

IMAGE AND FIGURE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF CHINESE POETRY

When two distantly separated literary cultures make contact with each other, across major barriers of geographical and linguistic remoteness, there are various characteristic patterns of interaction which may in retrospect be observed. The assimilation of some knowledge of Chinese classical poetry into the work of English writers and poets, beginning in the early years of the present century, forms the subject of this paper; in this process of assimilation it is possible now to recognise how writers in English re-made the features of an oriental literary tradition according to their own preconceptions and creative needs. But in those cases when the results of this work are poetic translations or adaptations displaying exceptionally assured poetic intelligence and coherence it is tempting to assume that a 'poetic intuition' guarantees that a successful poem in English which is based on a Chinese original must be successful in ways directly related to what was poetic in the source text. I have come to hold the view that this assumption, about parity and correspondence in the matter of underlying poetic structure and effect, is quite dubious, and I believe that the assumption should be tested against the evidence. For creative misreading can be influential and contagious, and can itself enter a continuing tradition so that historically it becomes part of an established mode of perception; it may thereby become almost invisible.¹

Part of the characteristic pattern of interaction to which I have referred can be set out in a typical chronology. After the early voyages of travel and reconnaissance from West to East there is usually a beginning at comprehension of the remote culture's language and history and institutions, often attempted by Christian missionaries. Trade then follows, and variously regrettable colonial adventures. Scholars embark upon the task of codifying knowledge of the language, and representative translation from the historical and literary record is attempted; this is usually done from the philologist's viewpoint rather than as an exercise in creative assimilation; and then a stage is reached where a body of technical translation and commentary has been published and is available to the Western writer. It is at this point that a specifically *literary* interaction can begin.

Looking at the relations between Chinese and English-speaking literary culture from the English side one may say that this stage had been reached by the end of the nineteenth century, when a translated corpus had been established by such formidable scholars as James Legge and Herbert Giles; Guillaume Pauthier had done the same in France. Neither of these English sinologists had any serious literary pretensions, yet they were both willing to

¹ Compare for instance the case of another adapted text, put into circulation by a flawed transmission process, which has thereafter become influential specifically in that form, the *Cours de linguistique générale* of Ferdinand de Saussure: 'One comes back in the end to the fact that, whatever its imperfections, this publication [of 1916] was the authoritative text of Saussurean structuralism for a whole generation of scholars, and the instrument through which an entirely new approach to linguistic analysis was established. Thereby it acquires in its own right--"mistakes" and all--a place in the history of modern thought which cannot retrospectively be denied it' (F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris [London, 1983], Introduction, p. xiii).

address their translations to a non-professional readership. The forms of expression which both scholars adopted, when confronted with texts in verse, were thus ordinarily conventional; the distinctive foreignness of their originals largely vanished under the reassuringly familiar appearance of mainstream Victorian 'poetic' treatment. No assumption is advanced by such work, either explicitly or tacitly, that the English form of expression attempts any close stylistic correspondence with the originals, except in certain merely extrinsic formulae such as rhyme, parallelism and the like; for the rest, whatever is 'poetic' in the Chinese poem is made over into a normative English 'poeticism' so as to allow the English reader to accept that the experience carried across is recognisably 'poetic' according to established English expectation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century a new generation of writers and self-taught scholars started to approach this set of texts and problems with a more radical motive: that of bringing the response to Chinese classical poetry into the forefront of innovative literary consciousness, and of attempting to identify the thematic and expressive characteristics of Chinese poetic art so as to work out a more radical interaction of Chinese and English. It is here, chiefly in the writing and theoretical discussion of Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley, that assumptions about parity and correspondence begin to form and to become influential in shaping perception. Because Ezra Pound himself influenced Waley, and was by far the more original poetic intelligence, it is upon his early development and practice that this enquiry must concentrate.

The general outlines of Pound's attack upon Edwardian literary London and its belated Victorianism are well known, as are his discovery of Chinese and Japanese poetry and his work on the Fenollosa papers. But his transition through stages of development was extraordinarily rapid, and involved several overlaps and reversions, so that some careful detail is required. To summarise rather briskly, at the start, it may be said that by about 1909 Pound had made two kinds of attempt to propel himself free of listless Victorian lyricism. On the one hand he had tried for intensity of mood and feeling, following on from William Morris and Rossetti to the early writing of W.B. Yeats. On the other hand he had wanted to dramatise the psychology of feeling and to sharpen its idiom; here the chief exemplar was Browning. These two lines of advance did not connect with each other very well, and Pound tended to switch between them. In his 1909 collection *Exultations*, for example, the long poem 'Laudantes Decem Pulchritudinis Johannaе Templi' is divided into sections assigned to different speaking voices; yet the principal mode is a vehement impressionism held back and qualified by an intermittent delicacy of hesitation:

O pearls that hang on your little silver chains,
 The innumerable voices that are whispering
 Among you as you are drawn aside by the wind,
 Have brought to my mind the soft and eager speech
 Of one who hath great loveliness,

Which is subtle as the beauty of the rains
 That hang low in the moonshine and bring
 The May softly among us, and unbind

The streams and the crimson and white flowers and reach
 Deep down into the secret places.

The impressionism here renders pathos of mood and its colouration; but the hesitation in rhythm and movement of phrase tends to isolate visual detail, like the 'pearls that hang on your little silver chains'. These are in context clearly raindrops, and thus an explicitly constructed figure is offered: yet the lightness and autonomy of presentation makes the lustre of pearls, the sheen of silver, the colour-patches of crimson and white from the rose-petals, float together so as to be disconnected from their descriptive frame. Almost, we might say, these are not *figures* which are acknowledged as products of rhetorical deliberateness, but rather *images* which disclaim a rhetorical motive and arrive upon the page by a more immediate interaction of heightened poetic attention and rhythmical concentration.

In his 1910 essay on Dante included as a chapter in *The Spirit of Romance* Pound quoted Aristotle on the essential swiftness of perception underlying metaphor: "'The apt use of metaphor, arising, as it does, from a swift perception of relations, is the hall-mark of genius": thus says Aristotle. I use the term "comparison" to include metaphor, simile (which is a more leisurely expression of a kindred variety of thought), and the "language beyond metaphor", that is, the more compressed or elliptical expression of metaphorical perception. . . . It is in the swift forms of comparison . . . that Dante sets much of his beauty' (*Spirit of Romance*, p. 158). Pound does not yet have a term for this vivid compression, but the 'crimson and white flowers' which in his poem are unbound like the running stream come to float by virtue of this sudden release into the form of what in the Dante essay he called 'primary apparition'.

This, then, is one of the thresholds of what Pound was a little later to announce as 'Imagism'. By some time in 1912, according to his own account, he had composed the two-line image poem, 'In a Station of the Metro', with its tacit orientalism superimposed upon metropolitan displacement; and in a now celebrated essay published in *Poetry* (Chicago) for March 1913, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', he was ready with a definition: 'An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. . . . It is the presentation of such a "complex" instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art' (*Literary Essays*, p. 4). This theory of instantaneous presentation not only excludes, we should note, the development or extension of the image within the sequence of the poem; it also excludes any visible deliberateness by the poet in rhetorically positioning a figure in relation to an explicit or implicit context. The 'image' is to meet the reader's attention *directly*, as if there were scarcely any anterior poet in evidence at all, and as if the prevailing framework for interpretation and association could be jolted or floated into an entirely novel focus.

In the search for precedent instances of such techniques of presentation we know that Pound, by training a linguist and by habit an eclectic, was roaming far and wide. Very soon he was to meet the widow of the American oriental art historian and student of Chinese poetry, Ernest Fenollosa, and to

be entrusted with Fenollosa's drafts for the translation into English of Chinese classical poems; but this important encounter did not take place until late 1913. And before this Pound had *already* become interested in Chinese poetry on his own account; not in the high T'ang poetry of Li Po but in the earlier compositions translated into stiffly literary English by Herbert Giles. This first phase of Pound's interest in Chinese poetry produced three 'translations', freely adapted from the Giles versions, all first published together in February 1914 and probably composed some time in the previous year: 'After Ch'u Yuan'; 'Fan-Piece for her Imperial Lord'; and 'Liu Ch'e'.

In his valuable and informative introductory essay on 'The Translation of Chinese Poetry', prefixed to his anthology of *Poems of the Late T'ang*, Professor Angus Graham says of Pound and his circle: 'Interest shifted from Japan to China after 1913, when Pound received the manuscripts of Ernest Fenollosa' (*Late T'ang*, p. 16); but this is to telescope the chronology somewhat misleadingly. We need to examine these earliest Chinese versions as part of the beginning of imagism, not as influenced by the theory and practice which Pound subsequently discovered had been advanced by Fenollosa. To start with a specific example we may consider 'Lin Ch'e'. Here first is the Giles account of the poem, by Emperor Wu of the Han (156-87 B.C.):

The sound of rustling silk is stilled,
 With dust the marble courtyard filled;
 No footfalls echo on the floor,
 Fallen leaves in heaps block up the door. . . .
 For she, my pride, my lovely one, is lost,
 And I am left, in hopeless anguish tossed.

Giles, *Chinese Literature* (1901)

This is rather clumsily done, and we should notice that the effort to rhyme is conspicuously self-conscious; it is 'literary' by effort of adaptation and there is no attempt to suggest that the rhymes occur naturally or for intrinsic reasons. Now see what Pound has decided to do with this material:

LIU CH'E

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,
 Dust drifts over the court-yard,
 There is no sound of foot-fall, and the leaves
 Scurry into heaps and lie still,
 And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:
 A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.

Pound, *Lustra* (1916)

Pound has at a stroke abandoned all rhyme and largely dismantled the couplet-rhythm. He has assumed that 'lost' in Giles was a euphemism for 'dead' and so he has imagined the lady's grave beneath the fallen leaves which blow about the court-yard. Then he forces a strophic break into the poem, to sharpen its leaning-forward into a culminating gesture; and then we have what is a pure invention: a separate, almost wholly autonomous *image*, 'presenting an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'. If we glance at the slightly later translation of the same original by Arthur Waley we

shall see that both Giles and he agree on making the last line an overt expression of personalised emotion. But for Pound that is altogether too like Yeats or William Morris or Dante Gabriel Rossetti; a 'direct treatment of the thing' must replace the statement of feeling, so that feeling is implied instantly. The word 'cling' suggests emotional dependency and hopeless attachment, but it is displaced from direct human application, just as it is isolated in prosody from the epitaph which precedes it. What Pound divined as the inner method of Chinese lyrical composition is recruited to justify and demonstrate his new practice of imagism.

An even more radical act of selective compression is displayed in his reworking of the very early poem traditionally ascribed to Lady Pan, which had also been translated by Giles. As Pound encountered it, there were ten lines of extendedly plaintive outcry, rendered in the leisurely forms of explicit simile and dipping into an eighteenth century poetic diction for phrases like 'the grateful gale' and 'torrid rage':

O fair white silk, fresh from the weaver's loom,
 Clear as the frost, bright as the winter snow --
 See! friendship fashions out of thee a fan,
 Round as the round moon shines in heaven above,
 At home, abroad, a close companion thou,
 Stirring at every move the grateful gale.
 And yet I fear, ah me! that autumn chills,
 Cooling the dying summer's torrid rage,
 Will see thee laid neglected on the shelf,
 All thought of bygone days, like them bygone.

Giles, *Chinese Literature* (1901)

The object itself, we may say, the silken fan made and given as a mark of anxious favour, almost disappears in the Giles treatment under a great surge of descriptive attributes. By ruthless excision Pound fixes a direct attention upon the thing, sharpens the chill outline by laying the frost upon a precise grass-blade, and then compresses all the explicit emotion of the shift of season and mood into the irony of one word, 'also':

FAN-PIECE, FOR HER IMPERIAL LORD

O fan of white silk,
 clear as frost on the grass-blade,
 You also are laid aside.

Pound, *Lustra* (1916)

The title here is the most explicit expression in the whole performance, just as had been the case with 'In a Station of the Metro'; within the brief movement of Pound's version the comparison of the cooling white silk to frost is swiftly overtaken by the season of frost itself; in which neither the fan nor she who made it is any longer required. We may note that the Giles version contains six separate verb-formations, and that Watson and Birrell employ eight and nine respectively. Each of these three translations also points up the narrative contrast, between the summer season when the fan is needed and the coming autumn when it will be discarded; the explicit future tense

appears ominously in all three versions. By contrast Pound, although working from the Giles version as his raw material, has reduced the poem to a single verb only, in the present tense, seizing upon the passive construction to shew how the opening descriptive phrases are finally subjugated to the peremptory whim of an implied but unnamed owner. Pound's highly compressed image has swiftness and sharpness and vivid, presentational brevity, all features which imagism was to claim as characteristics of Chinese poetic art; and yet none of the three versions of the Chinese poem made by those with direct knowledge of its language shew any of these features.

The methods which these adaptations from Giles shew in process of being worked out were quickly incorporated into a canon of examples for the reform and rejuvenation of English poetry; writing in an essay hopefully titled 'The Renaissance' and published in February 1915 Pound asserted: 'Undoubtedly pure color is to be found in Chinese poetry, when we begin to know enough about it; indeed, a shadow of this perfection is already at hand in translations. Liu Ch'e, Chu Yuan, Chia I, and the great *vers libre* writers before the Petrarchan age of Li Po, are a treasury to which the next century may look for as great a stimulus as the renaissance had from the Greeks' (*Literary Essays*, p. 218; there wrongly dated as 1914).

Waley, we may comment, knew perfectly well that the Chinese poems referred to were infinitely far from being *vers libre* of any sort; his 'Notes on Chinese Prosody' published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* of April 1918 makes that completely clear; yet he also chooses a kind of *vers libre* for his own translation. Professor Graham says of Pound's version of 'Liu Ch'e', in his essay already mentioned: 'Pound emerges triumphantly by discarding Giles and writing a new conclusion of his own. . . . It is Far Eastern in manner and feeling, but it transforms the poem and fully entitles him to claim it for his own' (*Late Tang*, p. 36). Now I hesitate to offer disagreement with so accomplished a scholar, but I can only surmise that here Professor Graham has allowed himself to believe that, because Pound has produced a highly successful *poem*, he has somehow also captured something essential in the spirit of the original. That is an assumption of the kind I mentioned at the outset of this paper, and I believe it to be mistaken.

But meanwhile, after these early imagist experiments with adaptations from the Chinese, Pound had by late 1913 met Mary Fenollosa in London and had been offered all of her late husband's working papers. This episode and its consequences have already been fully described, notably by Hugh Kenner in a rather insidiously Poundian manner, and somewhat more objectively by Earl Miner in his *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*. Fenollosa had left drafts for an extended essay on *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* and after editorial reworking Pound saw this into print, initially in *The Little Review*, volume VI for 1919, spread over four successive numbers. Pound discovered in this essay much that confirmed and justified his convictions about the image and about 'direct treatment of the thing'; Fenollosa had stated that 'Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within' (*Chinese Written Character*, p. 28), and such contention must have seemed an explicit endorsement of what Pound had done to 'Liu Ch'e'. The poetic theory of the twentieth-century Western imagist and of the

early court poet of classical China seemed to coalesce. For Pound the concept of a pictographic idiom whose sequences visibly performed and compressed the operations of nature was thus launched upon its literary career; the act of metaphor was to precede an ascribed or intended meaning, and absolute metaphor was to float with a kind of charged non-attachment within a frame held sharp by rhythm and exactness of attention. Absolute metaphor was thus energetic and succinct, autonomous within the immediate context of its presentation, and connected to it not by links of reference or idiom but by feeling and inner rhythm; as Pound wrote in 1916, in his *Gaudier = Brzeska: A Memoir*, 'Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists deal in "association," that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word. They made it a form of metonymy [sic]' (*Gaudier = Brzeska*, p. 97). We may say at this point that Chinese poetic practice, and the Chinese language itself, became for Pound at a critically formative stage in his career a demonstration against metonymy.

At this point I must pause to introduce some more specific definition of terms, and from those to whom they may already be familiar I ask indulgence. I have already implied a difference between *image* and *figure*, and I now bring forward another parallel, contrasting relation between *metaphor* and *metonymy*. My rather condensed contention is that the Western rhetorical tradition of literary composition diagnosed the figurative construction of discourse so as to identify specific codes of expression and interpretation; the writer who came to employ such figures knew he was doing so, and the reader knew that the connected implications of such knowledge had formed part of the text to be understood. The deliberateness of figuration was a phenomenon of *connection*, because separate figures and their place in a sequence of variation and development each tacitly implied their part in the repertory of effects and constructions which comprised the whole literary discourse and its relations to the personal and social reality of which it offered a representation. Pound's theory of the poetic *image*, taking up earlier tendencies in Pater and Yeats and the English reception of the French *symboliste* poets, attempted to divest the presentational image of a context in the deliberateness of a connected structure of expression, and also to isolate it from any visible ties of reference or relation; the image was to be 'luminous from within'. Pound in fact admitted that a principle of construction was involved; in his monograph on the sculptor Gaudier = Brzeska, already referred to, he acknowledged that 'the "one image poem" is a form of superposition, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another' (*Gaudier = Brzeska*, p. 89). But he in the same passage also seeks to pre-empt analysis of relations: 'In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective' (ibid.).

In this way for Pound the *image* was to escape the authorial deliberation and the connections of implied reference which had variously characterised the Western tradition of rhetorical *figures*. In arguing for what he called 'absolute *metaphor*' he also protested against any tendency to *metonymy*. This latter word is the name of a classical rhetorical figure, closely related to metaphor but distinct from it by virtue of the implied construction of its context. Metonymy and its sister-figure synecdoche both operate as figures of

substitution, in which the act of choice of an attribute or representative part to stand in place of the context from which the choice was made is part of the activity of meaning in the text. I shall give some specific examples later, from which it will be seen that an habitual use of metonymy brings with it a connected repertory of allusion; indeed, the systematic allusional framework of poetic figuration is a central characteristic of metonymy as it has in recent Western theory (principally that of Roman Jakobson) come to be regarded as a mode of composition strongly contrasted with metaphor; since a metonymic system depends upon a pattern of figural components which are already associated together in a poetic discourse or context of connected formalisms from which combinations are produced, each local part of such a system pre-implicating the larger whole. In this mode metonymy comes to include synecdoche, because the mentioned part which implicates the deleted whole becomes by convention the sign or name for that whole; by the same token it also includes the figure of euphemism and the euphemistic pun. The convention governing deployment and these figures is one which must regulate both authorial practice and also the reader's acts of interpretation; hence, the code of allusion requires to be generally understood even though only a part of it may be activated by any one individual poem.

By contrast with the foregoing a metaphoric practice does not implicate an established figural system, but selects extrinsic or separated elements on the basis of a newly-perceived relation which substitutes one more or less autonomous element for another; it constitutes a new and original relation, rather than invoking a familiar one. The separate-floating or 'luminous' image lies at the far end of this figurative spectrum, deliberately remote from the practice of metonymy; Pound's energetic movement, during his initial Imagistic phase, towards absolute metaphor and the darting juxtapositions of autonomous intensities of presentation, carried with it a more or less conscious wish to break up the associative contexts implied by metonymy. And his response to Fenollosa's draft essay on *The Chinese Written Character* was to see it as a primer of elemental metaphor.²

It may be seen by now, I hope, that *figure* generally and *metonymy* in particular share the feature of connection within an historical system of meanings; and that both *image* and *metaphor* entail claims, to greater or lesser extent, of independence from a prevalidated system. Fenollosa's essay shews clearly enough that he regarded Chinese poetic art as essentially metaphoric rather than allusional or metonymic, and indeed he regarded the written ideogram as itself charged with primal metaphor. Pound, already drawn to this view of the image, was on this authority ready to believe that the characteristic genius of Chinese poetry was specifically of this kind; and Pound's later development in his *Cantos* of this ideogramic theory of the image has exerted a widespread influence on twentieth century Western poetic theory and practice. But, we may pause to enquire, was this analysis of Chinese poetic art a correct one? Do Chinese poems really work like this?

² For discussion of the metonymy/metaphor distinction, see David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977); Gérard Genette, 'Métonymie chez Proust', *Figures III* (Paris, 1972); Alexander Gellley, 'Metonymy, Schematism, and the Space of Literature', *New Literary History*, 11 (1980), 469-87; and Max Nänny, 'Context, Contiguity and Contact in Ezra Pound's *Personae*', *ELH*, 47 (1980), 386-98.

The place for an initial consideration could well be the volume of translations from the Chinese which Pound adapted from the Fenollosa drafts and published in 1915 under the title *Cathay*. What is initially puzzling about much of this book, however, is that the poems are not in fact imagistic in construction at all; although many scholar-critics and literary historians have been so bemused by their own expectations that they have believed otherwise. Indeed, in his celebrated version of Li Po's 'The Jewel Stairs' Grievance' Pound presented a text which looked superficially like a sequence of luminously floating images; but he supplied an interpretative note to it in which he pointedly explicated the allusional metonymies upon which he took the poem's meaning to be based. But let us examine in closer detail his version of another celebrated poem, on which he supplied no note, and then we may compare his translation with those produced by other scholars writing in English. Here first is Pound's *Cathay* translation titled 'The Beautiful Toilet':

Blue, blue is the grass about the river
 And the willows have overfilled the close garden.
 And within, the mistress, in the midmost of her youth,
 White, white of face, hesitates, passing the door.
 Slender, she puts forth a slender hand,

And she was a courtesan in the old days,
 And she has married a sot,
 Who now goes drunkenly out
 And leaves her too much alone.

Pound, *Cathay* (1915), p. 7.

This is, of course, the second of the Nineteen Old Poems, which had previously been translated by Giles and which was also a little later translated by Waley. Giles again keeps up a monotonously pert rhyming, adopting whatever common features of Victorian poetic vocabulary will come easily to hand to install a *pastiche* of Tennyson and Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. It should be remembered, here, that Giles believed his chief difficulty was to convince English readers that Chinese poems could be recognised as 'poetic' by any standards known to them, so that to make such a translation look instantly familiar to his intended readership was a condition of reasonable success.

Pound's version, by contrast, is more wavering and hesitant in rhythm. The presence of the willows is allowed to be suggestive of delicate but over-luxuriant enclosure, the qualities of nature metaphorically transferred to the isolation of the mistress by a brilliant internal chiasmus or crossing-over of sound values (willows, overfilled) and an implicit comparison of trailing branches with the tresses of the mistress, calling up by further implication the dampening mist of the low water-meadows and the subdued undertone of distress in the traditional Western associations of the weeping willow. The abruptness of rhythm in the second strophe is in pointed contrast to the hesitancy of the first, overriding the prosody of a repeated stanza-form to make a pronounced contrast of mood. Waley's version of the same poem is more mechanical in rhythm and he breaks up his lines so as to destroy any sense of stanzaic movement. Pound's version would, by a modern reader of

English poetry, be judged clearly the most successful of the three, even though its technical accuracy as translation was completely dependent on the Japanese-mediated drafts produced by Fenollosa. Pound's title insists upon an autonomous aesthetic pictorialism, complicated by the underlying mood of melancholy resignation but not disrupted by that mood so as to activate in the reader any closer working-out of context.

Now consider a version produced by a much more recent scholar, as part of the project of translating into English the entire corpus of the Southern Dynasties anthology, the *Yü-t'ai hsin-yung* or *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*. This anthology was preoccupied with the then fashionable 'Palace Style Poetry' (*kung-t'i shih*) and its first chapter included twelve of the Nineteen Old Poems; the version of Pound's 'Beautiful Toilet' as translated by Dr Anne Birrell stands in a context of interpretation which demonstrates, I believe, a radical contrast to the reading offered by Pound. Here is the poem as Dr Birrell renders it:

Green, green riverside grass,
Lush, lush willow in the garden,
Sleek, sleek a girl upstairs,
White, white faces her window.
Fair, fair her rouge and powder face,
Slim, slim she shows her white hand.

Once I was a singing-house girl,
Now I am a playboy's wife.
A playboy roves, never comes home,
My empty bed is hard to keep alone.

(*Jade Terrace*, p. 39)

By comparison with the *Cathay* version this seems stiffer, less resonant and wavering and with less modulation of mood; indeed, it is if anything closer to Waley and even to Giles than to Pound. We observe immediately that the reduplicated initial epithets are exactly maintained, each line separate by end-stopping, bringing back into prominence the formalism of the piece and associating that formalism with the belated artifice of cosmetics as a hapless antidote to a suffocating nature. In her publication Dr Birrell provided a note on 'willow' (*liu*), making explicit the fact that this was no free metaphor associated with interior mood but, rather, a traditionally metonymic pun for 'to detain, to keep someone from going away on a journey' (*Jade Terrace*, p. 333). Further, she explicates what an original readership would also have well understood: the often implied comparison of the willow's silky strands to silk thread, itself a pun for pining love. Knowing all this, even in outline, the English reader may at once recognise a sharp irony, since this singing-girl was once herself professionally unattached but is now unable to keep her playboy husband from roving off and leaving her alone; a system of allusions is implied especially by the negative force of this ironic punning, just as she only, in this transit of linked doublets, is left separate and unpaired.

Pound's highly idealised tone was not prepared to concede that the girl's pallor of appearance was a contrivance of cosmetic self-presentation, any more than he was willing to shew that the presented images of the poem were

also to be recognised by the reader as contrived within an implicit framework of allusional presentation; that the mode of composition, to simplify, is not metaphorical but metonymic. Yet the reader is surely to recognise, for instance, that the girl is at her upper window, discreetly both vantage-point and shew-case: allowing to be seen there the young girl's face which she has already composed in her mirror, offering just the hint of a gesture ('white hand') towards some possible passer-by. The lure of this gesture looks for a male visitor, and yet we know that the compiler of the *Jade Terrace* anthology expected that most of his readers would be high-class palace ladies. The modern Western reader also learns from Dr Birrell's annotation what a Chinese reader would already know and what Pound only hints at: that a 'singing-house', from which this now abandoned girl originally came, was a recognised euphemism for a brothel (*Jade Terrace*, pp. 14, 326). The sexual innuendo of a term like 'sleek', in Dr Birrell's translation, now falls into place; the contrived self-consciousness of the word resonates with the artifice by which the mistress preserves her well-groomed appearance, as expression of her hopeless attachment to one who had formerly been merely one of her many clients.

So that, although Pound's *Cathay* version of this poem is not prominently imagistic, it does treat the poem as if it were a dramatic moment rendered by metaphors of instant presentation and gesture; whereas in Dr Birrell's account of it there is a network of ironical, punning allusion, in which signs which are present stand for larger connection to a system of meanings which is implied but absent; just as the mistress herself is now stranded on the outer edge of a system which once gave her both place and meaning. In Dr Birrell's treatment it is a poem of euphemism and metonymy, and it asks to be read according to a schedule of fuller and prior knowledge.

Now, I would argue that the average literate English reader, if asked which of these two treatments was more essentially 'Chinese', would point to Pound's version as displaying just that pictorial delicacy and luminously floating clarity of image which seems so characteristic of Chinese poetic art. Even scholars have affirmed this; as for instance Wai-lim Yip in his *Chinese Poetry* published in 1976: 'Much of the art of Chinese Poetry lies in the way in which the poet captures the visual events as they emerge and act themselves out before us, releasing them from the restrictive concept of time and space, letting them leap out directly from the undifferentiated mode of existence' (*op. cit.*, p. 1). This is the extreme Imagist position revived, determined to make every element in the sequence of a poem into a visual metaphor of its own absoluteness, of its disconnection from a constraining context of signification. It is a fair description of the final gesture in Pound's 'Liu Ch'e' and those early adaptations from Giles, and it represents at least the tendency of the first part of his 'The Beautiful Toilet'. But it does not correspond at all with what Dr Birrell's version finds in this latter poem; since for her the 'restrictive concept of time and space' is essentially part of this poem's frame, and part also of its clearly implicit meaning.

Is it possible at this stage of the present discussion to ask which of these discrepant views is nearer to the facts of the case? The question needs to be qualified and examined before it can instructively be put. In the first place we are constrained to observe that 'the facts' of Chinese poetic art as

seen through English and American eyes have, until recently at least, approximated more to the Imagistic view; so that this tradition has become a fact of Western literary history in its own right. And secondly, we ought not to expect that any such description as Yip's, however generalised, could apply with equal force to the range of kinds and historical variation found within the long development of Chinese poetry. But in relation to this second point we can try to be more specific; and it is notable that although Fenollosa had an obviously strong interest in Li Po, both Pound and Waley reacted initially with more favour to the pre-T'ang lyric forms. These are exactly also the territory of the *Jade Terrace* anthology, and so we may take a further example from that collection as a test-case to help adjudicate the issue.

Here then is a brief poem by Chang Shuai which appears in Chapter Nine of the book as the second in a pair of what are described as White hemp dance lyrics:

Wonderful voices in song after song, light bodies fly.
Trickling sweat stains faces, blending with sweet scents.
They move as one, stop in unison, none out of step,
Enraptured, the honoured guests forget to go home.
Long hours they play through the night as bright stars dwindle.

Once again this seems like an image plucked out of the moment and brilliantly held, 'the thing outward and objective darting into a thing inward and subjective'. It seems luminously pictorial and to display a 'direct treatment of the thing' which is also fraught with a strong concentration of emotion. But even to a reader with no direct knowledge of the original this translation yields much to a different type of reading.

We may note, initially, the quite unostentatious but unmistakably deliberate management of cross-woven dancing rhythms and the exhausted elation of ecstatic song. In each successive line of the translation the caesura is stepped back closer to the start, rapidly doubling in line three like the hops in a court dance of the European Renaissance (a galliard say, or a *saltarello*), finally to vanish altogether from the unbroken run of line five. The treatment by rhythmic imitation also brings in other effects of sound and phonetic word-play: the internal echoings of *light to fly*, *sweat to sweet*, *stop to step* obliquely recreate the effect of rhyme; the *blending* both *bends* and *lends*, and finally *ends*, just as the consonant-groupings of *dwindle* brings *down* in conclusion the unnoticed *dews* of *dawn*. It may be objected that neither 'dew' nor 'dawn' is mentioned here; but the reader alert to genre and context will recognise this piece as a condensed variant of the traditional drinking-party theme; as for example the closing lines of Ts'ao Chih's folk-song translated by Dr Birrell under the title 'My sad fate':

Our host invites his best friends to his private party,
Chants solo, 'Bring the cups! why so slow?'
Guests recite 'Drunk now let's go home!'
Our host responds with 'Dew not yet dry'.

(*Jade Terrace*, p. 238)

This parting shot is itself a direct quotation from *The Book of Songs* (No. 174); and although the White hemp song speaks of the long hours of an enraptured

night's entertainment, it silently also acknowledges its exhaustion, that again the 'restrictive concept of time and space' dismissed by Yip is once more to be felt as an active constraint by context even where explicitly it is apparently ignored. The dews of dawn will dampen the ardour of these revellers, as the artificial brilliancy of the night finally subsides.

And, to cite a further detail, the observant reader will have come to notice from the tradition that the phrase 'honoured guests' is a consciously nuanced euphemism for just such clients at a singing-house as were so painfully missing from the Ancient Poem translated by Pound as 'The Beautiful Toilet'; the women who dance in such a place are, of course, *professional* and deliberate in their work of skill and allure, just as their male admirers are amateurs in every sense. The 'honoured guests' at this singing-house are sportively at play, in a dalliance of hectic recreation; but the musicians who play for them and keep to time in the rhythms of the dance, are hard at work to keep up the effort of continuing exhilaration: the male visitors play but the female entertainers only play at playing.

The implications of this perspective may stretch even further, to include both the author and his readers within the bound perimeter of interpretation. We know that the outward forms and tunes of such of such a poem are fixed by literary tradition and that the poet undertakes a professional submission to their requirements; in imitating the service provided by a professional entertainer he himself plays voluntarily at ceding the freedom he thus also tacitly affirms. In like turn the reader recognises the minutely tokenised sacrifice of freedom made on his or her behalf, to give back by conscious readerly understanding what has been implicitly surrendered. We are surely to know, and to know with assurance, that within the framework of this courtly anthology no author will give up a real freedom or invite any reader to do so; we know that the author is consciously confident upon this point, and that he is confident of our conscious if latent assent. But he also knows and accepts on our behalf that there is no exercise of such a connoisseur's freedom except inside the bound forms of a prescriptive convention, within the terms of which at the level of compositional choice and imitated narrative the minute dramas of captivity and servitude can act out the exercise of issues progressively enlarged within the widening circles of authorial implication and readerly self-consciousness.

Such token manoeuvres within the circuit of imitation may seem complacent or even cynical, but this possibility is belied by the seriousness of professional artistry, and even by the sense that the momentary transport of the dancer's inner liberty of completeness, however it must be compromised by a limiting social reality, may represent a tightly limited freedom less vulnerable precisely because already bound; and if the author's professionalism seems to celebrate a control on his part too free of risks we should recall that even high officials who amuse themselves with leisure pursuits may lose favour and fall from power, just as happened to Chang Shuai himself; freedom to play at loss of freedom is a game with its own undertones of danger, and even men of exalted station may come by a later turn of fortune to dance to tunes set and played by others.

Thus in gauging attentively the implied social frame the reader can, and

indeed should, 'know the dancer from the dance', to quote the concluding rhetorical phrase from W. B. Yeats's poem 'Among School Children' where the identity of dance and dancer is presented as a single image of independent, fused autonomy of signification:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

(Yeats, *Collected Poems*, pp. 244-5)³

My citation of Yeats here is intended as yet another reminder that a poetry of metonymic figuration and of allusion to a context of formal meanings was rejected by the European and north American literary modernism of the start of the present century, in favour of a poetic image which should dramatise the moment of instantaneously self-revealing significance; the epiphany of Joyce, the image of Pound, the 'pair of ragged claws' at the close of Eliot's 'Prufrock' or the 'direct treatment of the thing' in William Carlos Williams. With variation and development this is broadly still the Imagist commitment to a de-rhetoricalised Western art of poetry, and Chinese classical poetry has for most of the century been held to display the quintessence of this presentational autonomy; so much so that some English-speaking translators, especially in America, have rendered Chinese poems back into this carefully unstructured idiom without serious question about the correctness of the correspondence implicitly claimed. From such comment I exempt the high degree of intelligent insight and control achieved by Kenneth Rexroth; but the decision by Burton Watson to exclude all detailed annotation from his recent *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry* once again tacitly encourages the reader to accept a floating imagery as moment by moment it comes into view.

Throughout the course of this paper I have been postponing the final question, which involves asking whether Classical Chinese poetry in the lyric kinds is really imagistic in the way claimed for it by this tradition of English translation. Even Arthur Waley has contributed to the confirmation of the tradition, by his preference for rhythms which move hesitatingly and by understatement rather than with purposeful regularity and rhythmic culmination. Professor Graham put the case into a nutshell with his opening comment, in the *Late T'ang* anthology, that 'The art of translating Chinese poetry is a by-product of the Imagist movement' (p. 13). What I may now in conclusion allow myself to assert, not as a certain conviction but as an experimental hypothesis asking to be tested by other scholars and critics, is that a large part at least of the Chinese poetic tradition is not actually like this at all. There is a strongly visual element, often enough, and the grammatically undifferentiated structure of the language may seem to comprise a mosaic-patterning of floating representation.

³ See Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London, 1971), and John Peter, *Vladimir's Carrot; Modern Drama and the Modern Imagination* (London, 1987), pp. 320-6.

But the act of comparison, however elliptical, is mostly one with a conscious history and a deliberate context, of thematic and allusional connection. Composition is less by autonomous metaphor or luminous brevity, more by deliberate rhetorical figuration and the deployment of a sophisticated metonymic context of implied interpretation. Yet, if this summarising description is closer to the actuality of Chinese poetic art, the movement begun by Pound and Fenollosa to give the English-speaking reader a quite different expectation has been so successful and so preponderant in the West that it may be said to have appropriated and redefined for three-quarters of a century the essential nature of Chinese lyric poetry.

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