

Note on 'I've Always Delighted in a Shaft of Light in the Depth of Night' by Duo Duo

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March 22, 1992

Philip Fried
440 Riverside Drive (#45)
New York, New York 10027

Dear Philip,

Here is the note to the translation of Duoduo's most recent poem. I'm not sure this is precisely what you wanted, but it's how I responded to it when I sat down to write.

All the best,

Gregory Lee

Duoduo is a poet in exile, called by many a dissident poet. There is then a presumption that his lyrics will convey a political message. Indeed, some of his poems very clearly do so, and many of the lyrics in this poem will lead the reader to such a response. There is a sense of the guilt of the exile, distanced from the site/sight of others' misfortune. But multiple readings of his poetry are almost always possible. Duoduo has always written out of a time and space determined by great political maneuvers and their human consequences. And yet the politics of his poetry surely is not limited to a critique of a society resulting from China's still dominant Confucian-Leninist ideology, but also involves a critique of modernity in which we are all implicated. Thus, while the wind and the forces of nature have frequently been symbolic of Political forces in Chinese poetics, for Duoduo Nature (trees, the wind) has long been a source of unrestrained power, a power humankind attempts to defy or harness maybe, but a power which is also fundamentally hostile to modern human projects. In this sense, surely Nature is the ally of the poet in his critique of society, and of himself. Death has long been a preferred motif of Duoduo's poetry, from the youthful poems composed in the early 1970s during the Cultural Revolution, down to his post-Tiananmen lyric production. The deaths of his compatriots over the last few decades are evidently one of this poem's concerns. But there is perhaps also a dwelling on the death, a year into the poet's exile, of his mother in Peking, and of his brother several years previously. Beyond these specific instances of death there is also

a more philosophical meditation on death, and thus on life itself. "Light," traditionally associated with life and goodness, is here implicated with "death;" stars are "accustomed to death," "death projects into light." Despite the light of spring and dawn, the "I" of the poem is forgotten by the trees of society, except for one which hates him. He is isolated like the "solitary church," dead or as good as dead, an observer alienated in and by the forest, and who is unaided by the ultimately unenlightening "shaft of light".

I'VE ALWAYS DELIGHTED IN A SHAFT OF LIGHT IN THE DEPTH OF NIGHT

I've always delighted in a shaft of light in the depth of night
midst the sound of wind and bells I await that light
in that morning asleep until noon
the last leaf hangs as if dreaming
many leaves have entered winter
leaves falling from all sides hem in the trees
trees, from the rim of the sloping town gather winds of four
i

Why is the wind always misread as the center of being lost
why do I intently listen to trees hinder the wind once more
force the wind to be the harvest season's five prized open fingers
the wind's shadow grows new leaves from the hands of the dead
finger nails pulled out, by hand. By tools in hands
clenched, the spitting image of a human, yet spat on by humans,
like the shadow of a human, walked over by humans
there it is, driving the last glint of light from the face of the
i
yet honing ever brighter the light that slices into the forest!

Against the light of spring I enter the light of before dawn
I recognize the only tree that hates me and has remembered me
Under the tree, under that apple tree
the table in my memory turns green
the splendors of May, bones by wings startled awake, unfold
i
I turn around, fresh grass has grown over my back
I'm awake, and the sky has already moved
death inscribed on the face has entered words
illuminated by stars accustomed to death
death, projects into light
making the solitary church the last pole to measure starlight
making the left out, left over.

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