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JOHN BALABAN

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The Invisible Powers

“The proper subjects of poetry are love, virtue, and war.”  
--Dante Alighieri, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* c.1303.

Perhaps as long as there has been war, there has been poetry about war. Long before Homer composed his epic about the launching of the Greek warships to Asia, there was an oral poetry already alive among his pre-literate ancestors recording the valor and miseries of what Lord Byron two thousand years later would call the “brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art.”

The great war epics of the ancient world, even while praising the bravery of sword-wielding warriors, were mindful of the pain left by warfare’s destruction, both on the soldiers and civilians, victors and vanquished. At the close of the 10th century Anglo-Saxon poem called “The Battle of Brunanburh” celebrating the liberation of the English tribes from the Scots and Danes, we hear this:

Behind them they left corpses to be shared  
by the dark-coated one - the black raven

with curving beak - and the grey-coated one,  
the eagle with white tail, the carrion to be enjoyed

by the greedy hawk of war and the grey beast,  
the wolf in the wood. A greater slaughter was never  
before on this island slain by an army  
with sword blades....

Lord Byron, attuned to modern wars of national liberation brewing in Europe,  
continued:

War's a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art,  
Unless her cause by right be sanctified.<sup>1</sup>

And in doing so, he presents some complicated questions not just for men and women in uniform, but for any citizen, but particularly a citizen of a democracy like ours, in times like ours, with a technology like ours. How is a war “by right sanctified”? What is a “just war”, or a *jus ad bellum*, “the right to go to war”? And how do we determine what is *jus in bello*, the “right use of force”? Who makes these discriminations?

In its imagery and affecting music, poetry has considered such issues through the centuries, and not just in Western poetry but in nonwestern traditions as well. Later in my talk I will try to persuade you that a mind trained in reading poetry—not necessarily poetry about war but poetry about anything that affects our human condition—is a mind crafted to make crucial moral distinctions.

But for now, here is an 8th century poem by the Chinese master Li Po<sup>2</sup>, written around 750 when Chinese imperial armies had sent out hundreds of thousands of their troops as far west as the Caspian Sea in modern day Iran, northwest into Xinjiang and the domain of the Uighurs, and south in India and Vietnam:

Last year we were fighting at the source of the Sang-kan;  
This year we are fighting on the Onion River road.  
We have washed our swords in the surf of Parthian Seas;  
We have pastured our horses among the snows of the T'ien Shan.

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1 *Don Juan*, Canto 9, V.4

2 Arthur Waley, trans.& editor, *The Poetry and Career of Li Po* (Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp. 34-35.

The King's armies have grown grey and old  
Fighting ten thousand leagues away from home.  
The Huns have no trade but battle and carnage;  
They have no fields or ploughlands,  
But only wastes where white bones lie among yellow sands.  
Where the House of Ch'in built the Great Wall that was to keep away the Tartars,  
There, in its turn, the House of Han lit beacons of war.  
The beacons are always alight, fighting and marching never stop.  
Men die in the field, slashing sword to sword;  
The horses of the conquered neigh piteously to Heaven.  
Crows and hawks peck for human guts,  
Carry them in their beaks and hang them on the branches of withered trees.  
Captains and soldiers are smeared on the bushes and grass;  
The general schemed in vain.  
Know therefore that the sword is a cursed thing  
Which the wise man uses only if he must.

What were they doing washing off their swords in Parthia, or present day Iran? Li Po's poem maintains that the sword is "cursed thing" that a wise man uses only when he must.<sup>3</sup> This idea comes right out of the ancient *Tao Te Ching*. Otherwise, the viewpoint is fairly similar to the Anglo-Saxon poem I just read, even in its disturbing imagery. In ancient China, generals returning home with their armies re-entered the capital through a so-called Gate of Mourning. This was true whether the campaign had been a success or a defeat, because war is a pollution and ceremonies are required to protect the living from the inevitable spiritual consequences.

The key word in these old poems is "sword." For us, it has been a long, long time since it was the usual expectation of warfare that soldiers would be driving sharp instruments into enemy soldiers, face to face. We are a long ways from the very personal battlefields where one warrior using a sword or ax went after another warrior whose name and family lineage he might have even known.

Over the centuries, as this audience knows well, the technology of warfare has changed drastically, complicating moral issues almost beyond comprehension both

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3 Chapter 31 of the *Tao Te Ching*, James Legge, trans. "Now arms, however beautiful, are instruments of evil omen, hateful, it may be said, to all creatures. ...and not the instruments of the superior man—he uses them only on the compulsion of necessity. ...Calm and repose are what [the sage] prizes; victory (by force of arms) is to him undesirable...and he who delights in the slaughter of men cannot get his will in the kingdom.

for the ordinary citizen and for soldiers skilled in war's *techné*—to use the ancient Greek word for craft or skills. As Air Force cadets you are well aware that your extraordinary technical skills make possible the killing of people you will never see, perhaps from 35,000 feet or so from where you cannot even see the ground much less the people on it. Sitting at a computer screen and keyboard in Las Vegas, Nevada, you can launch missiles from a drone circling a landscape on the other side of a world.

Such is the current *techné* of warfare, the technology of modern warfare. In his book *Air War Vietnam*, the aviation historian Frank Harvey called this technology “hurling impersonal thunderbolts from the heights in supersonic jets.”

The plural of *techné* is *technai*, curiously the word from which we derive the term “liberal arts” as the plural came to mean more than utilitarian skills but was extended to refer to what we call the arts—the use of skills for a higher purpose of the human moral imagination—including the art I wish to talk about: poetry.

But before I talk about the power of poetry, here is some background:

During the Vietnam War, I volunteered as a civilian conscientious objector and worked as the field representative for a private agency that treated the most severely wounded children. The children that we brought to major U.S. teaching hospitals were riddled by bullets, slashed by cluster bomb flechettes, blinded and deafened by tossed grenades, had their lips and jaws shot away, their spines severed. Others had their limbs blown off, including one 12-year old boy left with only an arm after a road mine blast. Another boy had his chin glued to his chest by napalm. One girl had her eyelids burned off by a white phosphorus artillery shell. One gun-shot toddler survived the massacre of her family in a ditch because she was protected by their bodies. I could go on. And, indeed, the memory of such suffering would have been my sole, unadulterated sense of Vietnam hadn't my job often taken me into the countryside to explain to parents what we could possibly do for their children at hospitals in the United States. Oddly, that work afforded me a glimpse of another, more enduring Vietnam. Improbable as it might seem, this glimpse came on snatches of poetry and song that led me into a realm of beauty and wisdom beyond the mayhem of the war.

At first, I had no clue on what I was hearing. I would be standing on a river bank way out in the war zone as a little skiff motored by and I would hear a bit of song float past me, sometimes without ever even seeing the singer's face under the conical leaf hat from where the song drifted up to disappear in the stutter of the boat's two-cycle engine and in the wave wash on the muddy bank at my feet. Once, I found myself waiting in an orchard behind a family's house as they came to a

decision about sending their injured, 10-year old son to America in our care. You can imagine the strange intensity of this moment: “we” had injured their child, yet our huge American war technology made it also seem to Vietnamese farmers that we could do anything...maybe even grow back a arm? Back at the regional hospital, it was explained that this could not be done, not even in America, but that it might be possible to make a bone graft to join the severed bones. The arm would always be weak. The graft might fail.

That day, off a dirt road near the Mekong, at their bamboo-thatched house under palm trees, I had come for their decision. While they conferred, I went out back to sit on a bench in their fruit orchard. Somewhere in the stands of bananas and papaya, a woman’s voice started up in song. I was in my twenties and in what you might call a heightened state because of what was happening inside and because being out by myself in the countryside was a risk. The singing was lovely, just a lone voice drifting through the leaves. I couldn’t see the woman, but pictured her picking bananas or snagging papaya into one of those little wire baskets at the end of a long pole. Inside the simple house, a momentous decision was being made about the boy whose right, upper arm had been severed by shrapnel but held together by a plaster-of-Paris cast and fed by an underarm sliver of flesh that carried the arteries and nerves. He could still move his fingers, so there was hope. At the hospital weeks earlier, the family had refused the surgeon’s advice to have their son’s arm removed. Now the splintered bone tips were starting to decay.

After what seemed like forever, they came out with some tea and a plate of sliced mango. It was late in the afternoon and everyone knew I had to get out of there before too long. Yes, they would send their son for surgery in America. They made me promise to bring him back when it was over. All during our talk, drifting in the background of this charged moment, oblivious and yet calling from some other realm, was the woman’s song.

My fascination with that sung poetry led me to a lifelong study of Vietnamese literary culture. What I was hearing out in the country was a *ca dao*, an oral poetry in a singing tradition over 2000 years old. After my discharge, I returned to Vietnam on a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities intending to record this poetry before it disappeared, I thought, like the passenger pigeon, along with the society that knew it. So, while the war still rattled on, I walked about the countryside of South Vietnam with my green Harvard bookbag that held my notebook, a tape-recorder, a bottle of water, and a .38 revolver. The book that resulted, *Ca Dao Vietnam*, was the first such book translated to a Western

language. Most of the poems had never been written down before *in Vietnamese*. Here is one of the poems I recorded, sung by a former 38-year Viet Cong soldier:

Sông Sài Gòn chảy dài Chợ Cũ,  
Nước mênh mông nước đổ phù sa.  
Ngọt ngào ngọn lúa bát ngát hương (thơm)  
Hương lúa của quê nhà (hồ hò);  
Hương về quê mẹ đậm đà tình thương.

The Saigon River slides past the Old Market,  
its broad waters thick with silt. There  
the rice shoots gather a fragrance,  
the fragrance of my country home,  
recalling my mother home, stirring deep love.<sup>4</sup>

From the folk poetry I went on to translate some of the literary poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương, the “Queen of Nôm Poetry,” in a tri-scriptural book called *Spring Essence*. Her world of imagery and literary allusion—tied to the oral folk poetry but coming at the end of a complex *literary* tradition spread across East Asia—was a far more complex challenge. Even with the help of Vietnamese and French scholars, it took me ten years to translate and annotate the fifty poems in the book. Moreover, *Spring Essence* was the first time that the Vietnamese ancient writing script called Nôm had been printed in the modern sense.

Following the remarkable success of *Spring Essence*, in 1999 I began the Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation with Vietnamese colleagues (<http://nomfoundation.org>) to rescue the 1000-year cultural heritage written in Nôm. What other treasures, we wondered, might be hidden in Nôm collections and known only to a few scholars or to no one at all? We have continued that work for ten years now.

Last December I was in Hanoi, where our Foundation has been working at the National Library to digitize and make a digital library of its 4000 ancient texts, all of which are rotting away and being eaten by insects. I took a day off from my work to visit the old Temple of Literature, founded as Vietnam’s first university in 1076, after the Vietnamese had finally driven out their Chinese overlords. Until 1919

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<sup>4</sup> to hear this poem and others as originally taped in 1970-71 go to:  
[http://www.johnbalaban.com/ca-dao.html#the\\_saigon\\_river](http://www.johnbalaban.com/ca-dao.html#the_saigon_river)

when it was closed, this is the academy where Vietnam trained its elite in poetry, history, and philosophy, selecting its students from any social class, and believing that a mind trained and tested in such things is a quick, sharp, and careful mind. And that such minds are important resources to the nation.

You enter the Temple grounds through a large stone gate topped with recoiling dragons and then proceed past gardens and ponds through another large gateway under a sheltered balcony where graduates declaimed their poetry.



Walkway into the main Temple. Photo: John Balaban

Perhaps the most striking thing one then sees are rows of 6-foot stone blocks standing on the backs of huge stone turtles. On the blocks are carved the names of those who, over the hundreds of years, graduated from the Temple and entered Vietnam's ancient civil service. Even today, hundreds of years after their serving the nation, one can see their descendants lighting incense sticks and placing them before those stone blocks in veneration.



Scholars' Stone. Photo:Tally Balaban

Further on, in a room inside the Temple itself, there is a large square stone carved in Chinese characters and next to it a translation of its text in modern Vietnamese and in English.



The Temple and, below, the 1442 inscription. Photo: John Balaban



This is what it says:

Virtuous and talented men are state sustaining elements. The strength and prosperity of a state depend on it[s] stable vitality and it becomes weaker as such vitality fails. That is why all the saint emperors and clear-sighted kings didn't fail in seeing to the formation of men of talent and the employment of literati to develop this vitality.

--Examination Stele, Dai Bào Dynasty, Third Year (1442).

Literati? Literary people as “state sustaining elements”?

How on earth, we Americans might ask, can citizens trained in literary skills be “state-sustaining elements”? Why would the Vietnamese royal court set up a university for its best and brightest, regardless of class or wealth, and train them largely in poetry, history, and philosophy?

If that seems a little far-fetched, consider this: Confucius, the Chinese philosopher to whom the Vietnamese Temple of Literature is dedicated (after the Chinese were driven out of Vietnam) was once asked the perennial philosophic question of 4th century China—as it was the perennial question for Socrates in Plato's *The Republic*—“what would you first do if allowed to rule a kingdom?” Confucius' reply, as recorded in his *Analects*, was “to correct language.” Because, he continued, if language is not precise, “then what is meant cannot be effected. If what is meant cannot be effected, society falls apart.”

The application of the Confucian reply to our affairs today must be obvious.

Here is the substance of the exchange in Book XIII from around 400 BC.

Tzu-lu said, “If the prince of Wei were waiting for you to come and administer his country for him, what would be your first measure?”

The Master said, “It would certainly be to correct language.”

Tzu-Lu said, “Did I hear you right? Surely what you say has nothing to do with the matter. Why should language be corrected?”

The Master said, “Lu! How simple you are! A gentleman, when things he does not understand are mentioned, should maintain an attitude of reserve. If language is incorrect, then what is said does not concord with what was meant; and if what is said does not concord with what

was meant, what is to be done cannot be effected. If what is to be done cannot be effected, then society falls apart.”

Such precision in the use of words is of course a lifelong pleasure in-and-of itself, but it has immense practical value as well. Without such precision in the way we communicate with ourselves, with ourselves as a society, and with the world beyond the U.S., our private and public affairs falter.

Precision in the use of words is the talent which lends all other professions and skills their usefulness. It is a skill which goes beyond utilitarian technology. Such precision in speech, writing, and the reading of complex works of the human imagination brings to its practitioners and their societies a more enriched sense of self and an inevitable moral expansion. This skill, most notably found in poetry, is indeed “a state-sustaining endeavor.” It is no mere curiosity that from Vietnam’s earliest nationhood its rulers and foreign emissaries were always known poets. The 18th century ambassador to China, Nguyen Du, decorated as a “pillar of the nation” is also Vietnam’s most famous poet. In modern times, Ho Chi Minh wrote quite good poetry in Vietnamese and in Chinese. The North Vietnamese ambassador to the Paris Peace Talks was Xuan Thuy, known first as a poet.

Traditionally, the chief poetic vehicle for study and composition, was the “regulated” poem made classic by the Chinese master Tu Fu in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is always eight lines, seven syllables to a line, rhyming usually on the first, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth lines, and requiring syntactic parallel structure in the middle four. For several East Asian societies it became the main lyric vehicle for centuries, serving them in the way the sonnet served the West. Through this form—whether written in Vietnamese and in Chinese—streamed history, culture, and cohorts of individuals possessing “bright mind.”

As if creating and commenting on such compressed poetic structures were not enough for honing one’s mind, Vietnamese carried it further, sometimes completing palindromes of the regulated verse form. Indeed, sometimes they created palindromes that when read backwards *changed language* from Vietnamese to Chinese, still about the same place, but with a different point-of-view.

And, in one instance that will bedazzle the mathematicians in the audience, in 1848 the Emperor Thieu-Tri composed “for his intellectual recreation” a cyclical palindrome in which twelve perfectly constructed 8-line poems were interlocked in a sun-shape (suggesting “heavenly mandate”) which could be read by starting from any of its rays and, going about in a circle (clockwise or counterclockwise, from the outside-in or the inside-out) would create a perfect poem. Twelve different poems.



That changes things. With the qualification, poetry becomes as essential for us now as it ever was, for if poetry gives us a “mouth,” a voice to express our most private and public concerns, poetry makes *everything* happen.

Some years ago Mona Van Duyn, then the Poet Laureate of the United States, was interviewed by Ted Koppel on his television show *Nightline*. Mr. Koppel must have ticked off Ms. Van Duyn because here is her comment:<sup>6</sup>

“Mr. Koppel, I have watched you over the years as you challenge, manipulate, contradict, humiliate the world’s leaders, the world’s visible powers. Those powers are very great: they can change the world. Now you are in a new world, the world of invisible powers, the world of literature, of poem and story. These do not force their powers upon their subjects, who freely choose to submit to them. You cannot contradict, challenge, manipulate or humiliate them. They work invisibly—they widen and deepen the human imagination, they increase empathy (without which no being is truly human), they train the emotions to employ themselves with more appropriateness and precision, they change or modify the very language in which human thought is formed. Like love, but stronger, since love’s power is limited by mortality, they are holders and keepers of what Time would otherwise take away from us—the world, both natural (its creatures, colors, shapes, textures, sounds, smells, tastes) and the social (the others we love or hate or have never known, their voices, appearances, assumptions, the inner and outer contexts of their lives). These powers, too, are very great: they can change the self.”

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6          Mona Van Duyn, “Matters of Poetry” (Library of Congress, 1993).

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**JOHN BALABAN** Professor of English and Poet-in-Residence, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, has been nominated twice for the National Book Award in Poetry, and is a winner of the William Carlos Williams award from the Poetry Society of America. He served in Vietnam as a conscientious objector and is known for his translations of Vietnamese poetry and his work to preserve Vietnamese writing in the ancient script called Nom: <<http://nomfoundation.org>>.