

**KEYNOTE SPEECH AT THE FIRST PEARL RIVER POETRY CONFERENCE,  
GUANGZHOU, P.R. CHINA, 28TH JUNE 2005**

It's wonderful to be here. I saw the blue sky this morning and I assumed it must be some mistake. However, it looks real enough. It's good to be with familiar faces, and in a place which I have come to know and for which I have much affection. And I have for this morning's talk, oh, a small, quite limited subject, assigned to me by our admirable organisers of this brave new kind of conference. It is nothing more nor less than poetic language, in the history and current situation in the East and the West, and indeed the whole planetary situation--a small topic, easily managed in a couple of sentences. I'm sure I shall enjoy dismissing it with scarcely a passing thought.

It is a remarkable feature, if we think of it historically, as for a moment we shall, in order finally to put history to one side--it is a remarkable feature that there are, at the present time, two great poetical traditions on the planet. One of them is the English poetical tradition, and the other, of course, is the Chinese. And if I were speaking justly, I should put them the other way round, because the Chinese tradition is older, and deeper, and has a much more complicated origin, than the English. It's worth noting, in passing, that the American literary tradition is a mere teenager; it's scarcely begun. It borrowed most of its initial forms from its colonial origins as an offshoot of English culture, and now it is struggling to find its way in the world, and perhaps in five hundred or a thousand years it might become a mature culture. At the moment it's merely a powerful one. So we can set the whole of American culture to one side. It is not yet a serious long-term player in this game. We're talking now of a serious and deeply rooted, complex cultural accomplishment, on the English side and on the Chinese side; and the relations between these two are complicated and deeply interesting.

The Chinese literary culture is not the one that has enjoyed the longest, continuous, active span in planetary history. That honour goes to the Babylonian culture (1). The Babylonian literary language ran for longer than the Chinese one has yet done; though if the Chinese one goes on for some thousand years or so more, it may catch up with the record of the Babylonians. However, let's set the Babylonians on one side too, because they're now nothing more than ancient history buried under the burned-out residues of American tanks, poor wretches; and maybe their relics will survive this terrible ordeal, or maybe they won't, but not much has been heard recently of the current developments in Iraqi poetic language--more shame to the rest of the world, of that we should be certain.

If then we restrict our attention to the English and the Chinese traditions--no, I'm going to say that correctly: the Chinese and the English traditions--we do recognise some very deep contrasts, as well as some surprising and intriguing similarities. We have in both cases the complex interaction between a written culture, which is essentially the culture of a literate class and the historic development of certain social forms associated with that minority literate class; and the popular culture of spoken language,

the language of song, of everyday activity and of cultural pursuits like dancing and making lists and enjoying the company of your friends; and the singing and dancing and various kinds of popular practice for which the word "ceremonial" is probably too grand a term are part of the life-blood of the spoken, oral language in its natural cultural setting. And this contrast between a written language and a spoken cultural practice is to be found in both language systems, both the Chinese and the English. The Chinese writing system has fascinated the English literate classes ever since the beginning of the last century and even earlier, because of the extraordinary power of your written script, and the extraordinary suggestiveness of how your written script records and notates the spoken form of Chinese oral practice. **(2)** We have an alphabet and you don't. We have dictionaries arranged in the order of head words, and as I discovered, painfully, when attempting to learn your language, the use of a Chinese dictionary is a very arcane art that requires a great deal of special practice before as a Westerner you can perform the simplest activity in looking up a single word. So you have an extraordinary written system, though not unique, as other languages in the orient have different systems of this general kind also. But actually the Chinese language is not so different from the English if you compare it to some even more outlandish languages: the agglutinative languages like Eskimo, for example, are constructed on a yet more unfamiliar basis than even Chinese or English, since Mandarin Chinese is in some sense an SVO language, that is to say a subject-verb-object language, and the relationship of that kind of elemental, basic grammar gives the English-speaking learner a kind of starting point in ways not altogether unfamiliar.

These are very general remarks, and we've scarcely yet spoken about poetry; so we should, in order to speak about it, move from the very general to the very particular. I want just to remind you of one of the very famous poems of one of your Tang dynasty poets, which I'm going to read to you--it's very short--in English, and my interpreter has purposely not been given any advance notice of this poem, so that he won't be able to read it to you in the original. Thus in your case we shall cross from classical Chinese to English in order to get back again to the Chinese. Some of you may know this poem because it is so celebrated; but my own principal access to it is through this English version, and I would like to share with you some thoughts about the English version from an English, that is to say an external, viewpoint. It's a poem by Meng Hao-ran [689-740], and as I say, sufficiently famous in your great history; and Meng Hao-ran was, nearly everyone in this room will know, an earlier contemporary of the great Tang poets Wang Wei [701-761], Li Bai [701-762], and then a little later, Du Fu [712-770]. This is a five-character quatrain which is translated under the title "Passing the Night on a River in Jian De." Do I see some eyes light up? They should be lighting up, by now.

[reads poem]

I guide my boat to mooring by a misty islet,  
 With the setting sun, a traveler's sorrows revive.  
 Wilds so vast, the sky stoops to the trees;  
 The river so clear, moon close to man. **(3)**

Let's pause for a moment over this remarkable, beautiful and complex short piece. It's a very familiar, traditional subject. It is the lonely poet, far

from home, on some travels, no doubt of displacement from his natural place, from his home and his family, out in a strange location, on his travels, confused and unhappy to be alone and in some sense separated from his natural place. And in this mood of separation, he glances around the empty, desolate landscape which is his temporary resting place; and it's strange, is it not, that this misty islet near which he has stopped, where everything that could be seen around him is part-obscurd by the water vapours, suddenly becomes in this last line, the river so clear, moon close to man. Have these water vapours, these clouds, parted for a moment, to reveal a clear sight of the river? How has the river become clear? How does he understand now what the river means, and what he can see when he looks over, out over the expanse of this empty, lonely, watery landscape? How can he catch this glimpse of the moon in the sky, and how does he feel the sky come down almost to the level of the trees around him, so that the sky momentarily touches the canopy of the earth, shaping and holding his place? And how does he feel the moon itself so close that he can almost touch it?

The translation here is expert. It was not always so. It was done by a scholar, an American I believe, called Paul Kroll; and I have followed the evolution of the translation of this short poem through a number of his versions. In a later more studious monograph he printed a much clumsier attempt, but the earlier published draft, as here, is quite magical and has all the power of poetic creation. It would be even better if he had said not "the river so clear," but "river so clear." There is no need for this definite article. I would strike that out, just as of course Ezra Pound would have struck it out. We don't need to be told "the river," because this is here and now the only river. It's the only river in sight, and therefore it's the only river; and therefore as a river it needs no introduction and no placing; just as, in the final phrase, with impeccable purity, the translator says "moon close to man." (4)

Moon close to man; by good chance both these nouns in English chime close together, "m--n" / "m-n", bearing all the ancient Chinese symbolism of the moon's significance for men far from home. The generic singular noun, "man", captures this union in the Chinese of the intense subjective selfhood of the individual person with the inclusive, anonymous collective of all human-kind. And what the translation has also done is, with great skilfulness in the pausing and the management of little movements of emphasis, to break this final line into two parts, into a pair, a kind of couplet: "river so clear / moon close to man." It is of course a parallel couplet in the traditional paired form also, because the previous line breaks in the same way: "wilds so vast / the sky stoops to the trees." Why do we know, without the shadow of a doubt, that this is true poetic language? Why do we know that such a thought could not be expressed in prose and could hardly be expressed in music or painting, but belongs in the essential domain of the power of poetry? What is powerful about it, and what is true about it, that such vast remoteness can of a sudden become so intimate to the understanding? The final two lines of the poem have crossed some inner space, from the scene reported at the start: as readers we are not told what this crossing is, but we discover it by making it for ourselves. Within this internal gap the sun has set and the moon has risen, a shift from evening into night-time with its own, different light; but there has been another, more profound shift, also. This brings me into some

central aspects of my so-minor topic. What are we valuing, and what do we recognise as distinctive about the language of poetry?

First I must disentangle an uncertainty concerning what this phrase means. The language of poetry is either the language which is inside poems, used in their composition; or it is the language that poets use, which they have as their repertoire, as their place of operations, as their workshop, as everything that goes on around them in the world of language which is part of their equipment and their knowledge.

Here let me pause and introduce another slightly rivery, watery aspect. Consider the situation of fish. Consider the fish in the streams and lakes, that move about in the water, because water is their natural element. Everywhere they go is water. If they find themselves out of water, then in a short time that will be the end of their existence; and since this is Guangdong province, they will almost certainly end up on a plate somewhere. Very nice too. Your fishy menus are absolutely out of this world. But if you're a fish, you don't look forward to that aspect of things so much. In fact you don't do a lot of looking forward, because although the water is your element, you know nothing of it, you have no knowledge of your element, you simply naturally move and swim in it. It is your world, it is the condition of your world and the limit of your world, and of it you have no knowledge or power of knowledge.

Poets move and swim about, sometimes with the stream and sometimes against the stream, in language. (5) And here they differ from fish, because they know what they are doing. They know the element they are in. They could even survive outside language, for short periods, though no doubt they gasp pretty much if the removal is prolonged. Every poet requires his daily dose of natural language to replenish his storehouse of sweetness and horrors. And so the press and the TV and all the rest of the normal practice of degraded and corrupted language are absolutely essential to poets, and they're particularly so because they give poets the task and the duty of knowing where they are and knowing what they do. It means that, unlike fish, we know where we are and what we are, and what we have to do, in the world of language.

What makes the use of language that poets make, distinct? Well there are many things that could be said here, and I'll mention only two. The first is radical economy. That is to say, poetry is briefer than prose. If you're a printer, you know perfectly well that when you set poems on a page, you don't need so much type. You need quite a lot of paper, but you don't need so much ink. You don't need so much printing type over all that delicious wasted space, all down to the right hand side--or I suppose if you're setting up type or writing things out in the traditional Chinese way, all down the left hand side. That is to say, it is economical with the presence of words on the page, and places these words in an estranged environment of white text space, all around them, to give them oxygen and breathing-power. This economy is strongly and deeply felt by writers and by readers. It means that great power can be invested in patterns of repetition, and of all the devices which give poetic language its extremely organised, managed and coherent internal and structural shaping, which is characteristic probably of all poetic traditions on the planet now and in the past. It is an intensely shaped activity, and the shape essentially consists in leaving things out, in compressing and

condensing, so the record becomes acutely symbolic and displaced: nothing is complete, nothing is entire, nothing is fully and totally recorded. And yet the incomplete part, the gap, becomes a sign or index of the whole. The construction of sense, or of the presence of language, is made by the reader as a kind of act of restoring, of completing the notation that is set out by the poet on his or her page.

The other aspect I'll mention is truthfulness. A community pretty much depends on its poets for the survival of truthfulness. Let's try to distinguish, since some of you are dependent on dictionaries, the way that I too am, when I'm in a foreign language, between truth and truthfulness. Truthfulness is an attitude, and a performance, a stance, and an accomplishment, that people can do when they understand the power of truth and work with it and for it. It is essentially a human act. Truthfulness is the stance of those who know what truth means and why it's important to them. By contrast, truth is an abstract idea, and could so far as I know exist inside a glass cube without human intervention. But truthfulness requires people to do it. And if it is not done by people it will certainly not be done by fish; and as it won't be done by fish, if it's not done by people it will be done by no-one.

And the function of truthfulness is curiously and rather specially invested in poets. It's so, pretty much above other artists in other media, because it's quite difficult, in the sense I'm using now, to be truthful if you're holding a paint brush, or to be truthful if you're practising the flute. There are no doubt forms of essential truthfulness proper to all artistic expression; but human language has a peculiar close relation with the power of language to be mendacious, that is to say to be false, corrupted, lying, depraved and distorted; and that is the normal condition, of course, of human language in most of its daily uses, most especially so now, in the condition of the planet at the present time. So poets essentially have to learn to stand outside the language which is their medium and understand its corruptions, and from its corruptions make some kind of temporary, working sense that a reader can share and understand. That's why when Meng Hao-ran says that he's out alone on this river, and his acute loneliness tells him that his separation is a truth about life and about the world and about his non-place in the world and about his task in that world, that the river which had previously been misty becomes finally clear to him: *qing* (first tone), "clear, distinct, clearly understood, uncorrupted." He understands not only the power of separation to bring sadness, but also and by an inner shift the power of insight to bring clarity; and he understands the duty which this lays on him, to communicate this insight to readers of his poem and to bring them also to realise that a distorted or obscured and misty landscape is one that requires special powers of vision, to understand and to interpret and to pass on to others. Indeed this is a lesson that some of your more recent Misty Poets here in China might have done well to learn better.

Where we are now in our new century is not that kind of landscape. The obscuring mist and darkness which dominate our islets and stopping-places are of a kind quite different from anything imagined in this poem. It is the corruption of power, it is the corruption of military force, the corruption of control systems, it is the corruption of relentless, pointless triviality in the consumer world, of empty and purposeless and worthless commodities which

are thrust at us on all sides, and which we greedily grasp at because they express our ambition to be completed, whole persons, flourishing in our social eagerness to be special, to be successful, to be advanced and to be improved. These are all wasted ambitions, variously corrupted and depraved: if Meng Hao-ran had seen these, out on his solitary boat, he might have thought, "I'm even lonelier than ever. I'm out here with nothing but this river and these few clouds--and what am I to make of this pressure of the darkening world around me?"

And yet these double paired parallels of the final couplet disclose the framework for a sense of person intently specific but restored from the vanity of mere private, habitual sorrow; as a poet as well as just a man he looks out over this misty river, and just for a moment he finds his place, as we by reading also do; and the river is clear.

That's where I'm going to end. Thank you very much.

J.H. Prynne (Pu Ling-en)

**NOTES**

(1) On the cuneiform writing-systems and literature of ancient Mesopotamia (from before 3100 BC to first century AD) see Jeremy Black, *Reading Sumerian Poetry* (London, 1998), Chap. 1.

(2) For Western views of the Chinese written character, and comparison with the Mesopotamian and Egyptian systems, see e.g. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 7, Part 1: Christoph Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 34-52.

(3) Meng Hao-ran, trans. Paul Kroll; text from *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*, ed. Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), p. 92. Compare *Meng Hao-ran shi ji jian zhu* (Tong Pei-ji, 2000) p. 360, and Paul W. Kroll, *Meng Hao-jan* (Boston, 1981), p. 71; and perhaps compare too a finely skilled original English poem by a Scottish poet:

**Gigha**

That firewood pale with salt and burning green  
Outfloats its men who waved with a sound of drowning  
Their saltcut hands over mazes of this rough bay.

Quietly this morning beside the subsided herds  
Of water I walk. The children waded the shallows.  
The sun with long legs wades into the sea.

W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Matthew Francis (London, 2004), p. 82; first collected in *The White Threshold* (London, 1949) [Gigha is the name of an island]. Here is another, much less assured version of Meng Hao-ran's poem, by an American translator usually much more adept:

**Overnight on Abiding-Integrity River**

I guide the boat in, anchor off island mist.  
It's dusk, time a traveler's loneliness returns.

Heaven settles far and wide into the trees,  
and on this clear river, a moon drifts near.

David Hinton (trans.), *The Mountain Poems of Meng Hao-jan* (New York, [2004], p. 49. Note that this translator has recognised and inserted a blank line-space between the first two lines and the final couplet; a space also recognised by the contemporary calligrapher Ge Hong-zhen of Suzhou, whose scripted text is reproduced overleaf. There are translations of this same poem by William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Rexroth, and Gary Snyder, none as good as Paul Kroll's: see *The New Directions Anthology of Chinese Poetry*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York, 2003), and <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16442>.

(4) I give here a further example of translation finding this intensely poetical quality by radical omission, this time an early poem of very deep insight by Che Qian-zi, as translated by Jeff Twitchell:

**Late Autumn in Suzhou**

Hands begin to feel cold  
A bucket of water carried upstairs  
Shadow always in front of me  
Darkness drops like stone

Che Qian-zi, Chinese original text first collected in *Yuanyang: Zhongguo yuyan shipai* (Nanjing/Suzhou, 1990 [1992]), p. 20; this translated text from *Original: Chinese-Language Poetry Group* (Brighton, 1994), p. 17.

(5) Remembering the dictum of the Austrian-French writer Manès Sperber (1905-84): "Auch wer gegen den Strom schwimmt, schwimmt im Strom" (Even the one who swims against the stream, swims in the stream); compare *qinggao*, "noble-minded, unwilling to swim with the tide".

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