**David Howard**

TURNING OVER THE EARTH: Re-placing *The Peony Pavilion* in Maoriland

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What is it like to be a literary grave-robber? The first effect is on the ego – digging through a major country’s major writer’s literary remains reminds me that, by Chinese standards, New Zealand literary activity is small. This country is home to only 4.6 million people, slightly more than the population of Sydney, Australia. Yet here we are, happily, in the capital of a few beautiful rocks at the bottom of the world, to mark the 400th anniversary of a Chinese poet’s passing.

The staged reading by Victoria University Theatre Programme graduates that you have just heard is of excerpts from my libretto The Mica Pavilion (2013), which was influenced by Tang’s The Peony Pavilion (1598). Part of a translational project started in 1983 that circles the displaced in Victorian New Zealand, The Mica Pavilionre-places the Chinese love story in the gold fields of Otago.

My libretto is infused by Tang’s vision; it follows his narrative arc, using two lovers who are divided by family and death, yet triumph over both to share their passion. To paraphrase Tang’s translator Cyril Birch, ‘a girl dreams of a lover, pines for him and dies, but then returns from the world of shades into the light.’ The argument goes like this:

*1874: Chang’e, Chinese goddess of the Moon, looks down on Tuapeka County, Otago. The miner Ah Sing works a gold claim, in the hinter of Lawrence, with his partners Wong Chy Nuey and Sam Chew Lain. Sam provides the capital to work the claim from his income as a hotelier. Ah Sing courts Tiriata, the daughter of Te Kaha of Kai Tahu. Te Kaha opposes the match; distrusting Chinese and Europeans, he demands Tiriata marry within the tribe. Tiriata falls into depression and dies of grief; she enters the Underworld. Dr Halley performs a post-mortem and reports to Sergeant Farrell, who has been charged with investigating her sudden death; Te Kaha waits in the grounds of Tuapeka Hospital. Ah Sing, supported by his partners, goes to the entrance to the Underworld on the banks of the Tuapeka River. On advice from Chang’e and her companion Wu Gang, he attempts to win Tiriata back by singing to Hine-nui-te-po, who warns him off. Hine subsequently agrees to restore Tiriata to the care of Te Kaha. Tiriata argues with her father that, since Ah Sing has saved her, they should be allowed to marry. It is full moon; Ah Sing and Tiriata are reunited under the watchful eye of Chang’e.*

A comparison shows that Tang’s two lovers Bridal Du and Liu Mengmei are reincarnated as Tiriata and Ah Sing. And Tiriata’s father, Te Kaha, shares the rational pragmatic outlook of Bridal Du’s father, Du Bao: he loves his daughter, wants the best for her, yet opposes her passion for the Chinese miner by reminding her:

Scattered firewood does not season;

it will not warm like wood from a bundle.

You must stay with us, marrying

among the tribe. Look within the compound

for your freedom. [Sc. 3]

- To which his spirited daughter replies:

Why drink local water?

The leaf stays but the flower disappears. [Sc. 3]

If Te Kaha was not a Kai Tahu tribesman then he might be mistaken for what Birch calls ‘a Confucian rationalist’. I doubt that there is a father in the audience who does not feel some sympathy for him!

But change is also a constant. My libretto discards Tang’s dream device, favouring the shared world where sexual tension is measured by the conscious mind and registers bodily as anger and sweat. Tang’s 55 scenes reduce to 6 scenes, and not just because we live in busy times. It is difficult to secure funding for an opera of any length, so outdoing Wagner for scale would ensure that the work never saw the stage. (It still may not; the Beijing composer Gao Ping wants to set my text yet can’t complete the composition until sponsors are found.) So, ‘economically’ in more than one sense, I modify an old story.

In addition to character and plot, I import references to Chinese customs, gods, and songs to convince an audience that poetry and opera are united by their respect for ritual; they can best show both the remembered world and the present one, the sacred and the workaday, by attending to detail. For instance, after news of Tiriata’s death leaves Ah Sing staring at the moon in despair, his friends and fellow miners advise him:

Let her float without you, clear to the moon

where Chang’e can teach her to drum

with rabbit’s feet. Wu Gang hacks

at the cassia, it grows back

instantly. He will never leave the moon

you stare at, mad

for immortality. Trust the tin mug,

the pinching boots we must pull

off when you drink too much. What is the cloud?

A dragon’s sloughed skin. And the dream?

A rabbit’s lucky foot. And the earth we score?

A meniscus. [Sc. 4]

The earth is, indeed, a meniscus. And art can both walk on yet penetrate that meniscus. As *The Peony Pavilion* has shown many generations, a work of art goes beyond its occasion because, to be worth our time, a work of art has to.

Now American Presidential candidates may have a license to lie but poets do not. A good poet is good because he speaks what he sees and uses his ability to speak to see even more. He rarely writes a poem to discharge an obligation beyond the one to conscience that every thinking person has. That Tang believed this is questionable, however his willingness to risk disfavour, after being appointed to the Ministry of Rites, by directly addressing His Majesty over the Grand Secretary – for which impertinence Tang was banished to Guandong as a jail – means the question is petinent. And thank God for Tang’s impertinence or we would not have his four plays! By 1598, in his forties, he retired to write; the first year of that retirement brought *The Peony Pavilion* to the stage.

The kind of integrity that Tang showed remains a critical aspect of the imagination for us today. It is part of Tang’s, and every great artist’s, legacy to future generations. In the 21st century marketplace a commission by, say, a patron or a theatre does not let the writer ignore the demands of conscience; rather, it contextualises them: empathy + metaphor = an act of compassion.

Even if a writer restricts his conception of the reader to those who speak the same language, and we must assume that Tang did, I still believe it is impossible to reach let alone satisfy an undifferentiated mass. In Western industrial society 'I write for the people' is meaningless, whereas 'I write for the person' means a good deal. Like Tang before me, as a writer I attempt to make sense of the senseless, to move with purpose through the arbitrary, to learn. Because language is social then I necessarily have a social vision – mine is distant and distinct from Tang’s; it is also nowhere near as coherent as his, yet I am still motivated to reach out to an audience, just as he was. Working with Tang’s example has intensified my sense of poetry’s dependence on the shared history of the human condition: *my* word, *their* word, *your* word. Whether or not we eat *our* words, we dine together.

But authenticity is internal not external; like a spider, the writer spins out of himself and his web is supported by the Tree of Knowledge. Language is the history of being human so writing is a vision of the self-in-world; it is incidentally, and not necessarily a vehicle for professional advancement, a product for the market.

Political status is not essential but moral stature is. Fine writing is instructive not necessarily because of authorial intent; few poets are sages but most value precision in observation. And great poets like Tang go further; they rethink the box where the rest of us live, they do the impossible by looking over the horizon.

How do they do that? Because of their heightened understanding of time; not just timing, time. As a child I intuitively subscribed to Parmenides’ notion of block time. Its most prominent adherent is Albert Einstein, who was taken to task by Karl Popper for a view that reduces change to the status of an illusion… Even saying this sentence I find myself reaching towards China, towards Tang’s use of dream, towards a philosophy that is not conditioned by Taoism and Buddhism rather than Christianity.

I write from the imaginative position that what is, *is*; everything already exists, and for always. If everything already exists, including the poem I’m trying to write, then composing is really transcription, a privileged kind of listening. And not only because of the influence Tang’s *The Peony Pavilion* has on my poem-in-the-making.

Discovery is predicated upon listening, which is the common name for inspiration. This is almost a Taoist notion. Naturally I listen to other poets; some, including ancient ones, become close friends. They usually have the good manners to stay out of the way when I am beginning a piece. Obviously this was not the case with Tang, otherwise I would not be standing with you to mark the anniversary of his passing. But Tang has not passed; he is here, with us.

Poetry, which is a kind of analogical thinking, is *always* positive and the charge of Tang’s work arcs across the centuries to me as a writer and to you as a reader. Why do I maintain that poetry is ‘always positive’? Because it takes faith to leap. Yes, Tang spoke out early in his imperial career and was sidelined for doing so. The powerful authorities, whether from the state or private sector, sometimes use words to circumscribe, to diminish – whereas poets use words to expand, to open a window.  But it is a difficult window to see let alone climb through. That is why I looked to Tang for guidance when I was writing *The Mica Pavilion*.

If language is an after-effect of experience, then experience is also an after-effect of language. Citationality – borrowing from another poet, Tang – is a technique for interrogating the self, yet it requires empathy for others, for the dead, and respect for silence. Again, to echo is to enter into relation with the greater-than. When I speak you hear more than me.

Like Tang, but with a much smaller compass due to my lesser talent, I write to know more about my self and the world that turns irrespective of self, the world where *you* are. For me the most precious aspect of Tang’s poetry is its capacity to capture, perhaps even to create, intimacy—even though I know, just as Tang did, that language can also distort the thing it names. I believe we still delight in Tang’s work because, across the boundaries of time and space, it can teach us how to love.