

ADVERSARIA SINICA

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POE'S "RAVEN"—IN CHINESE

Chia I, born in the year 200 B.C., rose when no more than a boy to high office. Like many other notable Chinese statesmen, he suffered banishment, and died from chagrin at the early age of thirty-three. He wrote a great deal of poetry, and among his works is a piece entitled "The Owl," the opening words of which are extraordinarily suggestive of Poe's famous poem. It is to the credit of Dr. W. A. P. Martin that the similarity was first pointed out by him (*North American Review* for 1901, p. 857); but with this discovery I am constrained to say that Dr. Martin's credit begins and ends. For his attempt at translation cannot be regarded as a serious contribution. It is not even a liberal paraphrase, with a few ancillary touches of the paraphrast to help out the sense, or the metre. Whole sentences of several lines, not to be found in the Chinese original, are freely inserted, and a ring of Poe's craftsmanship, faintly heard, except in a few of the opening lines, is imparted to the translation, to a quite unjustifiable extent. Thus, Dr. Martin begins his version with—

Betwixt moss-covered reeking walls,
An exiled poet lay—
On his bed of straw reclining,
Half despairing, half repining—

not a single word of which is discoverable in Chia I's poem.

In 1912, Dr. Martin published the second edition of a little volume entitled "Chinese Legends and Lyrics," in the preface to which he says, "My harp, long silent, was suddenly awakened on June 21, 1905,

by thoughts of home." Here we find our poem re-appearing in a somewhat new dress. In order, no doubt, to enhance the analogy with Poe's "Raven," the Chinese poem is now made to begin with these most inappropriate words, in which the season of the year is quite arbitrarily changed,—

'Twas in the month of chill November,
As I can very well remember—
In dismal, gloomy, crumbling halls.

Then come the four lines quoted above, and the poem continues:—

When athwart the window sill
Flew in a bird of omen ill,
And seemed inclined to stay.

To my book of occult learning,
Suddenly I thought of turning,
All the mystery to know,
Of that shameless owl or crow,
That would not go away.

"Wherever such a bird shall enter,
'Tis sure some power above has sent her
(So said the mystic book) to show
The human dweller forth must go,"—
But *where* it did not say.

Then anxiously the bird addressing,
And my ignorance confessing,
"Gentle bird, in mercy deign
The will of Fate to me explain,—
Where *is* my future way?"

It raised its head as if 'twere seeking
 To answer me by simply speaking,
 Then folded up its sable wing,
 Nor did it utter anything,
 But breathed a "Well-a-day!"

More eloquent than any diction,
 That simple sigh produced conviction,
 Furnishing to me the key
 Of the awful mystery
 That on my spirit lay.

"Fortune's wheel is ever turning,
 To human eye there's no discerning
 Weal or woe in any state;
 Wisdom is to bide your fate;"—
 This is what it seemed to say
 By that simple "Well-a-day."

With this second "Well-a-day," which is quite a harmless gloss of the translator's, Dr. Martin brings the poem to an abrupt end in less than forty lines, although, as will be seen, it is a very much longer affair.

Apart from the coincidence of a bird and a disconsolate man, there is very little in the one poem which is common to the other. Poe bade his raven give a categorical answer to the question of reunion in the life to come:—

Prophet! said I, thing of evil!
 Prophet still, if bird or devil!
 By that heaven that bends above us
 By that God we both adore,
 Tell this soul, with sorrow laden,

If within the distant Aiden,
 It shall clasp a sainted maiden,
 Whom the angels name Lenore—
 Clasp a rare and radiant maiden,
 Whom the angels name Lenore?
 Quoth the Raven: Never more.

Chia I begged the owl to give him some indication as to the future course of his own life in this world; and when the bird did no more than heave a sigh, he himself launched out into a rambling discourse, evidently based upon the sayings of Lao Tzŭ and of Chuang Tzŭ, the earliest Taoist philosopher, and containing several allusions to the God of ancient China, whose personality is so vividly set forth in the older books of the Confucian Canon, and which at the date of this poem had by no means faded out.

The main object of the following translation is to show how far there is any real analogy between Chia I's "Owl" and Poe's "Raven." Only a certain measure of success can be claimed. There occur in the former poem some very difficult lines; these may perhaps be improved upon by some enthusiast who has either had the wit to see their meaning himself, or has some friendly native scholar at hand from whom he can obtain the desired light.

*Prefatory Remarks*¹

Chia I had been tutor to the prince of Ch'ang-sha for three years, when a *fu* bird flew into his house, and alighted on the corner of the divan. A *fu* resembles an owl, and is a bird of ill omen.²

Chia I, who had been exiled, was then living at Ch'ang-sha (in Hunan), a low-lying, damp place; and grieving over the thought that his life would not be a long one, he composed this poem, elaborating the theme himself, as speaker.

The Fu Bird

In the *shan o* year (B.C. 174),³
In the early summer of the fourth moon,
On the day *kêng tzü*, as the sun was declining,
A *fu* bird settled on my house.
It came on to the corner of the divan,
With a leisurely air—
A strange visitor indeed;⁴
I wondered why it appeared.⁵
So I opened my divining-books,⁶
And read these prophetic words:—
When a wild bird flies into a house,
The master will soon go out.
Then I said to the *fu*,
If I go, whither will it be?
If the answer is favourable, say so;
If unfavourable, tell me the worst;
As to sooner or later,
Tell me the date.
The *fu* heaved a sigh,
Raised its head and flapped its wings;
And as it could not speak,
I begged it to indicate its feelings.⁷
I said, "The myriad permutations of nature
Go steadily on without cease;
There is an everlasting flow
Either pushing forward or coming back;
Form is always being restored to vitality,
The old slough exchanged for the new skin.
Profound is this endless process;

How can words adequate be found?
 Misfortune is the foundation of good fortune;
 In good fortune misfortune lies hid.⁸
 Sorrow and joy gather in the same family;
 Weal and woe abide in the same district.
 The Wu State was very powerful,
 But Fu Ch'a (5th cent. B. C.) brought it to ruin;
 The king of Yüeh took refuge at Kuei-chi,
 Yet Kou Chien obtained the hegemony;
 Li Ssü migrated and achieved success,
 But finally he suffered the five punishments.
 Fu Yüeh (14th cent. B. C.) had been convicted,
 Yet he became Minister to the Emperor Wu Ting.
 Misfortune and good fortune,
 Are they not like rope-strands linked together?
 The will of God cannot be stated,
 For who knows whither it reaches?
 If water is flung out, it dries up;
 If an arrow is flung out, it travels afar.
 All things are subject to these divergences,
 And are forced to fulfil their revolutions.
 Clouds gather and rain falls,
 Coming down in all directions;
 Nature scatters things around,
 Ubiquitously, without limit.
 God's ways cannot be forecast,
 Nor can His eternal truths be provided against.
 Whether sooner or later depends on His will;
 How can we know exactly when?
 Consider: the universe is the melting-pot,
 And Nature is the artificer;

The *Yin* and the *Yang* are the charcoal,
And all creation is the metal.
For the union (birth) or the dispersal (death) of the breath
How can there be any fixed rule?
There were thousands and myriads of permutations
Before the existence of the Absolute (God).
Suddenly, you become a man;
Why strike the lyre (rejoice)?
You change to an uncanny thing;
Why should that make you sorrow?
Narrow wisdom is all for self;
Others are worthless, I am of worth.
The really wise man takes a broad view;
There is nothing without its value.
The sordid seek wealth;
Heroes seek fame;
The highly-placed die for power;
The masses think only of life.
He who is tempted by gain
Hurries east and then west;
The truly great man never changes,
But keeps a uniformity of purpose.
The fool is bound by conventionalities,
And is helpless, as though in gaol;
The perfect man disregards the things of this world,
And occupies himself with eternal truth.
The masses are greatly led astray,
Filling their lives with loves and hates.
The pure man is happy in a desert,
Alone, in peace, with eternal truth.
Discard wisdom, disregard form,

And contentedly accept annihilation of self;
 All space thus suddenly becomes a great void
 Through which you roam with eternal truth.
 If the tide favours, sail on;
 When you meet danger, then stop.
 Release the body, and yield to the will of God;
 Do not act only in reference to self.
 This life is like floating about at random;
 Death is like stoppage;
 Unruffled as the calm of a deep abyss,
 Moving like a boat adrift.
 Therefore do not regard life as your treasure,
 But cultivate the path of vacuity.
 The man of virtue will have no entanglements,
 And recognizing the will of God, he will not grieve.
 These matters are trifles, like grass;
 Why worry about them?

Coincidences, such as may be traced in the opening lines of the above, may frequently be discovered by the student of Chinese literature. Readers of French poetry will remember the beautiful "Consolation" which Malherbe addressed, (*circa* 1600) to his friend du Périer when the latter lost a much loved daughter, named Marguerite. One verse runs thus:

Mais elle était du monde, où les plus belles choses
 Ont le pire destin;
 Et rose elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses,
 L'espace d'un matin.

In China, early in the 9th century, a famous poet, Po Chü-i, addressed a similar consolation to a father and mother who had also lost a much loved daughter, only a few months before she

was to have been married. Her name was 簡簡, the nearest equivalent of which would be something like Allegra. The Chinese poet, just as his later-born colleague, mentions the "appas" of which "son enfance était pleine," and ends with the following six lines, which I have tried to render as literally as possible:

彩	大	只	恐	此	丈
雲	都	合	是	女	人
易	好	人	天	不	阿
散	物	間	仙	是	母
琉	不	十	謫	凡	勿
璃	堅	三	人	夫	悲
脆	牢	歲	世	妻	啼

Father and mother, lay your grief aside;
 She was not fashioned for a mortal's bride—
 An angel banished from her place of birth,
 Condemned to spend a few short years on earth.
 The loveliest things are of the frailest make,
 Like clouds they vanish, and like glass they break.

Notes

1.—The prefatory remarks and the poem following are translated from the 圖書集成 *T'u shu chi ch'êng*, § xix, *chüan* 50.

2.—The 服鳥 *fu* is no doubt the screech-owl (*Scops sunia*, Hodgs.), a bird (*ulula*) of ill omen among the Romans; cf. Ruskin, *Praeterita*, ii. 363: "I have found the owl's cry always prophetic of mischief to me." In the *T'u shu*, the *fu* is illustrated by the figure of a flying bird, taken from the 三才圖會, where it represents the 鴟鵂 eared owl, the *fu* being illustrated in the latter work by a somewhat similar bird perched upon the branch of a tree.

3.—A 單 閏 *shan o* year is one for which the cyclical denomination contains the character 卯 *mao*. As 賈 誼 Chia I was born in B.C. 200, and died in B.C. 168, this *shan o* year can only be 174; *kêng tzü*, below, is June 3.

4.—This line runs literally, "A strange thing came and settled," and the character 萃, as here used, calls for attention. It is defined in K'ang Hsi, with special reference to a line in the Odes, as "to collect together;" and Dr. Legge, following this authority, has translated the line,

And there are owls collecting on plum-trees.

Now, as owls do not "collect together," but are either solitary or in pairs, it would seem as though the name of the bird is at fault; as that, however, can hardly be the case, we must fall back on the analogy of 集, which, from birds collecting on a tree, comes to be used in the sense of "to settle." The line would then read,—

And there is an owl sitting on a plum-tree.

5.—Poe's raven tapped first at the door, and then at the window, through which it finally stepped in.

6.—Poe's books, to which he had recourse before the arrival of the raven, were of a different kind:

Vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow—
Sorrow for the lost Lenore.

7.—Six times Poe's raven uttered the words "Never more!"

8.—These last two lines will be found in the *Tao Tê Ching*.