a moment. It was only in the morning that I understood what was going on. Whether dreams or nightmares, I always enjoy talking about them. They are so wonderful, so dangerous for critics. Both narrator and listener take great interest in them, as if they were stories being told. I would really like to have such dreams often just for my pleasure.³

Dreams for Mu Dan are human life itself. Or rather life for a human being is a daydream, never peaceful.

Human life is fluctuating. It is only when you follow its fluctuations that you will be able to enjoy the taste of life. Thus whether dream or nightmare, you can find flavour in it.⁴

In his view, dreams and life are sequences which determine the *I*, not in its individual and particular existence, but rather in a vitalist current where its action knows no hindrance. For the poet, ordinary dream is worthless:

What is really uninteresting is the ordinary dream. It unfolds without any surprise, quite simply until one wakes up, how boring! I think it is not worth talking about or noting in one’s diary.⁵

With the ordinary dream, Mu Dan risks turning away from the *I*, silencing it, spoiling its expressive dimension, stopping him from becoming a differentiating consciousness. The sensual seduction of the nightmare is linked to

an unbridled *I*, which then enjoys a certain idea of the sublime. With mundane dreams, Mu Dan is afraid of *cliché*. And by refusing it, through the dissonance of nightmare and in order to achieve autonomy, Mu Dan wants to get away from the power of the mundane extended to the whole society. His dream does not intend to become a witness to his submission to the authority of social banality. A nightmare, for Mu Dan is a sort of polar zone confusing the compass needle.

It is the search for a feeling that no longer wants to exist for the *I* only, but for and in itself.

When he wrote “The Dream,” Mu Dan was sixteen. Life seemed stranger than he had previously imagined it. It actually had many surprises in store for him and some rather unusual experiences.

In 1935, he passed the entrance examination at Tsinghua University in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. There Mu Dan, under his pen name “grave and pensive dawn-light” came across the work of English romantic poets. In 1934, he wrote:

在這流浪的街頭 [……]
是流浪人底兩隻沉重的腳 [……]
一步，一步…… 流浪人。⁶

In this roaming street [...]
They are the heavy legs of the wanderer [...]
Step after step ... the wanderer.

The deep voice of the *I* can be heard especially in the darkness of night throughout his poems written between 1934 and 1937:

驚起旅人午夜的彷徨⁷
——〈更夫〉

He stumbles on the midnight stroll of the passerby
—“The Night Watchman”

黑暗，寂靜，[……]
狗，更夫，都在遠處響了
——〈夏夜！〉⁸

Darkness, silence, [...]
Dog, night watchman, like a distant echo
—“Summer night!”

沉夜，擺出一條漆黑的街 [……]
從街頭處吹過一陣嚴肅的夜風

那門板隙中透出來的微弱的燭影⁹

——〈一個老木匠〉

The deep night puts out a dark street [...]

From the end of the street blows a severe wind

The faint shadow of a candle filters through the gap in a door

—“An Old Carpenter”

更聲彷彿帶來了夜的嚴肅

[……]

夜，不知在什麼時候現出了死靜 [……]¹⁰

——〈冬夜〉

The sound of the watches seems to guide the severe night

[...]

In the night, I do not know when this deadly quiet arose [...]

—“Winter Night”

冬夜的街頭失去了喧鬧的

腳步和呼喊¹¹

——〈更夫〉

The tumult of shouts and footsteps

has disappeared from the winter night

—“The Night Watchman”

In “The wanderer,” one sees the influence of Edgar Allan Poe describing the crowd walking through the streets of London. It was then the fashion to walk turtles and to follow them. Baudelaire would resume the idea of the *flâneur*. His would be a provocative *I*, such as Mu Dan’s, an *I* who wants to stand in sharp contrast to the crowd. Baudelaire, in his preface to his own translation of Poe’s *Extraordinary Stories* talks about “the absurd settling in intelligence and ruling it with a terrible logic.”¹²

First English Influence: Youthful Prose

According to recent studies, Mu Dan left thirteen youth poems.¹³ Was the poet influenced by the English romantics? On this point, one fact is revealing: During the first years of study at Tsinghua University, the writings of the English romantic poets were the first readings for the students of his faculty.¹⁴ From this English reading was born in 1936 a poem entitled “Meigui de gushi” 玫瑰的故事 (The story of the rose), directly inspired by a poem by Logan Pearsall Smith’s

(1865–1946) “The Rose.”¹⁵ A romantic poem of such descriptive nature is rare in Mu Dan’s work. In his other writings, the writing is rather a philosophical passage. Here is the preface to the poem:

The contemporary English prose writer L. P. Smith wrote a short piece, “The Rose,” whose style is easy and pleasant, its content rich and appealing. It makes you want to read it over and over. The story does not lack pretty things, most of which are included in my poem. The content remains the same to maintain an atmosphere of exotic and distant dream. I am not sure I retained the beauty of the original text, this poem is for me a bold attempt.¹⁶

In what way is the attempt bold? Where exactly are the points of articulation of his poem with the English text? Let us try a brief lexical confrontation considering first of all the poem in Chinese: “The Story of the Rose.” The first stanza reads as follows:

庭院裏盛開着老婦人的玫瑰，
有如焰焰的火獅子雄踞在人前，
當老婦人講起來的故事，
回憶和喜悅就輕輕飄過她的臉。
……許多年以前，還是我新婚以後，
我同我的丈夫在意大利周遊，
那時還沒有鐵路，先生，一輛馬車，
帶我們穿過城堡又在草原上馳走。¹⁷

In the garden the old lady’s roses are in bloom
Like inflamed fiery lions, sitting imposingly facing men,
When the old lady begins to tell the story of the rose,
Memories and joy fill her face.
... Many years ago, in the early days of our marriage,
My husband and I travelled all over Italy,
At the time there was no railroad, Sir, a horse-drawn carriage
Took us through the fortified cities, spun in the meadows.

In comparison, here is the English poem:

The old lady had always been proud of the great rose-tree in her garden, and was fond of telling how it had grown from a cutting she had brought years before from Italy, when she was first married. She and her husband had been travelling back in their carriage from Rome (it was before the time of railways)....¹⁸