

XI CHUAN 西川

On Reading: Two Poems

Translated from the Chinese by Lucas Klein

On Reading

— *after Inger Christensen*

Some people have read too many Chinese books, too few Western books
Some people have read too few Chinese books, too many Western books

Some people only read Western books, but don't know a single phrase in another language
Some people only read Chinese books, and go by the alias Mountain Hermit, as if they lived at
the end of some mountain road

Some people have read too many Chinese books and Western books, and become world-weary
Some people have read too few Chinese books and Western books, and live on
nothing but their own genius and intuition

Some people let their words flow with neither genius nor intuition, but don't have
the silence for commas or periods

People who know how to use semicolons and dashes must not be Chinese

Some people have read too many Chinese books and Western books, but haven't read
any Arabian or African books

Some people have read a few Latin American books, but don't know for sure if they
were Western or Southern

Are there even Southern books? in the Southern hemisphere the seasons are opposite
from in the Northern hemisphere

But Southern books don't need to be read from the last page to the first

Some people think China is the East and don't bother thinking about India though of course India is the South of the East

And Pakistani and Afghani writers write books too even if they don't care about Confucius

Some people have read a few books and walk with their noses in the air, judging the rivers and mountains. The rivers and mountains are listening

Some people have read a few books and become overcautious, proper in word and deed, breathing quietly

Some people pretend to have read a lot of books but in fact they're illiterate

Some people really have read a lot of books but in fact they're illiterate too

Some people really are illiterate but yell at people who read

Some people hate being yelled at and so pick up a book in search of the Truth

Some people hate being yelled at and so swear never to read again only to find out that elephants and sika deer don't read either

Some people don't read a single book but are written about in books and never find out

Some people read books in search of happiness but not to seek pleasure

Some people seek pleasure but have read not a few books which means people who read are not in fact destined for lives of genteel poverty

Some people read themselves thin an exercise in self-flagellation

Some people read themselves fat filling their bellies and never feeling stuffed

Everyone who reads will get older the more they read of course not reading doesn't mean you don't age

On matters of life and death there's no difference between reading and not reading just like there's no difference between knowing kungfu and not knowing it

Some people keep on reading, drifting away in solitude, like the river flowing into the sea

Some people read until they're thirty and then halt, then stare at the ground in a daze
until they're thirty-seven

At thirty-seven some people bid farewell to their genius and idiosyncratic ways of life
They sit down, turn on the desk lamp, and write, to deplete themselves and be
forgotten by the world

Some people build rooms for their books only going into these spectral rooms in the
light of day

Some people spend time in these spectral rooms at night but they don't sleep there

Some people throw all the books out of their libraries emptying them so they have
somewhere to meditate

Some people empty out their libraries so they can have a place to store merchandise
but they never become successful businesspeople

Some people think emptying out their libraries means emptying out their minds
But in their minds people are always crying people are always yelling this makes
them depressed

When depressed some people walk into mountains of books actually they're
mountains of magazines

Some people sit amid mountains of books and never come out because they can't find
a path out of the mountains

Some people light fires in the mountains of books thinking about how they'll be
denounced in a hundred years

Some people burst out laughing in the flames of burning books purely out of hatred
for evil

Some people burst out laughing in the flames of burning books believing this is the
best way to go up in smoke

Some people think a mountain of books will never burn up so obviously eternal life
must be possible

Some people walk out of mountains of books and spend their remaining time

persuading others to walk into mountains of books
Some people walk out of mountains of books and keep their lips sealed about what
might be contained there

Some people talk to books as if the authors were their close friends
Some people don't talk to authors but bow to them as if making sacrifices to their
ancestors

Some people think that to believe everything in books is worse than to have no books
at all these people are awesome they fully inhabit the moment
Some people only believe what's in books scorning the living world this takes
believing in oneself

Some people think that they look ugly if they don't read for three days
Some people have a natural beauty and fear books will steal their good looks

In the past Chinese people said in books can be found roomfuls of gold but now the
price of gold fluctuates wildly
And King Solomon of Israel said "he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow"

But the sorrow of the great is not the sorrow of the menial their reasons are different
But people who read always explicate the sorrow of the menial as an implication of
the sorrow of the great

Before the Six Dynasties the Chinese were sad and it wasn't due to reading
After the Song Dynasty the Chinese loved reading more and more but only read
Confucius and Mencius until Marx and Lenin came along

Some people read so as to abandon books in the end and so abandon themselves
Some people read books and inadvertently turn themselves into bookworms

March 8, 2016

论读书

——仿英格·克里斯蒂安森

有的人中国书读得太多了，西方书读得太少

有的人中国书读得太少，西方书读得太多了

有的人只读西方书，但一句外语也不懂

有的人只读中国书，自号某某山人，仿佛他真住在山道的尽头

有的人中国书、西方书都读得太多，变得厌倦人世，

有的人中国书、西方书都读得太少，活在世上全靠天才和直觉

有的人没有天才和直觉也能滔滔不绝，但也没有沉默做逗号和句号

懂得使用分号和破折号的人看来不是中国人

有的人中国书、西方书都读得太多，但没读过阿拉伯和非洲的书

有的人读过几本拉丁美洲的书，但分不清那算西方书还是南方书

难道还有南方书吗？南半球的季节与北半球相反

南半球的书却不需要从最后一页读回第一页

有的人以为中国就是东方全不管印度也是东方当然它在东方的南方

而巴基斯坦和阿富汗的作家也写书尽管他们不关心孔夫子

有的人读了点书便趾高气昂了，指点江山了。江山听着

有的人读了点书便谨小慎微了，谨言慎行了，安静地喘气

有的人假装读过很多书其实是个文盲

有的人真读过很多书其实也是个文盲

有的人是真正的文盲却对读书人呼来喝去

有的人因为被呼来喝去遂愤恨地打开书本寻求真理

有的人愤恨于被呼来喝去发誓再不读书才发现大象梅花鹿从不读书

有的人一本书不读却被写进了书里而他自己不知道

有的人读书是为了寻找快乐但不是寻欢作乐

有的人寻欢作乐但书读得也不少这说明读书人并非注定清苦

有的人就把自己读瘦了头悬梁锥刺股

有的人就把自己读胖了读到满腹经纶可并不觉得腹胀

所有读书的人只会越读越老当然不读书也免不了衰老

在生死问题上读书与不读书没什么区别就像练拳不练拳没什么区别

有的人书越读越多，仿佛从河流进入大海，孤独地飘荡

有的人书读到三十岁戛然而止，然后望着大地出神到三十七岁

有的人在三十七岁告别了自己所谓天才的不着调的生活方式

坐下来，打开台灯，写书，以便将自己耗尽并且被世人忘记

有的人为书籍盖一幢房子自己只在白天进入这幽灵的房间

有的人夜间也待在幽灵的房间里但是不在其中睡觉

有的人把书从书房里扔出来腾空书房用于冥想

有的人腾空书房用于储存货物但自己也没能变成成功的商人

有的人以为腾空了书房就腾空了大脑

但大脑里总是有人哭泣有人怒吼这让他心烦意乱

有的人心烦意乱地走进书之山其实是走进了杂志之山

有的人坐在书山里不再出来是因为找不到出山的路经

有的人在书山里点火想到百年后会有人对自己痛加斥责
有的人在焚书的火焰里哈哈大笑纯粹是因为痛恨邪恶

有的人在焚书的火焰里哈哈大笑觉得这是最好的自焚
有的人认为书山当然是烧不尽的所以永生当然是可能的

有的人走出了书山剩下的时间是劝别人走进书山
有的人走出了书山对书山里的事物三缄其口

有的人对书籍说话好像作者是自己的熟人
有的人不同作者说话只是向他们鞠躬就像祭祀先祖

有的人认为尽信书不如无书这得是多牛的人啊他深入当下
有的人只信书上说的蔑视一个活生生的世界这也得自信满满

有的人觉得三日不读书面目可憎
有的人天生丽质害怕书籍会夺走容颜

过去中国人的说法是书中自有黄金屋可现在的金价忽低忽高
而以色列的索罗门王说“积累知识就是积累悲哀”

但大人物的悲哀不是小人物的悲哀其原因不同
但读书人总是把小人物的悲哀解说等同大人物的悲哀

六朝以前的中国人就悲哀过了而且不是因为读书
宋代以后的中国人越来越爱读书但只读孔孟之书直到马列传来

有的人读书是为了最终放弃书本直至放弃自己
有的人读书在不知不觉中就变成了书虫

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On the Noble

They have to have read some books but can't have read too much, or they'll take on the relativism and cynicism known to readers.

In books of all kinds the noble tend to read biographies, like they're trying to live themselves into biographies.

They don't have to be interested in nobility *per se*. The best nobility is a natural nobility. But they always emulate the nobility of their elders.

Their main source of spiritual wealth is their idealism. Before the candlelight of idealism, the world cannot but darken.

But beware the darkness beneath the candle of idealism. Moths that fly into this darkness become so cunning they're no longer moths.

They must consciously be more intelligent than others, but not too intelligent, or they will start considering how to take advantage of others' stupidity.

One of the secrets of the noble is their stupidity. They may reveal their stupidity at times but they never make a fool of themselves deliberately.

They may be both stupid and intelligent, but cannot be clever and foolish.

If you're going to play, play big: they pick big watermelons, climb big mountains. They bask in the light of big moons.

For them the truth is held to be self-evident. Consciously they are qualified to speak for truth, which is itself self-evident.

If a sense of mission rises like a fever, they will burn like a boiling hero.

In the absence of a precise definition of truth, goodness, and beauty, they will sing the praises of truth, goodness, and beauty. As an anti-intellectual.

Anti-intellectuals all believe morality is natural, but at times they may be undecided about whether to sacrifice high morals for low ones.

Are there levels to morality? If so, then what level is the underworld on? What level heaven?

They say nothing of this. They lower their heads. They're not acting dumb, they're just unsure.

They definitely exhibit a certain childlike innocence at least in the eyes of others. Innocence proves a person's transparency.

They may not always be temperate at least in the eyes of others. Where are there nobles who are eccentric?

If they do something inappropriate, they must have a noble excuse. They must convince themselves, swallowing their own saliva.

They shed tears over the social injustices of society, for people who have been hurt, at times even for homeless cats and dogs.

But they cannot investigate evil. They avoid it. Whether it be internal or external, black or white.

They may suffer attacks that come from their own souls. Only at such times do they know they have souls.

At such times crying is no use. However long they cry, however good they look, how moving it may be—useless. Don't count on sympathy from the devil.

In such cases they must maintain indifference, to keep the black bears of selfishness behind their backs at bay.

They must prune the branches of desire, yet water love, a contradiction that is a noble contradiction.

They must not linger in the garden of seduction, must remain confident of their invulnerability in the chamber of fear, confident that one hundred poisons could not succeed.

If their hearts yield to grief, it is a pale blue grief, like the first batch of arts students after May 4, 1919.

They have to express forgiveness like high-level sophisticates of the Republican Era. But that won't keep them from sometimes cursing people behind their backs like punching bags in the sixties.

They must be kind to the petty until they can't bear it, chew them out, then feel guilty about it, until another petty person comes along.

Humble overestimation of themselves is essential. Because of this they do not associate with most people. They only associate with themselves.

The noble can't avoid loneliness, but they are never strangers to themselves. They never leave themselves surprised.

They are usually spectators to some degree, because the spectator is always clean, like a book whose pages have not been cut.

They stand in the rain or snow, actively or passively. Passive spectatorship is the rule among the noble.

But the noble cannot be too noble. More noble than the noble are either be gods or charlatans.

They can't quibble over small favors. They must be as magnanimous as mobsters. So they glow, and gain weight.

They can't quibble over small favors, and must often give of themselves, so as to understand what *dedication* really means.

They do not need the encouragement of applause. But it's better to have it. The way a clear sky becomes more beautiful with a couple clouds drifting by.

They need to know how to appreciate beauty in the world, even if they come off as uncouth, but as for understanding the sublime—not really!

They have to be ready with nostalgia, with recollections, and with gazing into the future, but they may have short memories.

They may be from the past or the future. As for whether they're from the present, well, they've never thought about that.

They've never thought about the meaning of the present, but they must love their family and friends, and even strangers, though as for whether they love themselves they'll follow nature's course.

Their love only trucks with small amounts of money. They need to believe too much money would smelt their nobility like a furnace.

To avoid the sense of putting on a show they must become part of the crowd of people with a small amount of money, must be a noble sheep walking amid a herd of sheep.

They never sneak sideways glances at anyone. When they look at you they face you full on. The face of their sincerity has only a front and no profile.

Even in the dark of night they appear to only have a front. This is the only way they are concerned with appearances. The best way to look in a mirror is straight on.

Unlike everyone else, when the noble look in mirrors their reflections are their past lives, while everyone else sees their faces.

In this respect the noble have maintained a touch of unsophisticated mysticism. Even if they probably won't admit it.

The noble with mystical tendencies are prone to overstatement, but usually to no effect.

So why be noble? For dignity? For peace of mind? For happiness? It must bring some benefit.

To be noble, when the world is against them, they fight a death match against the world.

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论高尚者

得读过几本书但不能读得太多，不能培养读书人的相对主义和犬儒主义。

在各类图书中高尚的人一般只读传记，仿佛他是要活成一本传记。

他并不非得对高尚本身感兴趣。最好的高尚是天然的高尚。但他总向高尚的前辈看齐。

他最主要的精神财富是理想主义。在理想主义的烛光面前，世界不得不暗淡。

但要谨防理想主义蜡烛的灯下黑。扑进灯下黑的飞蛾全都狡猾得不像飞蛾。

他得自觉比别人聪明，但不能聪明太多，否则就要琢磨利用别人的愚蠢。

高尚之人的隐私之一就是他的愚蠢。有时他也会显现他的愚蠢但并非故意出丑。

或许他得既聪明又愚蠢，但不能是小聪明和小愚蠢。

要玩就玩大的：他得挑大个的西瓜，爬大个的山。他得欣赏大个的月亮。

对他来说天道不证自明。他自觉有资格代天说话，这也是不证自明的。

要是使命感像发烧一样发作，他会烧成一个滚烫的英雄。

在拿不准真善美的准确定义的情况下，他得高歌真善美。做个反智主义者。

反智主义者统统认为道德天成，但有时，他又会犹豫该否为高级道德去牺牲低级道德。

难道道德是分层的吗？道德若分层，那阴曹地府是多少层？天堂又是多少层？

对此他不置可否。他低下头。他不是装傻，他是拿不准。

他肯定得有些童心啦至少在别人看来。童心可保证一个人的透明。

他不一定总是性情的啦至少在别人看来。哪有高尚的人不着四六？

如果他干了什么不妥的事，他得有高尚的借口。他得自我说服，咽回自己的唾沫。

他为社会的不公，为受到伤害的人们哭泣，有时也为无家可归的小猫小狗流眼泪。

但他不能探讨邪恶。他回避邪恶。无论是外在的还是内在的，黑色的还是白色的。

他有时会遭到来自他自己灵魂的严肃打击。这时他才知道他是有灵魂的。

这时哭是没用的。哭得再长久，再好看，再感人也没用。别指望魔鬼的善心。

在此情况下他得依然坚持一个淡淡的我，好赶走身后自私自利的大狗熊。

他得给欲望剪枝，却给爱浇水，这矛盾啊，是高尚的矛盾。

在诱惑的花园他不能逗留，在恐惧的房间他得自信刀枪不入，百毒莫功。

如果他心生哀愁那也只能是淡蓝色的，如五四之后第一拨文艺青年。

他得表达他的原谅如高层民国范儿。但这不妨碍他有时背后骂人如 60 年代的受气包。

他得善待小人直到忍无可忍，甩他一嘴巴，然后内疚，内疚，直到另一个小人出现。

谦虚的自我高估是必要的。由于这一点他不与俗人为伍。他只好与自己为伍。

高尚的人难免孤独，但他从不是自己的陌生人。他从不叫自己大吃一惊。

他往往是某种意义上的旁观者，因为旁观者总是干净的，如尚未拆封的书籍。

他站在雨里、雪里，主动或者被动。被动的旁观者中高尚者居多。

可是高尚者也不能过于高尚。比高尚还高尚的要么是神要么是伪君子。

他不能计较小恩小惠。他得大度如江湖大哥。所以他发光，甚至发福。

他不能计较小恩小惠，还得经常献出自己，好理解“奉献”这个词的基本含义。

他不需要被掌声鼓励。但有掌声更好。就像晴朗的天空飘几朵白云更美丽。

他得能够欣赏美丽的世界，哪怕它略显俗气，但理解崇高，说不上！

他得具备触景生情的能力，回忆的能力，展望未来的能力，但可能有一个坏记性。

他可能是过去的人或者未来的人。至于是不是现在的人他没想过。

没想过现在的含义，但他得爱家人、朋友，甚至陌生人，至于是否要爱自己他只能顺其自然。

他的爱只能与小数额的钱财挂钩。他得相信太多的钱财会像大铁炉子熔化高尚。

为避免做秀的感觉他得成为只拥有小数额钱财的众人，得是一只高尚的羊走在羊群中间。

他从不斜视，偷看他人。他看你时他的脸迎着你。他的真诚只有正面没有侧面。

即使在暗夜里他也只有正面形象。只在这一点上他注重形象问题。正面照镜子最方便。

与别人不同，高尚者会在镜子里照出自己的前世，别人只能照出容貌。

在这一点上高尚者保留了一点点古朴的神秘主义。尽管他也许不承认。

具有神秘主义倾向的高尚者常常发出耸听的危言，但往往无效。

那为什么要高尚呢？为了尊严吗？为了安心吗？为了愉快吗？一定有些好处。

做一个高尚的人，世界跟他过不去时他跟这世界死磕。

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