29 | Sima Qian, "Letter to Ren An"

A TERRIBLE THING happened to the historian Sima Qian (145?–86? B.C.E.) in 99 B.C.E. His contemporary Li Ling (d. 74 B.C.E.) was a general who had had great success in fighting the Xiongnu (see selection 27). After having penetrated deep into Central Asia, Li Ling was unexpectedly defeated by the enemy, whereupon he surrendered to the "barbarian" nomads—the supreme disgrace for a Chinese general. When Sima Qian saw that Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 B.C.E.) was displeased by the news, he praised Li Ling by pointing out that the defeated general had been outnumbered by the enemy and had fought bravely, adding that Li Ling was not entirely to blame, because his "relief troops never arrived." This comment was incautious, because the emperor understood Sima's lecture as a veiled attack on the so-called Nisaea General, Li Guangli (d. 90 B.C.E.), who was supposed to lead the relief column, and also happened to be the brother of one of the emperor's consorts. (He earned the sobriquet "Nisaea General" after his crafty successes in that Central Asian city.) The historian was promptly thrown into prison, convicted of "libel against the emperor," and sentenced to be castrated.

This penalty was intended to be humiliating, and Sima Qian was evidently expected to commit suicide rather than undergo it. But he chose to live on as a eunuch and eventually completed his magisterial history of ancient China, known as *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*. Sometime later, he explained his decision in an epistle to Ren An (d. 91 B.C.E.?), an acquaintance who also found himself entangled in legal problems. This letter has been preserved as a testament to Sima Qian's courage and resolve, and as a shining example of his literary skills. In it he declares that he could not bear to leave his opus unfinished, and so he dedicated the rest of his life, scorned and contemned as he was because of his shameful punishment, to the work that would secure his fame for eternity.

Sima Qian's style is lively and relatively ornate, with frequent use of elegant locutions (e.g., "within the stations of the Secret Guard" for "the palace"; "the land of warlike steeds" for "the steppe"). Moreover, his tone in this piece is unmistakably bitter, with many sarcastic and incongruous combinations of words: "I was encumbered by talent that would not be bridled"; "our enlightened emperor did not understand deeply"; "our defilement would only be more copious." (The translation below attempts to convey the idiosyncratic, and at times bizarre, diction of the original.) He takes solace in the observation that most of the great works of Chinese literature were composed by authors who endured some grave tragedy and who, in his words, "issued their frustrations" in their writing. If pain and misery are prerequisites to literary renown, then surely he has paid his dues.

Thus Sima Qian places himself in an august line of national heroes extending back to King Wen himself, the Sage King who completed the *Changes* while in captivity. Though Sima repeatedly deprecates his own abilities, it is clear that he has no lack of esteem for his work. Toward the end of his letter to Ren An, he announces that when he is finished, he will deposit his book in a famous mountain. In ancient China, a text discovered in such a place was thought to be a divine revelation.—PRG

Letter to Ren An [Excerpts]

When I was young, I was encumbered by talent that would not be bridled, and grew up without the praise of my town. Fortunately, on account of my father, the emperor allowed me to present my meager skills, so I passed freely within the stations of the Secret Guard. Considering that there is no way to gaze up at Heaven while wearing a bowl on one's head, I renounced visits [to and from friends] and forgot my domestic affairs. Day and night I yearned to exert my inglorious talents; I sought the emperor's favor by discharging the duties of my office single-mindedly. But then I made a great mistake in my service, and nothing would be the same.

Li Ling and I both lived in the palace, but we had not become friendly with each other. Our likes and dislikes put us on different paths, so we never quaffed a cup of wine together or were linked in an earnest relationship. But I observed that his personality was that of an outstanding gentleman. He served his parents with filial piety, was trustworthy with other men, scrupulous where money was involved, and fair in his dealings. He would defer in matters of hierarchy, and was respectful, temperate, and humble with others. He always yearned to attend to national emergencies, fervently and without concern for his person. Such are the [virtues] that he nurtured and accumulated; I considered him an inspiration to men of state. A subject who would go out to face myriad deaths without concern for his life, who rushes to meet challenges to the commonwealth, is outstanding indeed. In handling his affairs, he acted inappropriately but once, and those ministers who look to their own safety and protect their wives and children immediately plotted retribution for his shortcoming. I was sincerely pained by this in my private heart.

Moreover, Li Ling was provided with fewer than five thousand foot soldiers. They marched deep into the land of warlike steeds; they reached [the Xiongnu] king's court on foot and dangled bait before the tiger's mouth, outrageously provoking the mighty barbarians. Facing an army of millions, they engaged the *chanyu* in battle for more than ten days, killing more than their own number. The caitiffs were unable to retrieve their dead or rescue their wounded. Their lords and chieftains, clad in felt and fur, all quaked with terror, so they summoned the Wise Princes of the Left and Right,[1] conscripted those among the people who could draw a bow, and attacked and surrounded [Li Ling] as one nation. [Li Ling's troops] fought on the move for a thousand *li* until their arrows were exhausted and the escape routes sealed off. The relief troops did not arrive; dead and wounded soldiers lay in heaps. But Li Ling stirred his battalion with a single shout, and none of the soldiers failed to rise up. He himself had tears and blood streaming down [his face] in rivulets. He swallowed his tears, drew his empty crossbow, braved their naked blades, and faced north to fight the enemy to the death.

Before Ling succumbed, a herald had brought a [favorable] report [to the imperial court], and the ministers and feudal lords of Han had all raised a goblet to his long life. Several days later, news of Ling's defeat was heard, and the emperor found no savor in his food and no pleasure in holding court. The great ministers were worried and afraid, not knowing what course to take. When I saw the emperor despondent and distressed, I sincerely wished to offer my candid opinion, without taking my lowly status into account.

Li Ling always shared his short rations with other gentlemen, renouncing what was most savory, so that he was able to get men to die for him. Even famous generals of ancient times did not surpass him in this. Though he fell in defeat, if one considered his intentions, his desire to succeed should have redeemed him and requited Han. Nothing could be done anymore about what had happened, but in the losses that he inflicted [on the Xiongnu], his merit was indeed sufficient to be renowned throughout the world.

In my breast, I wished to disclose [these views], but I had no avenue to do so. Then, coincidentally, [the emperor] summoned me for an interview. I extolled Ling's merit in this manner, wishing to broaden the emperor's point of view and put a stop to the supercilious comments [of Li Ling's enemies].

I was unable to make myself completely clear. Our enlightened emperor did not understand deeply: he thought I was maligning the Nisaea General and lobbying on behalf of Li Ling. So he remanded me to the judges. I was never able to display my solemn loyalty, and in the end, I was convicted of libeling the emperor. My family being poor, my resources were insufficient to buy my freedom. None of my acquaintances would save me, and my colleagues would not utter a single word. A body is not wood or stone. Alone with my jailers, in the deep, dark dungeon—to whom could I appeal? You, Shaoqing,[2] have experienced this yourself; should I have conducted myself any differently? Once Li Ling surrendered alive, he sullied his family's reputation. I, in my turn, was led to the Silkworm Chamber,[3] to become the laughingstock of the world. How tragic! How tragic!

It is not easy to tell this matter in one or two words to vulgar people. My father's accomplishments were not of the order of the tally and seal [of nobility]. As an annalist and astrologer, I am placed among diviners and theurgists and the like—surely a plaything of the emperor. He keeps me like a singer or actor, misprized by the fickle mob. Suppose I had prostrated myself before the law and accepted execution—how different would it have been from the loss of a single hair from nine oxen, or the [death] of an ant or cricket? And the world would never have granted that I had died for my integrity; rather, they would have thought that because of the limitations of my wisdom and the egregiousness of my crime, I was unable to avoid the death penalty. Why? Because of the office in which I had planted myself.

(Sima Qian goes on to explain why he did not commit suicide after his degrading punishment.)

There is no one who is not, by nature, greedy for life and averse to death. We remember our parents and relatives and care for our wives and children. But it is otherwise with those who are roused by righteousness and justice; indeed, they cannot help themselves. I was unlucky to lose both my parents early; I was without brothers, a lonely orphan. And Shaoqing, you see how I thought of my wife and children! But the brave do not necessarily die for their integrity, and even a timid man, if he reveres what is right, will struggle for it wherever he dwells. Although I am timid and weakly, and desire to live, however indecorously, I certainly recognize the difference between what one may and may not do. Then why did I let myself sink to the disgrace of being fettered and bound? Any Zang or Huo,[4] slave or slave-girl, is able to commit suicide; should I not have been able to? I forbore in silence and lived on indecorously, enveloping myself in night soil without apology, because I sensed with remorse that there was something unfinished within my breast. I was loath to depart from the world without exhibiting to posterity my literary brilliance.

In ancient times, there were innumerable wealthy and noble men whose names have been obliterated. Only the uncanny and extraordinary are mentioned [today]. When the Earl of the West[5] was in captivity, he elaborated on the *Rites of Zhou;* when Confucius was in straits, he produced the *Spring and Autumn Annals.* It was after Qu Yuan was exiled that he composed "Encountering Sorrow";[6] Zuoqiu lost his sight, and so we have the *Discourses of the States;* Master Sun had his legs amputated, and *Methods of War* was compiled; [Lü] Buwei was banished to Shu, and the world has transmitted his *Panoramas;*[7] Han Fei was imprisoned in Qin, and [wrote] "Difficulties of Persuasion" and "Solitary Frustration."[8] Most of the three hundred pieces in the *Odes* were produced by worthy sages who conveyed their frustrations. All these men had anxious and suppressed thoughts; they were unable to propagate their principles, so they bore posterity in mind

by giving an account of past events. Those like Zuoqiu Ming, who did not have [the use of] his eyes, or Master Sun, whose feet were cut off, could never be employed; they retired to write books in which they expressed their frustrations, yearning to reveal themselves in the legacy of their insubstantial literature.

I have been impertinent enough to depute myself recently to my incompetent writing,[9] reticulating the world's neglected bits of ancient lore. I have examined [the record of] human action, investigating the principles of success and failure, flourishing and decline. In all there are 130 chapters. I wished also to understand the relation between Heaven and humanity and to be conversant with the vicissitudes of history, so as to complete a dissertation of a unified philosophy.[10] Before the first draft was done, this calamity happened to befall me. I was distraught that it might not be completed; therefore I submitted to this extreme punishment without an indignant countenance. Surely, when I have finished this book, I will store it in a famous mountain, where it will be left for someone to have it circulated throughout the cities and great metropolises. Thus I will repay the debt of my earlier disgrace; and though I might suffer myriad dismemberments, how should I regret it? But this can be said only to those who are wise; it is difficult to discuss it with the vulgar.

It is not easy to live with the burden of contempt; the lowly rabble mostly slanders and defames. I met with this calamity by speaking with my mouth; were I to compound the abuse and ridicule [that I endure] in my native district, thereby besmirching and disgracing my ancestors, how could I face the grave tumuli of my father and mother? Even after a succession of a hundred generations, our defilement would only be more copious. Therefore my guts ache several times a day. At home, I am disengaged, as though forgetting something; abroad, I do not know where I am going. Whenever I remember my shame, I sweat so that the clothes on my back are always soaked. By rights I should be a eunuch in the women's apartments, though I would rather withdraw to conceal myself deeply in the cliffs and caves. Thus I carry on for now, bobbing among the vulgar, undulating with the times, associating with fools and madmen.

—PRG

Notes

1. Two Xiongnu nobles.
2. Ren An's courtesy-name.
3. Where castrations were performed.
4. Stock names for a man and woman (like our "Jack and Jill").
5. The title of King Wen of Zhou before he received the Mandate of Heaven.
6. "Li sao," the longest poem in *Lyrics of Chu*.
7. *Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü* was also known as *Lü's Panoramas (Lülan)* in antiquity.
8. Two chapters in the *Han Fei Zi* (see selection 21).
9. Formal language of humility.
10. A biting pun: "a dissertation of a unified philosophy" *(yijia zhi yan)* can also mean "the words of one family." Denied a corporeal family as a result of his mutilation, Sima Qian intends his history as a surrogate.