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The Book of Fate

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English translation of the volume of poems *Reun ar C'halan, Levr ar Blanedenn*, Al Liamm (Brest, 1981. Pp. 142 (Xavier de Langlais Prize in Breton Literature)

Recommended Citation

Galand, René, "The Book of Fate" (1981). *French Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 17.
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English translation of the volume of poems *Reun ar C'halan, Levr ar Blanedenn*, Al Liamm (Brest, 1981. Pp. 142 (Xavier de Langlais Prize in Breton Literature)

THE BOOK OF FATE
RENÉ GALAND

FIRST PART - FOREWORD

In each section of this part, the same figure appears: Fate. *The Book of Changes*, or *I Ching*, was used in China to predict the future. The *Images from the Book of Fate* are those who are represented on the cards used by fortune tellers. In *The Poet's Fate*, each short poem is patterned after Japanese haikus. The title is explained in the introductory poem. According to legend, the poet Li Po died when he tried to capture the reflection of the moon in a lake. He had mistaken it for a wondrous lotus flower. He fell out of the bark and drowned. They say he had drunk too much rice wine. The message of the final section, *The Prophet's Teaching*, is closer to the Bible.

CHANGES ON THE BOOK OF CHANGES

These texts are neither translations nor imitations. The *I Ching* has been subjected rather to the kind of transformations which members of the OULIPO inflict upon the texts which they treat. I have made use of the images which had struck me for their poetic value without taking into account their historical, social, philosophical or religious framework.

25

Don'tt think of the harvest
At sowing time.

39

The mountain torrent
Leaps over the rocks :
A wild doe.

55

If at noon the sun hides,
The stars come out. .

61

The wind blows over the lake.
A halo circles the moon.
In the distance, a crane calls
For her lost mate. Come,
A pitcher of wine
To warm the hearts
We'll beat on the drums
And we'll tell the night

Love stories more cruel
Than a war song.

63

Whoever gets into a leaky boat
Has no cause for complaining
If his bottom gets wet.

IMAGES FROM THE BOOK OF FATE

Foreword

Gérard de Nerval, Stefan George, W. B. Yeats, Ivan Goll, André Breton, these are a few of the poets drawn to occultism. One does not have to believe in supernatural powers to notice the poetic power of occult imagery. There probably are secret links between such symbols and the irrational feelings, desire, terror or disgust, which they cause to appear in the unconscious.

11

The Mistress of Strength

The young girl walks, carefree, in the shade of the woods. Her white gown is embroidered with the Sign of the Infinite. She wears a belt which she made with the flowers of summer. The Lion comes to her. She puts her flower belt around his neck, and the Lion stoops before the Virgin.

19

The Sun

The small garden is sheltered by the wall, but the sunflower is not all that it grows above it. A child runs out of the garden. He would be naked, except for the garland of flowers which he wears as a crown and the red feather stuck into his blond hair. He leaps onto his white horse, holding up in his right hand the red banner of the Sun.

THE FATE OF THE OLD POET

The death of the poet

The poet in his dotage
Still extended his shaking hand
Toward the wondrous water lily
On the trembling night of the lake
He espoused limpid death
As he gathered the unique flower
The victorious image of the moon
In the deceiving mirror of the water.

Thus died, according to legend, the poet Li Po, who could not abandon his quest for ideal beauty and turn toward the beauties of the earth.

11

Another came to gather
The rose which still bloomed
In the secret garden of his old age

15

Alone he would drink to the health
Of his reflection in the tarnished
Mirrors of deserted taverns.

24

The little one took pity
On the stars shipwrecked
On the muddy bottom of the sea.

26

The metal tortured on the anvil
Never could foresee
The gleaming sword blade

33

The dust of centuries would dance
In the sun shining
Through the stained glass windows

THE PROPHET'S TEACHINGS

1

Before eating the fruit
Stop a moment
And think of the tree

15

And your heart shall break
At the sight of an empty chair
Next to a kitchen table

39

In the ruined chapel
The owl and the
Have replaced the

44

Step on a glowworm
There will remain gold grains of light
In the dust of the path

DESERTS OF MEMORY

Foreword

Readers will have a better understanding of these texts if they consider each poem as a separate scene in an evolving drama. In the first part, *The Song of Man*, the protagonist places his faith in a love which leads to death and nothingness. In the second, part, *The Song of the Land*, the protagonist comes to realize that he must play his part among his people if he wishes his own fate to have a goal and a meaning.

Le lecteur saisira mieux l'esprit de ce recueil s'il considère chaque poème comme une scène ou un tableau dans un drame. Dans la première partie, *Le Chant de l'homme*, le protagoniste place sa foi dans un amour qui ne mène qu'à la mort et au néant. Dans la seconde, *Le Chant du pays*, le protagoniste en vient à comprendre qu'il lui faut jouer son rôle parmi les siens s'il veut donner un but et un sens à son propre destin.

Acte de foi

Burning coal on the prophet's lips
Lava burning in the heart of things
Poetry

PART ONE

THE SONG OF MAN

Palmistry

The paths vanished into the shadows
And in the sky the stars kept their silence
The knife cutting into the flesh
Shall trace in the hollow of the palm
A line deep and straight
A magical wound whose blood
Shall right the warp of time

Eve at dawn

Eve at dawn rises
And shivers. Come
Naked and unafraid
You alone can fill
The empty space hollowed in my side
During my sleep
And on the fresh skin of the earth
Adam and Eve go together
Toward their destiny

Adultery

Did you ever ask
Your unfaithful shadow
Where it secretly goes
When the sun gets lost
And you remain
Alone and defenceless
Against the night?

Goal line

Where the roads ended
The milestones went on to measure
For the lost children of the earth
The distance which remained from the goal
The figures fell from their frozen fingers
And their famished bellies had eyes only
For the triumphal zero which marked
The goal line

PART II

THE SONG OF THE LAND

Dream

Through the mist of dream one glimpses
The far away shades of a lost time
Beasts meek and slow ruminating gravely
In the sweet warmth of stables
A house with the date carved above the door
Never would one have thought it was so ancient
And on the threshold the grandmother. Her hair
As white as the lace of her starched headdress
On the other side of the yard the ruins of a church
All covered with ivy and grey
Never was there talk of church or chapel in these parts
And yet, clear and sharp on the screen of the dream
One sees the forgotten church
The sanctuary which had hitherto been invisible
Through forgotten times
The temple built amid the fields
From generation to generation
By the humble peasants who labored here
They spent their sweat and their hearts
All have been dead for ages
But the ivy and the lichen still grow
On the church walls
Signs of the ancient faith which still survives
Signs of the life which still remains
Firmly attached to the hard granite

To him who walked before me

A stranding stone bars the way
Protecting your sleep
I did not have the chance to know you
But I retain the memory
Of an evening when the wind
Sang in the heather on the mountain
And its song was so magical
That the dazzling gold of sunset
Pierced the screen of the night
You answered to the mermaid
Who sang in the distance
The gold of sunset, alas !,

Turned into dry leaves.
And now you sleep your eternal sleep
In the frozen wastes of the North
But still I keep the memory
Of the night when on the wind
Was heard the call or the mermaid

The exile's plaint

So long ago during the night
The daughters of the rain
Stopped in their flight
Above our cradle
Their hair flew in the wind
And their siren voice
Sang in the meadow
Sang near the stream
Under the blessing of the clouds
Where have they gone
The daughters of the rain?
The stream tells only lies
In the ancient wood of the fay
Pigs dig with their snouts
The milt of toads
Poisons the silvery springs
And our loves were soiled
By the dregs of seasons
The leaves in the forest
Are red with the victims' blood
The bread of innocence
Is lost forever
The red curse on the invaders
Who loosed their flow of rot
On the ancient realm of the ermine*

* The ermine is the heraldic emblem of Brittany

The knight of thunder

Did you hear the knight of thunder
Galloping over the roof of clouds
Making haste? He brings good news
At the flaming tip of his lance
Red with the dragon's blood
We had had it with this old world
Left hanging there for much too long
A bruised apple on its branch
Forgotten by the press of time

And slowly rotting away
It was high time for the storm
To bring it down neatly breaking
The thin thread of its history

TABLE

THE BOOK OF FATE

Foreword

1-64

CHANGES ON THE BOOK OF CHANGES

1-64

IMAGES FOR THE BOOK OF FATE

1-21

THE FATE OF THE OLD POET

1-33

THE PROPHET'S TEACHING

1-45

THE DESERTS OF MEMORY

Foreword

Act of faith

PREMIÈRE PARTIE: LE CHANT DE L'HOMME

The Sorcerers of May

The Dream of a good child

Palmistry

On the dune

Wedding

Eine kleine Nachtmusik

Spring cleaning

Quarrel

The Invader

Dépit

To a sad lady / A une Dame triste

Crossroads

Cancer

A lost soldier / Un Soldat perdu

The death of the unicorn

Psyche

Eros

The angels' call

Eve at dawn

Eve's curse

Adam's exile

Adam's dream

Dahut's punishment

Orpheus in Hell

Adultery

The beggar's lament

Cliff
The deserts of memory
Goal line
Death

SECOND PART : THE SONG OF THE LAND

Prayer
To the one who walked before me
The exile's lament
The cowards' confession
The passers-by
Oasis
Sant-Albin-an-Hiliber
The empire's end
Pact
The knight of thunder
Anniversary
The crusaders
Fortresses
The Feast of Fire
Liberation