

THE TEARS OF LOVE BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND BEAUTY IN “A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS” AND BULGARIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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A. Introducing “A Dream of Red Mansions” to Bulgarian Readership

Presenting *A Dream of Red Mansions* in Bulgarian translation for the first time is not an easy undertaking. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first Chinese classical novel translated into my native tongue, if we accept the term as referring to the period of Ming and Qing dynasties. What could possibly relate a novel of such grandeur to our Bulgarian mind? What thread could possibly lead a Bulgarian reader through the folds of time back into a past unknown and unsavoured, such as the past Cao Xueqin describes? I took myself back in time to identify that powerful impulse which compelled me to undertake the translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* into Bulgarian. I remember two sparks that started a fire of love for this novel in my heart: nostalgia and beauty. These two somehow go hand in hand, and are often nourished by the tears of love.

Nostalgia is a powerful source of inspiration. It is also a great moving force that leads us to a rediscovery of the beauty of the past in a deeply emotional, poetic way. I believe it was this power that moved Cao Xueqin’s brush through the strenuous process of writing his masterpiece. Coming into deeper touch with the Chinese soul, I gradually realised that what relates me to China is not only a simple admiration for its *culture of beauty* and *culture of the heart*, but a much deeper similarity between the Bulgarian soul and the Chinese soul that was evident in times past. It is for this reason that I dedicate my first humble essay on *A Dream of Red Mansions* (hereinafter, *the Dream*) precisely to a long-cherished insight into these two: *nostalgia* and *tears of love*, which created the amazingly beautiful world of the novel.

Associated with an epic reminiscence of a glorious past, in personal as well as symbolically national plan, Cao Xueqin’s novel can be very well presented to our Bulgarian readership within a similar context. Intuitively guided by such a feeling, in my Epilogue to the first Bulgarian volume of the novel I dared to employ a simile which at first glance might seem striking, but which appeals to the reader in a very “Bulgarian” way:

“Dear Reader,

“Imagine that in the Bulgarian 14th century, in the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, a decade or two before it would be brought down in ruins, a great Bulgarian writer appeared, a genius whose talents clearly transcended his own era. Imagine that this Bulgarian writer decided to immortalise the grandeur, splendour and entire high culture of a wealthy noble family, by doing so striving to collect in a single book all that he would have us remember of the quintessence of Bulgarian spiritual life, Bulgarian art and culture, Bulgarian customs, homes and language. All of this he tried to incorporate in his novel with such clarity, with such poetic tenderness and filial love, that in his great book he could keep and pass on *the very life of his time*. He wished to describe it with the exquisite subtlety of the accomplished connoisseur and with the rich vocabulary of the most elegant language a people could bequeath to its children. Imagine, then, dear reader, that such a writer had appeared then, and had written such a book about our Bulgarian society – its time, its spirit, its faith, its culture, all things the Bulgarians achieved during that golden era in which he wrote his masterpiece, with the deep foreboding that soon this “Bulgarian dream” would be scattered by the vicissitudes of the winds of history. This then unknown and cherished writer would be our Bulgarian *Cao Xueqin*. His book would be not merely a crowning masterpiece of our medieval literature, but also a concise and rich encyclopedia of the endemic life of Bulgarians at the end of our Second Kingdom.

“*A Dream of Red Mansions* is just such a book as regards the late middle ages of China: a towering book, a book in which, as though in a magic seashell, the whole sea of old Chinese life and culture is contained.”

A. *Nostalgia as Culture*

“Nostalgia and consequently nostalgic literature are frequently critiqued as affected, sentimental, and a way to falsify the past through strategies of forgetting rather than recollecting. Misused as a term of abuse, the word nostalgia is, in fact, often taken up to describe something it is not.” [“Nostalgia and the Victorian Novel”]

Nostalgia is a universal thirst for a return to and a quest for safety from a tempestuous present. I take the liberty of employing the notion of *nostalgia* in

a rather particular sense: ***the acute feeling of the transience of life, beauty and love, and a Faustian craving for a never-passing moment.*** This concept of nostalgia – the view I humbly offer in my essay, – rests on the vision Baoyu experienced of a disappearing world while listening to Daiyu’s chanting of the *Ode to the Buried Flowers*. In this way, I take nostalgia both as *a craving to return* and *a foretaste of inevitable parting*. Nostalgia imbues insightful love with the bitter tears of that foretaste. Unhappy love is not the only love that is drowned in bitter tears. In fact, if there be tears in happy love, they are the tears of nostalgic foretaste, of an inner knowledge that “meeting is the beginning of parting”. Thus, in its most sublime sensitivities, love in this world is wedded to tears. “Love and nostalgia cannot be separated... In both love and nostalgia a wave of presence swirls around with a wave of loss’... It makes sense that being nostalgic is similar to being in love” [Wilson, p. 24]. It is for precisely this reason that I include *the Dream’s* nostalgia in the same melody line with tears and love.

As a force of literary culture, therefore, *nostalgia* instils its crystallization, sublimation and transformation into literary art. It is a topic of vast dimensions, which cannot be treated in a single essay of this scale. However, by way of introduction, I should like to put Cao Xueqin’s great *A Dream of Red Mansions* in the context of nostalgia, and draw a few parallels to the same artistic impetus in a number of Bulgarian literary works.

The sense of transience is seldom detached from the finest works of lyricism in literature. Indeed, lyricism is not merely a poetic quality: it is the wellspring of *all* literature. Lyricism, which is so closely imparted to nostalgia, is at the core of any literary undertaking:

“As a matter of fact, all literature that is worthwhile, that is the expression of man’s soul, is lyrical in origin.” [Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People*, p. 221]

I would go so far as to say that nostalgia is inherent in any poetic work of lyricism, whether it be prose or verse. It is a profoundly human quality, and an asset of sensitivity, to feel the fleeting wings of time beat upon your brow, to hearken to the clock of your heart ticking away till the unknown, and yet so certain, moment of your final breath. And yet, this is true not only on the smaller scale of an individual life and heart, – it is, in Lin Yutang’s words, also true when speaking of a nation:

“The lyrical origin of literature makes it possible for us to regard literature as a reflection of man’s soul, and to regard a nation’s literature as the reflection of man’s spirit in that nation.” (Ibidem, p. 222)

Another key characteristic of nostalgia as I regard it – and very essential at that – is ***the desire to conserve – intact and unfading – a world that is vanishing right before your very eyes***. This entitles us to speak of nostalgia as *both conservative and intrinsically poetic*. Nostalgic people are usually sensitive to poetry, regardless of whether they create or simply read it. On a more sublime note, nostalgia is characteristic of a person or a nation refined in civilization and art. In his “Lectures on Medical Jurisprudence,” delivered at the University of London in 1837, A.T. Thomson testifies to the *continued association of nostalgia with a superior sensibility*, emphasizing that

“it is frequently, although not always, in the ***highest and most cultivated persons*** that [nostalgia] displays itself” [“Nostalgia and the Victorian Novel”].

The less civilised a nation or a person is, the less prone they are to feel the pangs of either conscience or nostalgia. Of course, spiritual finesse does not preclude simplicity of soul, and in the Chinese context, simplicity is rather a mark of higher finesse. Similarly, verbosity and flourish do not necessarily entitle a literary work or a person to any claim of refinement. However, as is perfectly clear in *the Dream*, souls that are more sublime and spiritually elevated, such as Lin Daiyu, are naturally endowed with *both poetic refinement and the tearful sensitivity of otherworldly and nostalgic beings*. The almost ethereal Lin Daiyu could be poetically called a *Fairy of Tears*. Her sensitivity as a poet goes hand in hand with her sensitivity as a woman in love and a nostalgic girl. It is particularly important to note that ***nostalgic feelings appear only after the lapse of our unconscious childhood***. Nostalgia is born of contemplation of the past, and is possible *after* the time we compare to gold.

“At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is *a yearning for a different time* – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” (Boym, op. cit. emphasis added.)

The return to childhood, i.e. to the innocent world of universal integrity, beyond the complicated and disintegrated world of adulthood, is a common motif in art and literature. It is an unspoken longing for a lost paradise, common to all nations. Miguel de Unamuno refers to this panhuman melancholy, this sense of the tragedy of life, ***the hunger for immortality***. From this expression of his we can glean nostalgia’s primordial nature – a motif which is brightly expressed in

the Romanian folk tale, “Tinerete fără de bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte” [*Youth Without Old Age and Life Without Death*], wherein the unborn son of the king talks to his father from his mother’s womb, and promises not to be born until the king promises him unfading youth and immortal life (Ispirescu, pp.1 – 10). The Garden of *the Dream* is yet another expression of this same human longing.

In “Full-Length Vernacular Fiction” Wai-ye Li observes that “the nostalgia for and idealization of a *lost world* in *Stone* [i.e. *A Dream in Red Mansions*] capture the modern Chinese reader’s feelings about the entire traditional Chinese culture” – a truthful observation that can account for copious acquisitions of nostalgia in the hearts and minds of many readers of old literature in general. The fact that *the Dream* of so long ago continues to influence culture in China even today, speaks of the greater or lesser poetic soulfulness with which the Chinese regard both literature and life.

From a man’s spirit to the spirit of a nation is but a leap of Nature. A man of genius, such as Cao Xueqin, possesses the gift of feeling the deepest spiritual pulse of his great nation. To feel the Chinese spirit of nostalgia in *A Dream of Red Mansion* is not at all difficult, as it is not difficult to feel the English spirit of nostalgia in the works of that other genius, William Shakespeare, or the Bulgarian spirit of nostalgia in the songs of verse and prose by numerous Bulgarian authors.

Let us turn now to the allusions of nostalgia in Cao Xueqin’s novel itself.

At the very outset we are ushered into a world of allusions imbued with nostalgic sensitivity – the very first one is the place of the “compiling” of the novel “by a certain Cao Xueqin” – 悼紅軒 (“Nostalgia Studio”, in Hawkes’ rendition). In this particular instance it is important to notice the parallelism between 悼紅 and 怡紅. Apparently, we have here the *two halves* of a poetic “toponymy” born precisely of nostalgia – both names are associated with the determinative notion of “heart” (心), which refers us to the realm of feelings, and the referent notion of “red”, which is a keystone of *A Dream in Red Mansions*. 悼 (悼), is a character full of sorrow and nostalgia. It denotes *sorrow* (哀), painful *grief* (傷), and particularly, *mourning* for someone deceased (悼念), or figuratively, **mourning for what is irretrievably past**. Hawkes’ translation of 悼紅軒 is superb in capturing the essence of this fictional Studio. As I mentioned above, nostalgia is possible only when the object of its contemplation – denotable as *golden times* – is in the past. Hence, what we contemplate from Nostalgia Studio is indeed naturally and poetically denotable by a character such as 怡 (yi), which leads us into a realm of peaceful happiness, sheer delight and gladness (「怡, 和也」《说文解字》, 下气怡色。《礼记·内则》。注:「悦也。」怡, 乐也。《尔雅》)。 In 悼红轩 and 怡红院, *present* and *past* are juxtaposed in stark, poetic contrast: we see the author contemplating 红 (“red”) from two contrasting standpoints. Apart from denoting a colour, “red” in Chinese stands for

- a) *beauty, a beautiful woman* (《漢語大字典》「紅」⑥, for instance, 紅淚 [“red tears”] means *tears of a woman*, 紅袖 [“red sleeves”], means *a beauty*);
- b) *a time of gayety or a festive event, e.g. marriage* (《漢語大字典》「紅」⑦「紅白」 means *marriage and celebrations*);
- c) *flowers* (晓看红湿处。 --唐·杜甫《春夜喜雨》).

Red is a lucky colour in China. Mourning for *the red* (悼红) is tantamount to **feeling nostalgia for a happy past**. Chinese *red* is comparable to Bulgarian (and English) *golden* – years, age and memories. *Nostalgia studio*, or more precisely, *The Studio of Mourning for the Red* (the place and time of *remembering the Dream*), is a poetic antipode of *The Court of Red Delights* (the place and time of the *happy Dream*, or 怡红院).

One cannot fail to remark the nostalgic tension between *past glory* (當此日: 「錦衣納 褲之時, 飫甘饜肥之日」) and *present misery* (今日: 「一技無成」, 「蓬牖茅椽, 繩床瓦灶」) in the choice of such poetic “toponymy.” In *A Dream of Red Mansions* **the distance between past and present is commensurate to the “distance” between dream and reality**. In this remarkable outset to the novel *past* and *dream* reverberate within *present* and *reality*. Moreover, it is a “distance” that can be considered only with an artistic measure – poetry, imagery, music, etc. Hence, the sublimely poetic language in which the novel begins. Any attempt to be “specific” in an analytically Western or “scholarly” way would impair the novel’s intentional poetic ineffability – the *vision* that unites reality and past, dream and present is an ineffable feeling, redolent of nostalgia, love and beauty, and much else.

The very title, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, strikes the opening chord of a nostalgic chorus, leading us to the contemplated past within yet another dimension of nostalgia: *nostalgia for dreams unfulfilled* – “that what could have been and never will be,” or “nostalgia born of a dream.” [cf. Библия и носталгия]. The whole of *the Dream’s* fifth chapter is intoxicated with a **future past revisited**; most of the foreshadowing songs of what will befall the Twelve Maidens of Jinling are not so mysterious as they are poignantly doleful. There is a feeling of nostalgic woe in almost all poetic and dramatic moments of the novel, and it is not merely the *grief* (or even *fright*) of *parting* (end of Ch. 27, beginning of Ch. 28, but an **immense, cosmic sense of epic doom**. **Not incidentally** Baoyu’s fear of parting with Lin Daiyu is **hysterical** (Ch. 57) – according to David Shapiro, nostalgia is closely related to a regimen of hysterical experiences – and it is probably this *attachment* to another person that makes dream-nostalgia and a dolorous sense of doom inseparable from love.

‘One day when spring has gone and youth has fled,
The Maiden and the flowers will both be dead.’

“Lin Dai-yu dead! A world from which that delicate, flower-like countenance had irrevocably departed! It was unutterable anguish to think of it. Yet his sensitised imagination did now consider it – went on, indeed, to consider a world from which the others, too – Bao-chai, Caltrop, Aroma and the rest – had also irrevocably departed. Where would he be then? What would have become of him? And what of the Garden, the rocks, the flowers, the trees? To whom would they belong when he and the girls were no longer there to enjoy them? Passing from loss to loss in his imagination, he plunged deeper and deeper into a grief that seemed inconsolable.”
[Chapter 28, Hawkes]

It is probable that Baoyu’s *infatuation* (痴情) is simply the other side of his poetic nostalgia (indeed, Cao Xueqin’s nostalgia), while his *eroticism* countermands nostalgia in the same manner in which realism counteracts romantic reminiscence and dreams of the future. Love fulfilled is erotic. Love unfulfilled is nostalgic and oneiric. In a visibly paradoxical but inherently logical way, Baoyu’s tensions between his romantic “love that could be” (Lin Daiyu) and very real physical love (Xiren, etc.) represent the poetic tensions between fleeting reality and a dream that abides forever. The poetic divide between erotic love and sublime love is very clearly delineated in a poet *par excellence* such as Cao Xueqin/Jia Baoyu. But this is another subject I shall dwell on in the section dedicated to Beauty.

Nostalgia and dream are both closely related to the narratives of “what was and what might have been.” The *golden* past (red, in the Chinese symbolic language of colours) is married to the never-to-be-realized dream of the future. One of the most artistic and powerful ways to deal with intense nostalgia is re-inventing the past with its cherished people and sceneries through artistic – literary, aesthetic, poetic, even political – re-creation. Indeed, poetic reminiscence is a most powerful vehicle of the soul, one that is poignant with disconsolate memories. Perhaps this *nostalgic forcefulness* is the root of poetry itself, considering that epic poetry was the wellspring of all poetry (indeed, of literature). For these reasons, I am deeply convinced that **nostalgia was precisely the driving force that inspired Cao Xueqin to write his amazingly beautiful novel**. Or, otherwise expressed through Baoyu and Daiyu’s love:

“The youthful love between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu is heavenly love. On the surface, it is the mutual attraction between two human beings living on earth. At a deeper level, it turns out to be the

poetic, everlasting companionship between two stars in the sky. Before being born into the human world, the two lovers had enacted a story of their first love in which Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting watered Crimson Pearl Flower with sweet dew. After they came to the human world, they enacted a heartbreaking tragedy of paying the debt of tears. Far from being a myth, their heavenly love is the love between two souls entangled in life. *Subconsciously, both Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu harbor a kind of nostalgia, a yearning for the first love they still remember.* When they met for the first time, one of them felt that the other looked familiar while the other felt that they had seen each other before. Here, their memory was at work. When they fall in love for the second time, their love is just a continuation of the love they had in heaven.” (Liu Zaifu, § 23 Emphasis mine.)

A consciousness of evanescence is another name for contemplative nostalgia. In poetry and in religion it almost invariably gives birth to the *libertine* and the *ascetic*. Whether Cao Xueqin intended the “awakening from vanity” denouement (色空觀念), which Gao E gave to his novel, or – as Zhou Ruchang vehemently insists, – the *Dream* was meant to be a hymn of the “red dust” in the “flowery” world (花花世界), is of little consequence. *Both endings are perfectly logical* in the soul of a poet such as Cao Xueqin, and this is, in my opinion, the source of the novel’s psychological realism. One and the same poet could equally choose the “red dust”, or the “spiritual elevation” above the dust, precisely because of the *same consciousness of evanescence*. In Bulgarian poetry we have **Kiril Hristov** (1875 – 1944), who in his despair at life’s transience chose “wine and women, women and wine,” as denouement of the dramatic clash between love and death within his soul. Another Bulgarian poet, however, **Nikolai Liliev** (1885 – 1960), chose to soar above the red dust and maintain his purity unstained. Liliev’s verse, by the way, is admittedly the *finest and most exquisite of all Bulgarian poetry*, which inclines me to think that a more sensitive and refined soul would choose the “awakening” instead of the “red dust”. The same feeling of despair at the *imminent parting with Lin Daiyu and all the girls in the Garden* could equally drive Baoyu to *clinging* to the “red dust” (怡) or *detaching* from the “red dust” (逸). The deep psychologic veracity of such *possible* and *absolutely free* choice is clearly evident in the biographies of many of Europe’s saints and poets. And at the core of both choices lies *contemplative nostalgia*, or the sense of the transience of this world.

It is now time to cite a few examples of how nostalgic sensitivity has inspired some of Bulgaria’s finest poets. Contemporary Bulgarian poetry, especially in its early and classical period, draws its imagery and stylistic preferences from the

fountainhead of all poetry: *folk songs*. The themes of impossible love, of parting by force or by death, are very common in Bulgarian folk songs. “*White I am, swain, so white*”, a song from the little village of Gela (Rhodope Mountains), ends with this verse:

“When lovers cannot wed,
is there an anguish as great?”

In another song, “A Pine Is Curving and Bending” a girl, who is leaving her family for good, asks her mother:

At parting, mother,
I pray thee, dear,
to water my flowers
at morn – with tiny dewdrops
at noon – with scalding teardrops,
at dusk – with frigid water.

A *flower watered with tears* is a vibrant image from Bulgarian folk poetry, quite comparable to Vermilion Pearl’s tearful gratitude to the Discerning Stone. Bulgarians have many such folk songs of touching love and, as it is impossible to quote all of them here, I would like only to mention two more: “A Pigeon is Cooing in the Thickets”, in which a young bride lays bare to a pigeon her nostalgia for home; and “A Fine Rain is Falling Like Pearls”, in which a newlywed girl entreats her young husband not to go abroad for work, but to stay with her one more year:

“Stay, sweetheart, this year,
this year and this winter,
money one easily earns, sweetheart,
but our youth is one in this world, sweetheart,
and youth passes as dew:
it’s here in the morning,
it’s gone in the noon.”

In *Bulgarian poetry*, too, we have ample examples of lyricised nostalgia. **Petko R. Slaveikov’s** (1827 – 1895) “*The Springhead of the Girl with White Feet*” is a classical poem of unfulfilled love and a paragon of beauty sacrificed in the name of love. **Pencho Slaveikov’s** (1866 – 1912) “*Inseparable*” is another poem of two young people’s frustrated love which, in spite of their tragic end, continues to thrive in the embodiment of two trees that grew from the young lovers’

graves: the Rowan (in Bulgarian, *Kalina*, a female name and the name of a tree) and the Sycamore (in Bulgarian *Yavor*, a male name and also the name of a tree).

My narration about *nostalgic* poets of Bulgaria would be unforgivably incomplete, however short, were I to fail to mention a poet who could rightly be called the *Bulgarian Tennyson* – **Dimcho Debelyanov** (1887 – 1916). Just as Tennyson’s lyricism is an aesthetic of sorrow, so is Debelyanov’s lyrical euphony rich with overtones of melancholy and balladic grief. Most of his poems can be cited as superb examples of the *lyricised beauty of grief*. None of his poems has ever been translated into Chinese, and this deplorable lack begs to be filled. Here I would share the more striking songs of nostalgia Debelyanov has bequeathed to Bulgaria’s national literature:

Remember? Remember the quiet old yard,
 The quiet old house in the white cherry blooms? –
 Oh, please, do not shimmer in my prisoned heart
 Meaningless memories and faraway glooms –
 For I am imprisoned behind gloomy bars,
 Meaningless memories and faraway glooms
 For my own dishonour is my trusted guard
 And my castigation – a past that still looms.

Remember? Remember in the quiet old yard
 The whispers and laughs in the white cherry blooms? –
 Oh, please, do not wake up the luminous choir
 The choir of Angels – a past that still looms –
 I am but imprisoned behind gloomy bars,
 Meaningless memories and faraway glooms,
 A dream, oh, a dream was the quiet old yard,
 A dream were the cherries afloat in white blooms!

(Translated by Petko Hinov)

The unfallen cherry blossoms of *nostalgic reminiscence* here immediately bring to mind the fallen peach blooms (Chapter 23) and pomegranate and balsam flowers (chapter 27) of *nostalgic evanescence* in *the Dream*.

The grief of parting (离愁) – so deeply rendered in Chapter 98 (“Crimson Pearl’s suffering spirit returns to the Realm of Separation,”) – is a key leitmotif in another of Debelyanov’s poems, called “An Elegy”:

I want to remember you always like now:
 Homeless, hopeless, dejected in mind,

Your fiery hand in my hand entwined,
 Your sorrowful face on my heart inclined.
 The city afar in misty smoke shudders,
 The trees on the hill shiver grim,
 And holier our love appears,
 Because today we must part.

(Translated by Petko Hinov)

To close this chapter on nostalgia, I would like to quote a poem by a modern Bulgarian poet, **Penyo Penev** (1930–1959), whose almost delirious grief inspires in the reader emotions similar to those that resonate with us when we read Daiyu's *Song for Burying the Flowers*, or her *handkerchief quatrains*, or in Baoyu's "*Elegy for the Hibiscus Maid*" (《芙蓉女儿诔》).

Sorrowful sunset over the wood
 Like a wound freshly cut, is bleeding.
 With a sorrowful shimmer the wheat
 Like silvery lather is ringing.

This wearied day's burning low,
 Wind is weeping: farewell to the past!
 Night is falling now, it is nightfall
 Over quietly drowsing white paths.

Every man has a path of his own,
 Every path runs in search of one man...
 And I, too, had a path that I loved,
 Once I, too, had a path of my own!

One more step – look, the end is so near
 And my path has been walked to the end...
 What will happen with me? There's no seer...
 But I doubt I will travel again!

Many things I quit loving so dear,
 Even Mommy's soft eyes I don't miss.
 I had everything... Lost it all! Hear:
 There's no happiness – it doesn't exist!

To be lonely is maybe the best stand –
 In our times there is nothing that lasts!
 We'll stop loving our dearest and
 Our closest will distance from us!

Every oath is a fraud, nothing better;
 Every softness conceals a rude blow.
 Nothing be, then, forever and ever,
 So that we would lose nothing at all.

Every burning fire's dying away,
 There is no ever-brimming wellhead.
 What is blossoming – one day will fade,
 What is born – one day will be dead.

Every road becomes narrow for twain
 And with sorrow is pregnant all laughter.
 May there never be meetings again,
 So there will be no partings after.

Dead sank the day over the woods –
 Let it bleed away, like a wound tingling...
 Let with sorrowful shimmer the wheat
 Like silvery lather be ringing.

(Translated by Petko Hinov)

B. Love Is Tears

It is my conviction that the deeper aspects of a nation's soul are discreetly, but *de profundis* revealed in *her tears*. Poeticised sorrow is deeper than poeticised joy; the epic transformation of reality into literature follows not the mirth of vanity, but the rivulets of the tears of a nation. In this respect, *the Dream's* greatness is also quietly relevant to the tears shed in the novel, because in their gentle intimacy they are like Tang quatrains disclosing to the gaze of the remote reader a vision of epic grandeur. In Bulgarian literature there is an epic novel, *Time of Parting*, which in many ways is comparable to *the Dream* in revealing the poetic geography of the Bulgarian soul – both by its language, which I dare describe as poetry in prose, and by its epic scope. It is a book in which “tears bring forth light”, a book full of poetic nostalgia.

In a very similar vein, love's deeper aspects are also revealed through tears and not through carnal passion, which can burn even without love. Tears are equally associable with *femininity* and with *tender love*, and it is not incidental that Cao Xueqin gave “the gift of tears” not to Xue Baochai, but to Lin Daiyu. Vermilion Pearl revealed her propensity for expressing her love in tears even before her incarnation in the dusty world as Lin Daiyu. **Love which is gratitude, and gratitude which is love**, are both expressed essentially in the “repayment by tears” (还泪). The acting agent of *the Dream*'s tearful saga is not sentimentality, but, I should say, contemplative poetical sensitivity. In many of my own works – both verse and prose – I have confessed a similar sensitivity in contemplating transience through love, beauty, nostalgia and tears. The very subject of human beauty – especially of female beauty – is intertwined with the passionless pain of parting, evanescence and impossibility to choose “to hold” instead of tearfully “contemplate”.

Older Bulgarians – especially those of the generations of our grandmothers and earlier – have this very “Chinese” quality: when they love someone, they are able to shed tears of endearment, which inspires in me the thought of *psychological closeness between traditional Chinese and Bulgarian sensitivity*. Indeed, in our poetry, both folk and personal, there are many examples of this. I think that at the core of *that feeling* one may find another, more powerful, though latent feeling of nostalgia – *the tearful joy of returning is bound to nostalgia by the bonds of remembering and an intuitive apprehension of a future, fateful parting*. This very same nostalgia, which moved the Russian poet to write

And it was mercilessly clear
Life rustled and went past. (Alexandr Blok [1880–1921])

has probably moved Cao Xueqin to compose the initial paragraphs of the first chapter of the *Dream* with “handfuls” of tears. It is a feeling of either having lost, or being on the verge of losing, someone incomparably dear to you. I remember how my own grandmother, perhaps feeling that her life was coming closer to its end, would tell me how much she loved me, and her tears would gush from eyes weary of life. This same feeling assails me every time I hold my son or little daughter and tell them: “I love you!” – a feeling of unbearable nostalgia and immense love for every fleeing moment of life (cf. *One Ordinary Evening*). And I believe it is *poetically truthful* that Cao Xueqin should have felt the same urge – **immense love and nostalgia for a life past and people dear to his heart beyond compare**. The vast difference between a common lyric poet and Cao Xueqin is that the latter's genius *extended this feeling beyond his family, over all of Chinese society, and created a dream more beautiful than the loveliest memory*. Here comes the significance of *a Dream* and a story, narrated by a Stone!

A particularly eloquent moment in *the Dream* – one that gave me a touching insight into the soul of Chinese women – is the moment when Lin Daiyu first enters the mansions of her maternal Grandmother Jia:

“As Daiyu entered, a silver-haired old lady supported by two maids advanced to meet her. She knew that this must be her grandmother, but before she could kowtow, the old lady threw both arms around her. “Dear heart! Flesh of my child!” she cried, and burst out sobbing. All the attendants covered their faces and wept, and Daiyu herself could not keep back her tears.” (Chapter 3, Yang & Gladys)

In this particular moment, tears of joy at reunion are simultaneously tears of nostalgic remembrance of the past.

Another aspect of nostalgia is the feeling of *unconditional and everlasting belonging*. It is best impressed in the first meeting of Baoyu and Lin Daiyu: “I have seen this sister before!” – Baoyu exclaims inexplicably. This is a feeling too removed from this world, too idealistic, too ethereal, to be understood in the context of daily life in the Red Mansions. In an old essay of mine I put forward a similar insight, drawn from an ancient Chinese proverb:

“Meeting is the beginning of parting. ... What a profound and philosophical sadness grasps the heart at these words! If we consider carefully the meaning of the word ‘parting’, we observe that it somehow suggests not only the outset of a process, but also the very completion of this process – because the beginning of separation is already the separation itself. Thus, when two people meet they have already parted.” (cf. *When Two Meet*)

Thus, Baoyu’s meeting Daiyu eventually conceived an eternal longing to be together with her. Yet their meeting is not conducive to the bodily, erotic, deeply procreative longing *of this world*:

“The meeting of two bodies is never a meeting, but only a touch, which time dissipates shortly after it has occurred. These bodies retain their solitude even as they meet one another, coming through the ripening rye of life. They might attempt to escape from their solitude through the fire of passion, but this very attempt of theirs inevitably ends in another, more disastrous solitude which is either self-destruction by despair or the destruction of others by

debauchery. For those, who prefer to meet others as bodies meet bodies spiritual solitude is inevitable, sooner or later.” (Petko Hinov, *When Two Meet*)

Jia Baoyu meets Lin Daiyu *as a soul meets a soul* – here, in his inadvertent remark we hear the voice of the Spiritual Stone who has recognised Vermilion Pearl – and they meet again in the prescient longing of eternal union, which can never be fulfilled in this world. In this world, such a longing is invariably the beginning of a tragedy. And this is the starting point of the tragic trail of tears which is essentially the Path of Love in Cao Xueqin’s great novel. Daiyu’s frailty at this first appearance, and her tears, are all allusions to the frailty of the yearning for eternity in Baoyu, and in fact in any tender human heart. The more intense the yearning, the greater the pain.

And tears of love come from *this* pain. Lin Daiyu, the Fairy of Tears, often weeps, not out of frailty, but out of exquisite subtlety, in contemplation of *past* and *future*. For Lin Daiyu tears are an integral part of heavenly love in this mundane world. The “love” that can be delightful and tearless is the one which Xue Pan pursues. *Love is tears*, in the same way as *life is transient* and all flesh ends in death. Tears are an immortal elixir for love and this is a tragedy only if one deems love to be a mere delight.

“Lin Daiyu cries often. At first glance, the love between her and Jia Baoyu is characterised by sentimentality, but deep down it is full of significance. Of all the love relationships described in Chinese literature, it is the most significant and richest in cultural connotations. All the conversations and quarrels they have, particularly those communications conducted through poems, are pregnant with significance. The two best long poems in *Dream of the Red Chamber* are Lin Daiyu’s *Burying the Flowers* and Jia Baoyu’s *The Spirit of the Hibiscus: An Elegy for a Girl*.” (Liu Zaifu, §24)

Love’s labour is comparable to the silkworm’s labour, love’s tears are like the dripping of a candle: the silkworm’s silk ends only with its death, and love is burning while its life-candle melts in tears (“春蚕到死丝方尽，蜡烛成灰泪始干。丝尽身死，泪干成灰，怎一个爱字了得？”).

Bulgarian literary life is abundant with such tragic love. Similar to Baoyu’s, all the love stories of the poet of Bulgarian nostalgia – Debelyanov – end tragically: the women he loves die young or do not reciprocate his feelings. So, here is a wonderful example of weeping for the inevitable parting with the beloved one – Debelyanov’s *Elegy* (continued from above):

I will leave you at dawn, at dawn do come
 And bring me your last parting glance –
 I'll remember it, faithful and glum
 In the hour when *She* will triumph!”
 O, Morna, Morna, a tempest-broken sprig,
 Entreat me not, believe me – our spring
 Will not remain but an unfinished dream
 And one day you will still return to me!

But over us night's falling on appallingly,
 The bats are drawing clapnets in the dark,
 Your feebleness awaits its final solace
 And in my faith I have no faith at all!
 And then your burning hand lets go of mine,
 You go away with eyes, fixed on the dark,
 You have no strength to even shed a tear.
 I want to remember you always like now!

(Translated by Petko Hinov)

Another great Bulgarian poet, **Peyo Yavorov** (1878–1914), who may be called the greatest bard of tragic love in Bulgarian literature, has infused many a poem of his with the blood of anguished yearning for a love that can never be in this world (for example his poem “Night”). Love is tears, indeed, even when filled with the tremor of hope – here is the last stanza of his poem, dedicated to his first encounter with Lora, the second greatest love of his life (“Annunciation”):

My soul is *sorrowful* and silent,
 O, *tear*, o, child,
 My soul is *yearning* and silent,
 And *quiet tears* are rolling from my eyes:
 I listen to the festal chimes and hymns –
 This is a dream, alas, a morning dream!

(Translated by Petko Hinov, emphasis added)

Even in Yavorov's more lyrical poems, the *fear* of frailty and the *awareness* of eternal love's impossibility in *this* world are palpably felt – in “*Two Lovely Eyes*” the poet's admiration is shadowed by anxiety that beauty and purity might fall prey to sin and shame (cf. another poem below, *I Know Not Why...*):

Two lovely eyes. The spirit of a child.
 Two lovely eyes. Sunrays and music.
 They don't want anything and they don't vow.
 My soul is praying,
 Child!
 My soul is praying...
 The passions and the woes
 Will cast tomorrow over them
 The veil of sin and shame.
 The veil of sin and shame
 Won't cast tomorrow over them
 The passions and the woes

My soul is praying,
 Child!
 My soul is praying...
 They don't want anything and they don't vow...
 Two lovely eyes – sunrays and music.
 Two lovely eyes. The spirit of a child.

Here we come close to another of Baoyu's "complexes", springing from his specific philosophic aestheticism and his spiritual poetical sensitivity. And this philosophy is succinctly expressed in these his words:

'Girls are made of water; men of mud,' he declares. 'I feel clean and refreshed when I'm with girls; but find men dirty and foetid.'

It is not without irony that these words cannot be applied to some of Baoyu's fascinations with male adolescent creatures, notwithstanding which I would like to dwell on the deeper philosophic aesthetics of his thought.

C. Beauty is Transient

Baoyu's captivation with female beauty can be considered from both an aesthetic (that is, poetic) and an erotic point of view – the latter thought is expressed clearly by the fairy Disappointment (Chapter 5). As I have previously mentioned, "seeking revenge" on transience by retirement to an aesthetic hermitage is a path chosen by many a poet in history. *Beauty is more than life* – such *aesthetic idealism* is most symbolic of a Bulgarian classical writer, a refined and noble poet of the short story, – **Yordan Yovkov** (1880–1937). In his works, the transience of beauty, both male and female, is poised against the absolute value he imparts to beauty. On the other hand, a pure aestheticism would never solve

the problem of a beauty doomed to be reduced to grime and ashes. Beauty's call, in a poet's eyes, is to exist forever, at least this is Baoyu's sentiment throughout his life in the Garden. Therefore, beauty's immortalization in art is only a foretaste of its immortalization in religion, howbeit inversed: in Art, beauty is immortal because of its purely aesthetic absoluteness; in Religion, immortality is the root of true beauty, whereas beauty untrue is precisely the one which Art seeks to immortalise. In Christian aesthetics, regardless of how beautiful a human being is, "his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more" (Psalm 103:15 – 16.) A beauty-conscious poetic mind could turn either to the highest realms of aestheticism, or to the highest realm of spiritual enlightenment. These two kinds of consciousness sometimes engage in artificial warfare – whether Cao Xueqin's intended end of the *Dream* was of the former or the latter kind – a *highest aestheticism* held in thrall by earthly life, or *religious awareness* of the vanity of this world, – is of little consequence, because the root of these two strategies is *the very same yearning for immortalizing beauty as life itself*. And it is perhaps the mystery of Art, which not only conceals, but at the same time reveals here the mystery of Religion – the mystery of the quest for immortality.

Chinese literary culture possesses such a *superb aesthetic nature*, and it, probably alone among the world's cultures, created the preconditions that could give life to *a genius of beauty such as Cao Xueqin*. His genius is indeed so powerful that I cannot imagine the existence of such great power outside the realm of the long-standing Chinese literary civilization. Outside its historic Garden, even Cao's genius would be incapable of wielding the masterful brush that created *the Dream*; outside Chinese literary civilization his hand would have remained a genius' hand, but *without a brush* to suit its vast poetical potency.

In *the Dream*, tears of love and nostalgia for transitory nature unite in sorrowful admiration of female beauty. It is precisely in the first "introduction" of this "Fairy of Tears" to the stage that we read:

两弯似蹙非蹙笼烟眉，一双似喜非喜含情目。态生两靥
之愁，娇袭一身之病。泪光点点，娇喘微微。

Her dusky arched eyebrows were knitted and yet not frowning,
her speaking eyes held both merriment and sorrow; her very *frailty*
had charm. Her eyes sparkled with *tears*, her breath was *soft* and
faint. [Yang & Gladys, emph. added]

This peerless beauty, bedewed with tears, unconsciously inspires a sense of unsurpassed frailness and softness. Lin Daiyu was conceived by Cao Xueqin as the paragon of beauty:

颦儿才貌世应稀，独抱幽芳出绣闺。
呜咽一声犹未了，落花满地鸟惊飞。

Few in this world fair Frowner's looks surpassed,
None matched her store of sweetness unexpressed.
The first sob scarcely from her lips had passed
When blossoms fell and birds flew off distressed. [Hawkes]

Further, this is suggested indirectly by the verses that bring Daiyu to tears:

只为你如花美眷，似水流年。如花美眷，似水流年。
'Because for you, my flowerlike fair,
The swift years like the waters flow -'
水流花谢两无情。

Water flows and flowers fall, knowing no pity...

流水落花春去也，天上人间。

Spring departs with the flowing water and fallen blossom,

Far, far away as heaven from the world of men. [Yang & Gladys]

In this world we see how beauty fades so swiftly, and one need not be a prophet or a poet, not to sigh after his or her youthful years. Indeed, this feeling is so universal that it probably leavens all art, religious and profane.

For the sake of brevity I shall speak of two basic types of beauty: *ravishing* and *sublime*. **Ravishing beauty** ignites the sparks of erotic trembling and is instinctively affirmative; it seldom brings tears of sorrow for time passing away to the eyes of poets – in its intense corporality, in imagination it resists even Time that changes everything. Its erotic delightfulness deadens sorrow. This sort of beauty is like wine – and it equally symbolises “the affirmation of life,” as the hackneyed expression has it. Seldom is such beauty poeticised with the refined brush of a poet such as Cao Xueqin. Even if exquisitely fine, it serves only to abrogate contemplation in favour of sexual gratification. Its opposite – **sublime beauty** – is poeticised as the source of heavenly inspiration. In reality, none of these can be found in their purest embodiment, but in a more carnal, unpoetic world like today's we see an overwhelming preponderance of the first sort. This is why sublime beauty is revered as peerless by Cao Xueqin. And this, too, is the reason why Lin Daiyu could never be a non-tragic character. Her very lachrymose nature as “Vermilion Pearl” is predestined to suffer “the slings and arrows” of a world where beauty can be possessed, relished and relinquished when lost. It seems to me that, throughout history, this is one of the reasons why women are so often the plaything of men; and a courtly poet such as Cao Xueqin – Jia Baoyu (or even Don Quixote, in certain ways) – would

never forgive this muddy behaviour of men. I believe that this is one of the sources of Baoyu's "female complex" (女儿观): *men are made of such heavy mud that only pure women – pure as the waters of a mountain stream – could wash away their mire and transform them into human beings worthy of the fragrance of beauty.*

In Bulgarian and European poetry there are many ardent examples of a spirit similar to Baoyu's. Here, I would like to quote the Russian poet Sergey Bekhteev, whose poem "To the Russian Woman" illustrates my point to perfection. It is not incidental that Bekhteev has been acclaimed "the Poet of Russian Sorrow":

I write of her, who meekly took
 A heavy cross upon her shoulder,
 Who trod with us the path of thorns,
 In humble goodness and devotion.
 I write of her, who did inspire
 Valiant men to gallant deeds,
 Who blessed her last remaining sons
 To wage a combat to the death,
 Who in a chasm of beastliness
 In dens of infamy and evil
 Kept pure of utter mire
 The loveliness of motherhood!
 I write of her, who – suffering and anxious, –
 With children's hosts sojourned
 In crowded barracks, jails and prisons,
 On steppes and in abysmal pits.
 I hymn you ceaselessly, with love,
 My sister, mother, friend and wife,
 My very own – so pure and holy,
 My only one, true to the grave!
 And full of nameless, sweet disquiet
 I kneel in front of you with tears
 And your sore-covered feet
 I kiss with faith and prayer.

(Translated from Russian by Petko Hinov)

On a similar note, our exquisite poet **Dimitar Boyadzhiev** (1880–1911), who committed suicide as a result of unrequited love, penned the poem, "*With deep affection,*" in the final stanza of which we see the same admiration for the woman he loved and a feeling of his own "darkness" – or "clay-ness", – as almost another Baoyu:

With deep affection, gazing in your eyes,
 I kiss your hands and feel so sad,
 That maybe in the fruitless lies
 Of words so colourless and trite,
 O woman, you will never find
 How in my darkness I love you!

(Translated by Petko Hinov)

The more sublime the feelings of the poet – the purer the image of female beauty in his heart and thoughts, and the farther from the “chasm of beastliness,” into which men’s passions turn female beauty. Such adoration, of course, is not religious in its essence; I believe it is somehow rooted in our feeling for women as our “sisters, mothers, friends and lovers”, a feeling which the Chinese call *qin-qing* (亲情), or family love. Such love is viewed even higher than first love, erotic love and any other sensual feeling that may bear the name of “love”:

Family love is a touchstone; and any love between a man and a woman, in which family love has no share, is untrue. Love is sanctified by family love; family love is the highest attainment of love. ... Therefore, family love is the “sweet dew” of mankind, a gift from Heaven; that is why only after “Vermilion Pearl Plant imbibed the essences of heaven and earth and the nourishment of rain and dew,” it “cast off its plant nature and took human form, albeit only that of a girl.” The “intimate friendship” between Baoyu and Daiyu, just like that between “bosom girlfriends”, surpassed all boundaries of mundane love and transformed itself into family love, such as that between a brother and a sister, because such a blood relationship is impossible to sever. In fact, the relationship between these two “Jades” reflects the historically truthful family-like love, which is a primordial feeling indeed. Family love is not simply love – it is more than love. It is everlasting and endless. Love between a man and a woman is not eternal, but family love – only family love lasts forever. And only when family love exists does love between a man and a woman become immortal. (《悼红……》)

Family love is devoted love, and in Christianity *sanctification* springs from devotion – it overcomes not only the loss of beauty as time passes by, it overcomes the very core of existential individuality in *this* world – egoism, – and sanctifies human relationships with the intransience of truth. If a man cannot love a woman with such devotion, then his admiration for her beauty is but a passing whim, and what he calls “love” is his “muddy,” adorned carnal desire that will vanish even faster than beauty itself.

In some of my literary essays and poems, I have dwelt upon the subject of beauty, and especially on the relationship between beauty and lust. I have observed that beauty is more often associated with one's sublime need for *contemplation*, whereas lust is mostly a bedfellow of *will*, especially *the will to possess* beauty, instead of contemplating and extolling it. The poet and the animal often contend in the same heart, and usually this is a *male* heart. In **this**, Baoyu's insight at an early age – that men are mud and women water, – is psychologically *profound*. These parities: *mud and will*, *water and contemplation*, are central in understanding *the contradictory* proclivities in male psychology, which allure and repel Baoyu – his disgust for the *lust of possessing Beauty* and, at the same time, *his own insatiable lust for contemplating female Beauty*. To free himself of the latter, he frequently needs the pure water of Lin Daiyu's admonishment.

“When Jia Baoyu writes down the poem ‘I swear, you swear, / With heart and mind declare; / But our protest / Is no true test. / It would be best / Words unexpressed / To understand, / And on that ground / To take our stand’ (Cao n.d., chap. 22), Lin Daiyu immediately corrects his mistake and improves his argument by saying ‘To have no ground / On which to stand / Were yet more sound. / And there's an end’ (Cao n.d., chap. 22). Only through perpetual traveling and wandering can one eliminate the [typically male] desire for possession and avoid the trap of fame in the mundane world. [...] The desire for possession and ambition always narrows men's field of vision. Despite being a man, Jia Baoyu, however, keeps trying to put aside his desire and to broaden his field of vision under Lin Daiyu's guidance. Lin Daiyu is, in fact, a goddess leading Jia Baoyu forward” (Liu Zaifu, §30.)

Here is what I wrote in my essay *On Human Beauty*:

We seem to lack any eye for Beauty. We seem to be the captives of a chaotic sensuality, of a voluptuous insanity to desire **the possession of beauty** in our carnal senses, in our basest organs. On this account we ought to be afraid of even the faintest desire of our heart in that direction (to possess), of even the very first movement in our hearts, tending toward acquiring the other person for our possession: in this movement is concealed the most virulent hatred, which soon would result in our separation.

I believe this is what Debelyanov meant by “And holier our love appears / Because today we must part.” The danger of beauty in an imperfect world is precisely in the inability of *clay-made* men to contemplate it with the eyes of Baoyu or Don Quixote. In a world, envenomed by lust, beauty itself seems poisoned (or is poisoned indeed):

“The beauty I possess – says Marcela in *Don Quixote*, – was no choice of mine, for, be it what it may, Heaven of its bounty gave it me without my asking or choosing it; and as the viper, though it kills with it, does not deserve to be blamed for the poison it carries.”
(Cervantes)

If one should read the entire exposition of this superb “theory of Beauty”, it would not be difficult to draw parallels between Cao Xueqin’s penitent admiration of beauty (cf. Liu Zaifu, op. cit.) and Cervantes’ quixotic admiration for beauty sacrosanct.

“Rare in our days is that beauty which is not a mate of lust” (*On Human Beauty*). We find the same insight in fairy Disenchantment’s exhortation to Baoyu (Chapter 5):

In the rich and noble households of your mortal world, too many of those bowers and boudoirs where innocent tenderness and sweet girlish fantasy should reign are injuriously defiled by coarse young voluptuaries and loose, wanton girls. And what is even more detestable, there are always any number of worthless philanderers to protest that it is woman’s beauty alone that inspires them, or loving feelings alone, unsullied by any taint of lust. They lie in their teeth! *To be moved by woman’s beauty is itself a kind of lust.* To experience loving feelings is, even more assuredly, a kind of lust. Every act of love, every carnal congress of the sexes is brought about precisely because *sensual delight in beauty has kindled the feeling of love.*
[Hawkes, emphasis mine.]

This very realistic, psychologically veritable explanation for the connection between beauty and lust has but one exception in *the Dream*: Lin Daiyu. Her beauty is so superior to any bodily expression of lust, that it inspires only admiration, even awe. Of her beauty, this may be said:

I trust that if a beautiful (in body) person takes pains to attain purity of the soul, his or her beauty would cease to rouse lust, having

been transformed into chastity and become so spiritual as to inspire in rational creatures only awe... I also trust that beauty can attain such a height of immaculate spirituality that it would forever free the human heart from the insane pangs of carnal lust. [Hinov, *On Human Beauty*]

When we contemplate Lin Daiyu's beauty, we are moved not to lust, but to tears. This tragic sense of beauty I have tried to capture in a poem, which expresses simply in another way the sentimental philosophy of Richard Linton in *The Incurable Virgin*:

I know not why
 So often beauty makes me cry –
 A lovely face I daren't touch
 A charming smile I dare not return –
 And yet
 I know not why
 This loveliness with tears fills my eyes...

Do I perhaps regret its swift decline
 The years that invariably will
 Its fineness sweep asunder;
 The grave that turns its brightness into grime?...
 Do I perhaps bemoan its easily foreseen
 And wretched servitude to vice and sin?
 I know not why, I truly know not why
 Beauty so swiftly into darkness flies...

O beauty, though in awe I stand
 And write about you with a trembling hand
 You always fill my heart with gloom
 Wherein my anguish fights with doom
 Wherein my heart denies its hope
 And fear that your childish plays
 Life with ingratitude repays,
 And lust on you gloatingly preys...

I truly know not why,
 I know not wherewith
 So often beauty makes me weep...

“Since I was a child – says Richard Linton in *“The Incurrible Virgin,”* – I have always thought that people, especially those whom Heaven has endowed with beauty, are nothing like the rest of the world. I have always admired beauty, but I have also always been afraid to approach it, to touch it, to feel it, as it were. To me, a beautiful person is something divine, a heavenly harbinger with a special message to the world.”

Then, at the end of the story, the description of Richard Linton and his attitude to girls and female beauty is very similar to Jia Baoyu’s “feminine complex” indeed:

“It’s because apart from being a philosopher, you are a poet as well. You cannot touch beauty. You consider yourself impure, unworthy. Beauty, in your opinion, is something heavenly, something sacred. Therefore, you are unworthy to touch beauty and you are sad when you see how it is not only being touched, but smeared and devoured by rapacious beings who do not see beauty except through the eyes of lust and possessiveness!”

(Petko Hinov, “The Incurrible Virgin”)

D. Concluding Notes

A literary comparison between the cultures of the nostalgic contemplation of life, love that nurtures tears, and beauty that inspires sorrow for its incompatibility with the ways of this world – in China and Bulgaria, – could hardly be accomplished adequately within the restrictions of an essay. Here I have but lightly touched upon some subjects, which are abundantly present in Chinese literature and especially in poetry; I have sought to relate them to a few exemplary Bulgarian classics and a number of other relevant sources, including my own humble works. It would not be very misleading to state that nostalgia and a poetically refined sense of life are not the strongest aspect of Bulgarian literary culture – a culture which has been depleted for a number of centuries, has tried to revive its sources and to rise to a classical level for somewhat less than a century following our national Liberation (1878) – such refinement is but the destiny of very few literatures in the world.

Nostalgia is rooted in and deeply related to *the poetical sense of Time and Life*; it is a keen sensitivity to life’s shortness and beauty’s evanescence. The power of creative and reminiscent nostalgia is directly proportionate to a man’s poetic sensitivity: the more sensitive the poet, the stronger his or her sense of the transience of reality and the insecurity of everything in this world. One of the most significant dimensions of nostalgia is precisely this *feeling of omnipresent decadence and pitiless transience*. A genius with such a sense, Cao Xueqin has

been able to create an overwhelming *image* of his time and its people, their life and culture. Moreover, being a poet of the highest endowments, Cao Xueqin has been able to immortalise – with poetic scrutiny – daily life in imperial China with its predominant features, as well as to display the “*reddest*” of “*red*” society – the life and dreams of the most refined representative of Chinese domestic culture, *Chinese maidens and women*, though within the scope of a lengthy novel.

The culture of nostalgia contained in *A Dream of Red Mansions* has been inadequately studied, yet. I believe, it is so deeply related to classical Chinese poetry and thinking, that it deserves *not one, but a series of* extensive studies, so as to reveal the profound soul of the Chinese nation with its glorious poetic tradition and vast potential for the contemplation and transformation into art of even the tragic beauty of transience in this world.

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