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NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION OF A CHINESE POEM

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"Let books be written with standard characters;
let carriages be fitted with standard axles."
Yet palm-leaf manuscripts with horizontal text
were brought ten thousand miles by the white horse.
Distinguished monks have been invited to the Hall for Translation
to translate pages and pages every year.
—Their translating done, they sit, burn incense,
and sprinkle cool water on the plants in the courtyard.

In 982 A.D., Emperor T'ai-tsung of China established a Hall for the Translation of Sutras (i.e., the Buddhist canon) in a monastery. Seventy-six years later, Mei Yao-ch'en (1002-1060), the greatest poet of his time, was inspired by the work being done there to write the above poem.[1] In it, he refers to the famous white horse on which the monk Kasyapa Matanga was said to have brought the first Buddhist texts to China, in 64 A.D. The presence within their country of these precious documents, written in the difficult Sanskrit language, was later to stimulate the Chinese to engage in what was unquestionably the most ambitious translation project in pre-modern history.

Remarkable as it is that Mei Yao-ch'en should have written a poem about translation in the eleventh century, it is still more remarkable that he concentrates, not on the process or technique, but rather on what might be called the *atmosphere* of translation. It is an atmosphere steeped in ceremony and the mystery of the past. Not only does the poet recall the white horse of a thousand years ago, he begins his poem with a paraphrase of a passage in the still more ancient classic, the *Record of Rites* (*Li chi*): "In carriages, let the axles be standardized. In books, let the [written] characters be standardized." When the monks are done with their work, they burn incense and sprinkle holy water on the courtyard plants, demonstrating the essentially ritualistic character of their enterprise.

Much has been written about the theory of translation, and we now know more than ever before about the complexities of this controversial process. When I have attempted to articulate the way in which I translate Chinese poems, however, I have recognized an *ex post facto* quality in my musings. The fact is that the essence of the process has always, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, eluded verbal expression. Given a solid knowledge of the language in question, the literary translator should not go about his task with a preconceived theory of *how* to translate. After the job is done, he can, of course, analyze what has happened to his heart's content. But while engaged in what must be at least partially a creative endeavor, he is best advised to emulate the monks of Mei Yao-ch'en's poem and enter upon a ceremonial relationship with the original writer, to perceive as the poet has perceived, to experience what he has experienced.

It goes without saying that certain mundane choices must be made. In the case of Chinese poetry, most contemporary translators into English have decided, for example, not to attempt rhyme. All Chinese poetry rhymes, and Chinese is a language in which rhyme-words are abundant. Rhyming is much harder in English, and so any rhymed translation will probably contain some forced wordings.

One must also, I believe, master the appropriate mode of the target language before starting to translate. For my work, this has turned out to be the English of good contemporary American poetry. Before realizing this, I began by emulating the work of the greatest master of all translators from the Chinese, Arthur Waley.[2] After a while, I came to feel that Waley's was a British voice, and that I needed an American model. Burton Watson, the doyen of living translators in the field, filled this need admirably.[3] But I still had not reached my goal: to create a style of my own as a creative translator. For this, I turned to those American poets of today I most admired. In particular, Robert Bly, whose own poetry has been strongly influenced by Chinese literature and who has since tried his hand at some Chinese translations, provided several of the qualities I needed: satisfying rhythms based on those of colloquial speech; relatively simple language free of archaic expressions; precision of observation; strong imagistic structure. Interestingly enough, these qualities are among those which certain contemporary American poets, for whatever reason, share in common with my favorite Chinese writers, and which therefore render contemporary American English a particularly appropriate language for the translation of Chinese poetry.

Once the tools of the craft are under control, the crucial step must be taken, a step which is often overlooked in discussions of this subject: one must enter the world of the original poem as fully as possible. This is a process which can only be described as mystic, or spiritual. The "shaman's rainbow" in this case is no more than a structure of words, and one to which absolute faith must be pledged. But the rainbow leads to an-"other world," a particular perception of certain realities.

Let us consider the translation of an actual poem[4] by the twelfth-century poet, Yang Wan-li (1127-1206). The poem is entitled *The Fishing Boat,* and may be diagramed as follows (each X represents a single Chinese character, a monosyllabic word):

X X X X X X X
very small fishing boat leaf like light

X X X X X X X
reed cabin thick covered not hear sound

X X X X X X X
no people no fishing no straw bamboo
line coat hat

X X X X X X X
wind of blow boat boat of move
itself itself

It might be best to give my finished translation[5] at the outset, and then to explain how I arrived at some of the solutions embodied in it:

It is a tiny fishing boat, light as a leaf;
no voices are heard from the reed cabin.
There is no one on board—
  no bamboo hat,
    no raincoat,
      no fishing rod.
The wind blows the boat, and the boat moves.

To begin with, the first line of the four-line Chinese poem contains no verb, unless one regards "light" as what grammarians call a "stative verb," "is light (as a leaf)," and even in this case the verbal feeling would not be strong. In other words, the line is primarily a presentation of the subject of the poem—the fishing boat— which emphasizes its *being* rather than any specific action in which it may be engaged. The translator might simply write,

A small fishing boat, light as a leaf—

with a dash (—) after "leaf," but this somehow falls flat. My solution was to add the words "It is" at the start of the line, even though there is no equivalent for them in the Chinese text. At the risk of sounding boastful, I feel that these two words make the difference between a *competent* translation and one which is not merely linguistically accurate but also true to the heightened tone of the original, the sense of specialness that the fishing boat is felt to have.

Now, the decision to use the phrase "it is" in the first line was not the result of conscious deliberation. Even what I have written in the preceeding paragraph comes from hindsight. But after having completed the translation, I realized that I had learned this use of the phrase by reading Robert Bly! Here are some examples, all but one from Bly's first book (and his most "Chinese"), *Silence in the Snowy Fields:*

It is a moonlit, windy night.

(first line of *Return to Solitude*)

It is the morning. The country has slept the whole winter.

(*Return to Solitude*)

It is a willow tree. I walk around and around it.

(*Hunting Pheasants in a Cornfield*)

It is a willow tree alone in acres of dry corn.

(*Hunting Pheasants in a Cornfield*)

It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is deserted.

(*Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter*)

It was the sort of snowfall that starts in late afternoon . . .

(*Snowfall in the Afternoon*)

It's a white nest! White as the foam thrown up
when the sea hits rocks.

(first line of *A Small Bird's Nest Made of Reed Fiber,* first version, from *The Morning Glory: Prose Poems,* Kayak edition)

In all these lines, Bly uses the phrase "it is" ("it's," "it was") to *set off* his subject from the world of ordinary reality, and I had apparently absorbed the lesson, albeit subconsciously. As Yang Wan-li's fishing boat seemed to call for similar treatment, Bly's little device conveniently surfaced in my mind. It would be impossible to say how many other passages in my translations evolved in this way, but one thing should be noted here: the use of two simple words came about through a process indistinguishable, I believe, from one way of selecting words in the creation of *original* poetry.

Returning to Yang Wan-li's poem, the second line introduces the first full verb: "(not) hear." And yet, this verb has no apparent subject. In Chinese, it is possible to have a verb in the active voice while omitting the subject, a type of locution which is frequently used to express the transparency of the observing consciousness, the lack of ego-involvement with the scene. Poets who were influenced, as was Yang, by the Buddhist conception of "egolessness" could therefore express a mode of pure, selfless experience even on the grammatical level. My translation retreats into the passive voice at this point, *faute de mieux.*

In the third line, Yang divests the scene of its expected props. The Taoist fisherman, at one with nature, is a standard fixture of Chinese poetry and painting both. But this fishing boat is without such a personage, as expressed by the absence of the fishing rod, straw raincoat and bamboo hat with which he would ordinarily be provided. There are three "no's" in the Chinese text, and I have used repeated "no's" in the translation as well, to emphasize the mystic nay-saying, the *neti-neti* of the Upanishads ("Not this, not this"), which forces the reader to concentrate on the essence, the boat itself.

Finally, the last line virtually translates itself. The scene has been reduced not merely to the boat, but to the *motion* of the boat. Because the basic word order of Chinese is similar to that of English (subject-verb-object), it is possible to end the translation with the verb "moves," as in the Chinese.

Now the translator is ready to sit down, burn a stick of incense, and sprinkle about a bit of holy water. He has completed a fine English poem.

[1]Mei Yao-ch'en, *Wan-ling hsien-sheng chi* (in *Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an*), 57/10b.

[2]Ezra Pound should not be regarded as a master translator of Chinese literature. He never really knew Chinese, and his style as a translator was highly erratic, producing moments of brilliance but many failed works.

[3]For good examples of Burton Watson's work, see his *Su Tung-p'o: Selections from a Sung Dynasty Poet* (New York, 1965).

[4]Yang Wan-li, *Ch'eng-chai chi* (in *Ssu-pu pei-yao*), 30/6a.

[5]Jonathan Chaves, *Heaven My Blanket, Earth My Pillow* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1975), p. 58.