

THE *NIGHT VIGIL* OF SHEN ZHOU

J. H. Prynne

On a cold night sleep is very sweet. I woke in the middle of the night, my mind clear and untroubled, and as I was unable to go to sleep again, I put on my clothes and sat facing my flickering lamp. On the table were a few folders of books. I chose a volume at random and began to read, but tiring I put down the book and sat calmly doing nothing [*shushou weizuo*]. A long rain had newly cleared, and a pale moon was shining through the window. All around was silence.

Then after a long time absorbing the fresh brightness, I gradually became aware of sounds. Listening to the rustling of the wind stirring the bamboo gave one the feeling of going bravely and unwaveringly onward. Hearing the harsh snarling of dogs gave feelings of barring out evil, of opposing marauders. Hearing the sound of drums, large and small—the small ones thin, and the far ones clear and deep and uninterrupted—stirred restless thoughts that were lonely and sad. The official drum was very close, from three beats, to four and then five, gradually faster, hastening the dawn. Suddenly in the northeast the sound of a bell, a bell pure and clean through rain-cleared air, and hearing it came thoughts of waiting for the dawn, rising and doing. It was inevitable.

My nature is such as to enjoy sitting in the night [*yezuo*]. So I often spread a book under the lamp going back and forth over it, usually stopping at the second watch. Man's clamor is not at rest, and yet the mind is bent on learning. Seldom does he find the outside calm and the inner world at peace [*wai jing er nei ding*].

Now tonight all sounds and shapes [*shengse*] bring this stability and calm [*dingjing*]. Thus can one purify the mind [*xin*] and spirit [*shen*] and realize one's will [*zhijl*]. But one

should remember that it is not that at other times these sounds and shapes do not exist like this, nor that they do not reach the eye and ear of man, but that appearance is the servant of a thing, and yet the mind hastens to follow it.

True perception through hearing [*cong*] lies concealed in sound like that of drum and bell [*kenghong*], whereas perception through seeing [*ming*] is hidden in any pattern [*wenhua*]. Thus things usually harm rather than help men. Often is it like tonight's sounds and shapes, for they are really no different from other times, and yet striking the ear and eye they become so firmly [*liran*] and wonderfully a part of me. And so this existence of sounds and patterns is not what prevents me from gaining wisdom; for things are [not] enough to enslave men.

When sound is broken and shape shattered and the will [*zhi*] rises free, what is this will? Is it within? Or is it without? Or is it in a thing? Or does it cause the thing to be? Is there not a way of defining the difference? Most certainly, and I perceive the difference.

How great is the strength to be gained sitting in the night. Thus, cleansing the mind, waiting alone through the long watches by the light of a newly trimmed bright candle becomes the basis of an inner peace and of an understanding of things. This, surely, will I attain.

I made this record of a night vigil in 1492 during the autumn on the sixteenth day of the seventh month. Shen Chou of Suzhou.

SHEN CHOU (modern pinyin SHEN ZHOU) of Suzhou (1425-1509), inscribed holograph colophon to his hanging scroll-painting 'Night Vigil'; translated text here from Richard Edwards, *The Field of Stones; A Study of the Art of Shen Chou (1427-1509)* (Washington, D.C., 1962), p. 57; for another fuller account see James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore; Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1580* (New York, 1978), pp. 90-91 and plates 37-8 (monochrome reproduction); for an extended and recent investigation also see Kathlyn Maurean Liscomb, 'The Power of Quiet Sitting at Night: Shen Zhou's (1427-1509) Night Vigil', *Monumenta Serica*, 43 (1995), 381-403 (I have inserted her transcription of certain Chinese terms into the Edwards text, above; also, the 'not' in square brackets [para.

5] is inserted here because she records textual evidence that a character is probably missing and is probably *bu*, ‘not’). Poor-quality colour reproduction in *Ninety Years of Wu School Painting* (Taipei, 1975), p. 2, or <http://www.123soho.com/artgroup/national_palace_museum/1000/np_4ex4.htm>. The *Monumenta Serica* publication includes a good black-and-white reproduction plus detailed enlargement of the colophon and also of the picture-area (figs 1-3, pp. 393-5). Best internet images (b&w), which allow enlargement and zoom into detail with good resolution, are mounted in the Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, available online at <<http://huntington.wmc.ohio-state.edu/public/>> – here click on ‘search or browse the archive’ then in search box enter ‘night vigil’ and click on SEARCH.

Shen Zhou (in modern pinyin) was one of the exemplary and renowned major painter-calligraphers of the fifteenth-century Wu school that developed in the Suzhou area of central China, a little to the west of what is now Shanghai; for more information about this school see Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Sh'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 172-9, Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (2nd rev. ed., New York, 1962), pp. 65-82, and James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore*, Chap. 2. This prose text is translated into English by Edwards from the artist’s colophon, the inscribed upper portion of a painted scroll known as ‘Night Vigil’, ink and slight colours on paper, 84.8 x 21.8 cm, dated to the Hung-chih era, jen-tzu year [i.e., 1492], and now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei (ROC), with seals of Shen Zhou and others. This text in translation is also supplied in part, with comments, by Cahill (*Parting at the Shore*, p. 90), and more fully retranslated by Liscomb (my critical comments on some of her points should not obscure the many benefits I have derived from her full discussion).

The (lower) picture-area shews a small settlement of simple open-sided shelters (maybe not quite pavilions), nestled within a group of scattered pine trees rising up from sloping rough terrain at the foot of high mountain peaks, with a modest plank foot-bridge in the foreground leading across a mountain stream into the secluded central focus (on the plank-bridge motif see Esther Jacobson-Leong, ‘Place and Passage in the Chinese Arts: Visual Images and Poetic Analogues’, *Critical Enquiry*, 3 [1976], 345-368 [pp. 355, 358]; for a similar device compare T’ang Yin’s *The Cottage in Bamboo Forest* and his *Wu Yangzi Nourishing His Nature* [both Palace Museum, Taipeil]).

The ultra-tall pine trees, somewhat out of naturalistic perspective, rise from the ground level of the shelters, right up through the mist, apparently (by foreshortening) to the level of the mountains behind or at least their lower flanks; no doubt the near presence of the stream-water makes their footing moist and fertile (the pair of trees to the right may be broad-leaved, but those on the left are stylised conifers according to tradition). An allegorist might say, thought aspires upwards like these elongated tall trees, bare of lower branches; but trees thus hemmed in by permanent shadow from major landforms do of course always in response develop a characteristically taller habit. It's in their nature to behave as if like allegory, just as their actual long-lived species habit gained for them the iconic symbolism of human longevity.

There, beneath a layer of hovering misty vapour, precipitated by the cooling of moisture-bearing air after sundown, and within the central shelter (perhaps close to a traditional study-pavilion according to custom), sits the upright solitary scholar in meditation-posture on his low dais or *kang*, arms folded as the mark of bodily inaction, his books beside him on the table which also supports the candle-holder: a diminutive self-figure whose inner mind is fully disclosed in this outward scene, the interior of his shelter bright from the single candle, all held in motionless contemplation. (Kathlyn Liscomb refers to this light structure as 'a bucolic villa' [p. 396], wrong both as description and also in tone.) For a contemporary example of another reclusive mountain pavilion compare T'ang Yin's *Scholar in a Pavilion of circa 1499-1502*, borrowing many features of Shen Zhou's style (Palace Museum, Taipei; see Anne de Coursey Clapp, *The Painting of T'ang Yin* [Chicago, 1991], pp. 117-20 & fig. 38).

Here in Shen Zhou's painting the scholar's books lie on the table beside him but he is not looking at or towards them. He comments that 'the mind is bent on learning' and yet he chooses a book at random, this is not part of any plan of study: the learning sought after is supported by reading but is not to be won principally from books. The light from the inside candle marks a bright radiance of the heart/mind: that of the moon outside, a diffused luminous enhancement of natural appearance; this part-match in two kinds of light/enlightenment sets up a correspondence which is here also a problematic question. He has his back to the mountains which are not in his immediate field of view, even were the moon bright enough to allow them to be glimpsed at least in profile; they are part of his familiar inward knowledge of companionable forms, in the general

darkness outside, rather than visible to him as they are to us: we need to see what he already knows.

The tying of the reclusive scholar's top-knot playfully echoes the form of the thatched kiosk-roof behind him, which is maybe bright towards the apex because catching and reflecting light from the moon. The band of mist segregates the towering peaks from direct connection with the world of men, below; and further above is the third upper layer, of the text-space, inscribed downwards as reverse match for the upward movement of the ascending landscape. Above the highest mountain peak, in this upper text-area, is this unusually extensive colophon, a composed but half-spontaneous essay arising directly from the moment shewn in the picture, taking up some one-third of the complete picture format: this is the expressed mind-space of the whole composition. The mountain peaks are essential wilderness, within and beyond which meditation (Daoist, Chan-Buddhist, neo-Confucian) has traditionally belonged.

At first the absorbed self is immune to outer sound, but then his senses sharpen and he hears natural sounds or noises that come deeply into consciousness; as silence is restored, he ponders the connection between outward and inward perception, in relation to the formation of human resolve. Liscomb comments thus: 'Shen's essay conveys the belief that the existence of principle in everything enables people to experience a marvelous union with the things in their environment, as long as selfish desires do not distort or obscure their perceptions. Without such a belief in such an underlying unity, the link of human convictions and concerns with sounds made by plants, animals, and musical instruments would be considered by most people to be incidental or arbitrary' (p. 390).

But this is to separate the enquiring mode of speculative thinking from the art and insights of the painter. The scene depicted does indeed shew the human mind in nature as a central informing presence, preoccupied with central questions of traffic between subjective and objective reality and the priorities for human character and resolved action. But also it represents the material world itself, of both nature and man, as placed in the structure of a substantial landscape however idealised: the shelters are stationed where they are because the ledge in the lower part of the mountains is level and can support these informal dwelling-places, defended by trees and bushes, as neighbourhood forms, from wild winds and driving rain. The communal spaces around the shelters look to be neatly swept, as is of course to be expected. Even if the towering peaks owe almost

everything to generic image-ideas and profiles, within the tradition, the vernacular foreground of broken rocks and scree and vegetation is grounded in a reality not of the mind, but handled with affectionate regard for how such things are: too rough and stony for cultivation of crops but within reach of a close sympathy for the tones and formal contrasts of surface and its overt presence in the scheme of place. The treatment of this foreground is ethically principled, deeply attested by the plank bridge, and is intimate with the central purposes of the colophon essay.

The rustic plank bridge is thus not a formal, built structure, it is a 'natural' expedient, by well-established convention providing human access to this retired 'place' of nature: the mountain stream as here a modest barrier to man is also the expression of moisture as a need of all living things, and the plank is from a tree that had grown to maturity by advantage from this moisture. What flows and what remains still: the plank crosses the running stream but is supported by the firmness of the solid banks on either side, signaling the near and the far, the water descending from higher ground: the primal dimensions of being in space. The understated eloquence of this pathway for the viewer to enter this scene, to visit the human community within the small settlement beyond the bridge, resides in the simple, informal matching of art to nature, art hewn from nature to extend art's naturalised domain. As 'honoured guest' the viewer is invited by this visible link to follow the track which is a daily passage for those regularly using it. The bridge is just wide enough for a single person; no grand chariots or commercial wagons shall have business here.

Many traditional village settlements in rural settings would routinely have been fortified and gated, to provide protection against bandits, but here the prospect is innocent of defensive anxiety. The painter trusts the viewer, and we sense this from his serious, hospitable openness, the view unimpeded by darkness or gates or window coverings. Thus, the plank bridge conducts us directly into the disclosed inner heart-mind of the vigil itself. It is a spirit bridge, crafted out of solid timber.

Liscomb comments again, 'Shen employs semi-abstracted landscape forms to serve as metaphors for the moral resolve and thoughts aroused by various sounds of the night. Also, because the sounds came from things in his surrounding environment, using highly charged landscape forms to evoke his determined responses is an effective way to convey his marvelous union with those things by

means of his unobscured senses' (p. 396). This also cannot be right, or not the whole story, because for the painter the status of indeterminate passage-work in the treatment of foreground slopes and bushes, the light drawing-in of the tiles and shingles of the shelter roofing, the easy but attentive account of the channel cut down by the flowing water, are none of them mere metaphors: they are how the world is, of how this picture's composition derives seriously from the composure of human and natural place disclosed here. Little has been done to separate this group of vernacular shelters from the natural components of the mountain scene: the settlement is not enclosed by a gated fence, not much of the undergrowth has been cleared, the whole dwelling idiom is informal and even a shade precarious.

Indeed there is a visual community of forms and links. The rippling lateral rhythm of the roof-coverings speaks by echo of pattern to the running turbulence of the stream over its rocky bed, whose fresh clear water meets the domestic needs of the nearby dwellings, as the painter's brush washes onto the paper the moist smooth tints from his inkstone. If the scene carries meaning it's not by a scheme of representation but through a practice of observance and brushed-in sense of present things; if some of the rising upgrowth behind the main shelter is in fact bamboo, then the free-sketch treatment is in marked contrast to meticulous rendering of the bamboo forms by 'professional' artists, since for the scholar-painter, painting bamboo was, in Sherman Lee's phrase, 'a final test of brushwork' (*Chinese Landscape Painting*, p. 57). What is looked for is quite other, some sense of simplicity in which by conscious choice the art is not artful.

This theme of the painterly as non-subservient can be found as a thread in later aesthetic practice. Jonathan Hay discusses the 'Marbled Stone Cliff' page of the *Eight Views of the South* by Shitao (also known as Daoji, 1642-1707), an album in the British Museum, London, which carries a poem by the painter (probably written at the end of the 1670's) inscribed over a landscape containing, up on the mountain slope, another pavilion with open window-space within which can just be made out a solitary reflective figure; the inscribed poem is explicit in melancholy retrospect, revisiting the site of earlier memories as night pales into dawn:

I have long missed Taibai's pavilion
Now that I'm here again, I suddenly grow melancholy.
The pristine moon of past and present
Looks down sagely on autumn in the world.

The Three Mountains opposite seem to sit on the window ledge
Five drumbeats from the edge of the city mark the dawn.
Tomorrow I'll be gone, a thousand *li* away
Looking back on the water's fast current.

And yet despite this assertion of an apparently controlling nostalgia, Hay comments on how 'the painting resists reduction to this metaphoric reading through the filter of the poem' (Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* [Cambridge, 2001]), p. 311 and fig. 210; his translation). Haun Saussy has in his *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford, Cal., 1993) notably extended the discussion of metaphor and allegory in Chinese thought, and in his chapter 1, 'The Question of Chinese Allegory' he argues strongly against the kind of concept-classification which takes metaphor as the link which resolves difference by turning it to use, generative of signification. Citing Pauline Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1987) he comments:

The solidarity between ontology and literary theory, as Yu sees both being traditionally practiced in the West, is complete. Allegory "creates a hierarchical literary universe of two levels, each of which maintains its own coherence, but only one of which has ultimate primacy (Yu, p. 19). Both metaphor and allegory are two instances of an omnipresent law, that of mimesis or fictionality: "Mimesis is . . . predicated on a fundamental ontological dualism—the assumption that there is a truer reality transcendent to the concrete, historical realm in which we live, and that the relation between the two is replicated in the creative act and artifact" (Yu, p. 5) (Saussy, pp. 24-5).

The parallel with Shen Zhou's 'Night Vigil' will suggest that the two juxtaposed modes (pictorial and discursive) comprise an allegorical hybrid, in which the textual is mounted above the scenic, the strong meaning of the first ('higher') controlling and directing the weaker presence ('lower') of the second. This ignores the evident fact that Shen Zhou was first and foremost a painter, not a philosopher or essayist or even poet; his habit of thought is deeply visual and his ethical convictions find and reveal their primary evidence in his paintings, in his consistent treatment of what he sees and his priorities of regard. Is the picture then, in 'Night Vigil', the controlling primary

discourse? Again the answer must be ‘no’ or rather, this question too is ill-formed. The category-difference between painting and speculative autobiography is demonstrated as a kind of reciprocal parity, or each as metaphor/allegory for the other, each explicit in different ways as provided for in the medium, leaving the reader/viewer with the task of a deepened apprehension enhanced by seeing through reading and reading through seeing. Each mode involves recognising a self-reference and also escaping from it: the self-conscious mind is present in the narrative of thought and feeling as expressed in the grammar of language; but the pictorial also has its own grammar, in which the viewer must be practised if the scene is not to be misread or downgraded to subordinate status.

Thus, Shen Zhou’s shaggy foliage dots and hatchings are recognisably derived from standard painterly treatments of such landscape components, and yet they demonstrate also a chosen abstinence from neatness; the shaggy stipple climbs right up the far mountain peaks in a confident disregard of distance-perspective. To speak of these features as ‘the pleasantly awkward quality of the painted forms’ (Liscomb, p. 399) is to notice a characteristic and then rather completely to miss its point. Shen Zhou asks himself this (for him) quite urgent question, very ardently, in his essay: when the will rises free of externally perceived order in sound and sight, what is this will, is it in a thing, or does it cause the thing to be? These shaggy ink-forms are a latent but strong part of the answer: they are in the thing seen and known, just as the movements of brush and ink (*bimo*) cause them to be there on the paper and in the field of view, known in and through the construction of where they are. This is not to solve an ancient problem but to find energy and moral definition in bringing this problem to renewed life. Thus, ‘pleasantly awkward’ has to be a long way wide of the painterly commitment to a de-commissioning of sophisticated technique, as an ethical principle fully recognised as such in the essay-text.

As viewers we recognise that the social practice implicit in this scene is not that of a fully inhabited village-type settlement, these informal structures are more like summer lodges than year-round family homes. They are lightly constructed, and lightly sketched. And yet the barking dogs remind distinctly enough of the need to protect a domestic community from hostile attack, and the regular official drum-beats through the watches of the night confirm that social time is sequenced and marked in this public way. If the clear-striking bell is from a temple, then this too is another kind of community sounding

out its spirit-presence in habitable space. (For another night vigil punctuated by drum-beats see Du Fu, 'Ge ye' ['Night at West House'], composed c.766; David Hawkes, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* [Oxford, 1967], pp. 181-4.)

We recognise also the divided condition of a literary 'pastoral' mode, since the sophistication of the scholar's books and thoughts is not quite naturally at home in this simple rustic environment; his window-space is fully open (it must still be summer weather) to take in a wide view, whereas across the windows of the other shelters there appear to be crossed drapes or curtains; thus, his wakefulness must be in contrast to the natural sleep of those whose day-work has made them tired; so that there is maybe a task to reconcile one rhythm and way of life with the other, through admitting fully the separate categories of reality and being-in-the-world, searching out what may reveal the links across this difference. Perhaps such links or bridges can be profoundly simple, like the informal plank over the stream; but perhaps such simplicity is not easily grasped by a complex mind. Allegory would just be a short cut, intrinsically shallow. In the larger background we recognise also the contrasts of absolute and local temporality; these rocks and mountains have been in existence long before the first men walked the earth, even if continually eroded and shaped by weather and climate change; but these trees and bushes have a shorter span, and some of the minor vegetation will be merely seasonal and transient. Thus 'place' is made up of many inherently contradictory elements, even disregarding the perceptual categories brought to it by differences of human and social frequentation.

The scholar-painter will depend on this sense of community as brought to him by these sounds at night because, even if he's clearly a privileged member of the literati class, he is supported by his human environment and he is not detached from the overt reality of small things, not merely wrapped up into metaphors of heart/mind. What he sees is the world that stands and counts for him, before what he thinks, and his understanding lies somewhere between these modalities. So much in Shen Zhou's career as a painter of informal notebook (album) scenes, treated with deep affection like the domestic texture of a natural order, stands as testimony to his non-subscription to allegory as a master trope.

The relations here are, then, not overall those of illustration, nor of allegory or symbolic equivalence, nor yet of distinguishment or separation through resemblance and its iconography; however much

traditional classifications may propose otherwise, and even though these category-aspects all do have some specific roles to play. Neither working mode, discursive or pictorial, is secondary to the other. The writing is not on the picture nor even quite in the picture; it is integrally an expressed component of the whole idea and its trace, planned for in dividing up the paper-surface and no doubt done using the same brushes and the same ink (we may note in passing that the writing-style is by no means elegant, but rapid and unlaboured, like a letter or journal). Thus earth and heaven are zonally distinct, and yet their unity is both assumed and also deeply in question. The limited colour-tints are very muted, the overall tonal range quite shadowed, as suits the night-time scene: again Cahill comments, ‘Night and moonlight are suggested in the painting only by the paleness of color in some parts and a slight darkening in others’ (p. 91). The idiom is Shen Zhou’s deceptively informal and relaxed late manner; the whole composition is extremely delicate and sensitive to its own inwardly alert and resonant atmosphere, not at all regulated by fastidiousness as in Ni Tsan (Ni Zan) and others. On this painting Cahill comments, further:

While Shen Chou does not specifically relate these meditations to the process of artistic creation, it is probably not unwarranted to use them to illuminate his beliefs, and those of Ming literati artists in general, on the relationship between external phenomena and one’s experience of them—or, by extension, perceived images in nature and the transformation of them in art. Sensory stimuli are in themselves too bewilderingly diverse, press upon the consciousness too constantly and demandingly, to be absorbed fully by the mind or represented in their raw state in art. The literati artists’ continual insistence that verisimilitude, “form likeness,” is not their aim is based on a conviction that attempts to represent the world as it appears miss the point; realism in art does not truly reflect human experience of the world, or understanding of it; and it is that experience and understanding they mean to convey—insofar as they choose to engage themselves, as artists, with nature at all. At moments of extraordinary clarity, when the mind is receptive but at rest, uncluttered by distracting considerations—moments such as Shen Chou records so movingly here—one’s perceptions become a part of one’s

self, in an undifferentiated “passage of felt life.” The cumulative absorption and ordering of such perceptions is the “self-cultivation” of the Confucian system, and this in turn is the proper stuff of art (pp. 90-91).

For the arguments against “form-likeness” or commonplace naturalism in depicting external appearances see James Cahill, *The Lyric Journey; Poetic Painting in China and Japan* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 73-80. It is probably correct to add also that the habits of thought and perception latent in the ‘Night Vigil’ text reveal a distinct influence of Daoist/Buddhist attitudes to the seclusion of mind in nature, following the true Way by meditative practice and the suppression of assertive self-agency; though Liscomb prefers to connect these features more with neo-Confucian practice and ideas. Wen Fong comments on how ‘the literary Taoists, men of intellectual achievement and great influence, combined Neo-Taoist metaphysical thought with Confucian learning. As friends and companions of leading scholars and artists, they infused the Chiang-nan literati culture with Taoist mysticism, which served as the underlying philosophy for reclusive living. Several literary Taoists were also accomplished painters’ (Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation; Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 8th-14th Century* [New Haven, Conn., 1992], p. 470); compare also Anne de Coursey Clapp, *The Painting of T’ang Yin*, pp. 17-24, for an outline reconstruction of T’ang Yin’s ‘syncretic beliefs’. Marc F. Wilson comments regarding Shen Zhou’s poem-colophon to his ‘Landscape in the Style of Ni Tsan’ of 1484: ‘Shen’s poem is essentially a summary evaluation of his life and his place in a Confucian society that set a premium on official service and on historical and literary learning. The self-deprecatory tone rests in Taoist alternatives of withdrawal and personal cultivation’ (*Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting; The Collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and the Cleveland Museum of Art* [Cleveland, Ohio, 1980], p. 179). Richard Edwards comments, also:

These ideas may spring from Buddhist concepts—and certainly Shen Chou pictures himself seated like a Buddhist sage in his shelter—this stands as a kind of artist’s creed. For as the artist must fundamentally deal with matter, the creation or moulding of matter in terms of sounds and shapes, these cannot be considered irrelevant; they are not mere illusion. Rather, all appearance, all manifestations of

matter, all “things” hold the core of truth. It is through acceptance rather than denial of the world that one learns the nature of reality. Most particularly in these later years Shen Chou paints against a background such as this. For one can see in his scrolls a marvelous balance between the obligation to paint the beauty of the world as it appears to the eye and the necessity to suggest its fragile and deceptive quality as mere appearance. He thus would lead us to its inner and essential nature, to “an understanding of things” (*The Field of Stones*, p. 57).

Such fundamental questions may be approached alternatively by closer attention to paradoxes of temporality. The double presence of visual image and its intimately related text-essay prompts strongly the question of the time frame or time flow for this scroll. The completed physical production by the artist hangs motionless before the viewer: yet to absorb the picture, as also to read the essay, prolongs our encounter in real time. The scene presented is quite still, motionless: the human figure is in alert posture but also relaxed and serene, without need of physical movement: yet the thought-process reported in the stages of the essay is exploring and testing ideas and feelings, traversing a sequence of questions about experience, inward and outward reality. Consciousness is steady and unhurried, but by no means static. The passage through almost-dark night as a linkage of solitary waking hours towards dawn makes a contrast with the closed window-coverings of the other small shelters, where we may suppose other human beings to be at rest and asleep. Theirs will be the shared social activity of the day-time world.

The composition of the time frame is thus pointedly ambiguous, indeed this ambiguity is the notional ‘place’ of this whole enterprise. Outside the mind of the singular thinker who is also the artist making the external image of this suspended moment, the mountains represent forms that are permanent and enduring: the force for existence of nature prior to man, that will outlast mere human presence. Shen Zhou is, at the instant of his essay, about 67 years old, not a young man but with his own sense of accumulated selfhood. The season is autumn and, as winter approaches, these upland shelters will probably soon be exchanged for more permanent and weather-proof dwellings down below. The tall pine trees remind the viewer of their traditional reference to lasting age; but the more small-scale foliage is seasonal and transitory, the stream flows continuously,

downwards to the fertile rice fields that will nourish the artist-thinker; the sounds that punctuate the silence also calibrate the felt lapse of time. Growing insight into ideas that are true can partake of a permanence in truth itself: but thinking and searching in mind and revolving uncertain questions are within the flux of experience, and comprise it. What is the form of all these contradictions and complementarities about time and duration, permanent and relative, within the self and yet also outside and beyond it? The underlying tacit form is that of mortal life itself, vital principle in all things, joining the human and non-human and even the apparently non-living, within the order of nature and the fluent activity of heart-mind.

This is a conjoint image of what we are to recognise and ourselves experience as The Way, ever-changing in appearance and yet also ever-constant in latent presence for those who can discover its power. The power of undistracted self-understanding, searched for in this essay and latently visible in the pictorial image, confers strength of will, to resolve doubts in aligning individual purpose with The Way and its immanent directive guidance. Once again, the representation here is not allegory or even symbolism: the viewer/reader of this scroll is within the scene and its vigilance and yet of course out of it, just as the meditative human figure (almost but not quite our proxy) is within the natural and human place all around him and yet, also of course, out of it.

It would not be wrong, across cultures, to think of Coleridge's somewhat similar meditative night-piece poem, 'Frost at Midnight' of 1798, another intimate vigil within a darkened landscape; except that Shen Zhou's painting together with its essay-text can set up a dialogue, if not an enquiry, in wider dimensions; reaching deep into questions of human character about how the self is formed, what gives it strength and truth to principle, what is to be learned and understood from what we know of the outer world and its reality, coming into thought through the eye and brush: what that is and how we come to know it rightly and truly.

This way of thinking may be considered in relation to the brief summary by David Hawkes of the philosophical opening ideas of the *Hong Lou Meng* (*The Story of the Stone* (*The Dream of the Red Chamber*)): 'The idea that the worldling's "reality" is illusion and that life itself is a dream from which we shall eventually awake is of course a Buddhist one; but in Xueqin's hands it becomes a poetical means of demonstrating that his characters are both creatures of his imagination and at the same time the real companions of his golden

youth. To that extent it can be thought of as a literary device rather than as a deeply held philosophy, though it is really both' (David Hawkes [trans.], *The Story of the Stone: A Chinese novel by Cao Xueqin, in Five Volumes* [Harmondsworth, Mddx, 1973], p. 45). The nearest that Cao Xueqin will get to the inwardness of Shen Zhou's meditation is his descriptions of flute-playing at night, vol. 3 chap. 76 (Penguin ed., pp. 507-526); compare also Andrew Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in "Dream of the Red Chamber"* (Princeton, N.J., 1976), pp. 109-10, as cit. in Saussy, p. 29.

WRITTEN ON A FROSTY NIGHT

*'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness.*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Like pushing aside layers and layers of reed stalks, at summer's end
when the aroma of firewood through chimneys wafts gently in the air
comes to me, creeping low, on a soft breeze—a calling
unfolds delicately, yet seems just around my eyelids,
when the color duckweed, swaying in clumps, stirs up bits of memory
when the long-tailed dragonfly flies toward me, hesitant,
and trembling, it hovers above the twilight-dyed ripples
and tries to land on a thorny water plant,
scattering powdery pistils, making dusk return to the swiftly
changing moment when I push aside layers and layers of reed stalks,
like pushing aside layers and layers of reed stalks at the end of that
faraway summer

So I see, like the last ashes in an incense burner
in front of the already dim altar that insists on shouting
in silence, trying hard to elevate the instant to an eternal memory
in my faint unease like transparent moth wings flapping
outside the window, sound of dried, broad leaves like hearts, blowing
about one by one,
circling in the wind before falling at random into the cool shade of the
empty courtyard,

I see an expanse of light on the startled pond at summer's end
lingering at ease, softly chanting a long, ancient tune, intending to
turn fate into luck when frogs croak at intervals in the lonely hour
when crickets besiege childhood wilderness, when I push aside layers and
layers of reed
stalks to find time slowly transcending summer's end

YANG MU (born Yang Ching-hsien, Taiwan, 1940), trans. from 'Shuangye Zuo' of 1985, in *No Trace of the Gardener; Poems of Yang Mu*, trans. Lawrence R. Smith and Michelle Yeh (New Haven, Conn., 1998), p. 192; see also Michelle Yeh, *Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice since 1917* (New Haven, Conn., 1991), pp. 109-12, for slightly differing translation and also full discussion. The epigraph is the author's own placement, in English in the original.

J. H. Prynne, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge,
revised October 2009