

THE GENIUS OF LI PO

A.D. 701-762

WONG SIU-KIT



Centre of Asian Studies
UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

1974

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JOURNAL OF ORIENTAL STUDIES

Editors: CHAN LAU KIT-CHING, CHUANG SHEN, WONG SIU-KIT

The *Journal of Oriental Studies* is published twice yearly, in January and July, by the Hong Kong University Press on behalf of the Centre of Asian Studies of the University. All manuscripts, books for review, and editorial communications should be submitted to The Editors, *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

The area of coverage of the *Journal* includes China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia; the subject matter, history, geography, fine arts, language, literature, philosophy, architecture, archaeology, economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology. The *Journal* will normally be published in Chinese and English, but the Editors will be pleased to consider contributions submitted in other languages.

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THE GENIUS OF LI PO

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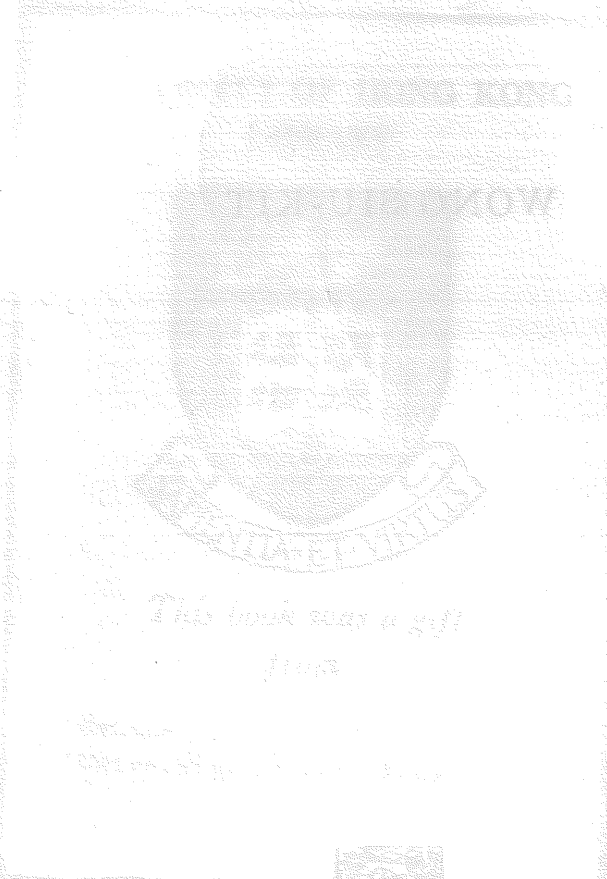
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And it dawned on me that I was always aware of the nature of his art and determined to control it. In contrast, Li was, by and large, an unrefined poet, whose achievement, in a sense, lay in his understanding; the precise characteristics of his work are elusive.

I. The Approach

AS I sat down to write this study of Li Po's poetry, I found myself confronted with a number of questions. Why is there so little accurate and incisive criticism of the poetry? Why is there such a gargantuan accumulation of writing on the poet's life, writing which is usually speculative in nature, conjectural because there is no sufficient unchallengeable information to rely upon? Why all this guesswork on what Li Po may or may not have been doing at particular points of his career? Why all this kerfuffle aroused by the question whether he was a Buddhist as much as a Taoist? Why, as I have suggested, so little descriptive analysis of Li's poetry itself? An 'explanation' soon presented itself - not in any sudden, unexpected understanding of Li's poetry, but in a few familiar lines by Li's contemporary, Tu Fu杜甫 (712-70), 'By nature I am obsessed with the well-wrought line, / Never shall I die content till my verses are made startlingly fine' 為人性僻耽佳句，語不驚人死不休；¹ 'To feed and nourish my soul and senses there is only one thing: / To make and alter new verses to my heart's content before I sing.' 陶冶性情存底物，新詩改罷自長吟。² Other occupational 'confessions' from Tu Fu found their way into my mind.

¹Chiang shang chih shui ju hai shih liao tuan shu' 江上值水如海勢 聊短述 (A short lyric, written when the river rushes on like the open sea), in Ch'ou Chao-ao 仇兆整, Tu Shao-ling chi hsiang-chu 杜少陵集詳註 (Tu Fu's poems: an annotated edition; Hong Kong, 1966), ch. 10, p. 8.

²Chiai meng shih-erh shou, ch'i ch'i' 解悶十二首，其七 (No. 7 of a sequence of 12 poems entitled 'Unhappiness Overcome'), op. cit., ch. 17, p. 82.

And it dawned on me that Tu Fu was a 'conscious artist', always aware of the nature of his art and determined to control it. By contrast, Li was, by and large, an untutored poet, whose achievement, in a sense, 'passeth all understanding'; the precise characteristics of Li's work are elusive, hard to pin-point and dissect whether with the relatively blunt tools of much of traditional Chinese literary criticism, or with the scalpels and pincers provided us by Empson, Leavis, the Chicago Aristotelians, or Northrop Frye. That much, upon further reflection, it seemed to me, should have been no new revelation. The qualities of Li Po's poetry are eel-like, being at the same time unprecedented and unsurpassed, and magical. The only way to label them would have to be, and should be, to call them manifestations of *genius*. (Instances of Li Po experimenting consciously with verse forms can be found in his Collected Works; but, in comparison with Tu Fu, Li Po displays contrivance only on rare occasions.)

Such a conclusion is by no means original. On the contrary it is very much the consensus of a host of Chinese critics. To name a few instances: Kao Ping 高棅 (1350-1423) the compiler of an influential anthology of T'ang poetry,³ observes, 'Li Po, possessing an unbridled, untrammelled genius, moved, with superior abandon among men 李翰林天才縱逸，軼落人群⁴ This observation is echoed by Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488-1559), who says, 'In the art of writing, Chuang Tzu and Li Po have attained the magical [or "'divine', or 'superhuman'"] and cannot be matched by merely "skilful" writers. Without being "skilful", you can never hope to be "magical";

³ T'ang-shih p'in-hui 唐詩品彙 (An anthology of T'ang poems).

⁴ Li T'ai-po ch'uan-chi 李太白全集 (The complete works of Li Po; Hong Kong, 1972), ch. 34, p. 20. Where I give only the page and ch'uan numbers, I refer to this edition of Li Po's collected (by no means 'complete'!) works.

at the same time the "magical" cannot be attained through mere "skill", 莊周李白，神於文者也，非工於文者所及也；又非工不可以神，然神非工之所可及也。⁵ In comparing Li Po and Tu Fu, Wang Chih-teng 王穉登 (1535-1597) expresses a very widely shared view: 'Li Po was endowed [with talent] by Heaven; Tu Fu had to exert human efforts. 李蓋天授，杜由人力。⁶ In a similar vein, the earlier Fang Hsiao-ju 方孝孺 (1357-1402) has declared, 'Li Po alone with his genius robbed the gods [of their mysteries]; how can ordinary mortals delve into and understand [the mysteries of] his work?' 惟有李白天才奪造化，世人孰得窺其作？⁷

This chorus of praise is no doubt 'valid', but does it live up to our expectations of modern literary criticism, or enable us to better understand the poet Li Po and the nature of his art — the meaning and possible significance to us of his poetry? One would not have discharged one's duties as a critic or a teacher by repeating the commonplace that one was in the awesome presence of a 'banished immortal'. There *must* be ways of suggesting how, if not why, Li Po's poetry should occupy a unique position of eminence in the Chinese tradition. Even in bafflement one must take on the responsibility of adumbrating the silencing qualities of Li Po's work. That task I shall attempt to undertake, in all humility, relying on no single style of criticism, but drawing upon whatever methods may seem apt for dealing with particular problems.

I do not intend to deal with the treacherous subject of the life of Li Po. There is an account of the life in Waley's book,⁸ the worst book

⁵ ch. 34, p. 2b.

⁶ ch. 33, p. 15.

⁷ ch. 33, p. 6.

⁸ Arthur Waley, *The Poetry and Career of Li Po, 701-762 A.D.* (London, 1950).

by that great Sinologist I have read: idiosyncratic in the author's choice of poems, thin and unrounded as biography, exasperatingly evasive on issues that any serious reader would be asking — I do not think Waley could have spent much time writing the book, and I certainly do not think that his appreciation of Li Po's poetry came at all close to that of Po Chü-i's.

There are numerous lives of Li Po in Chinese, of varying lengths, and a few in Japanese. The *Li T'ai-po ch'uan-chi* we use contains a few, as well as the year-by-year reconstruction of the life of the poet, the *nien-p'u* 年譜 by Wang Ch'i 王琦 (1419-1456), whose commentary, incidentally, should, I think, be regarded as the safest to follow. (Wang Ch'i's *nien-p'u* has of course been superseded by the *Li T'ai-po nien-p'u*⁹ by Huang Hsi-kuei 黃錫珪 [1862-1906]. But even Huang's contribution is found wanting in places, an indication of the insurmountable difficulties that a biographical study of Li Po always entails.)

Among the more recent studies of the life of Li Po, I find the brief one by Wang Shih-ching¹⁰ the least grating. The book-length one by Wang Yao¹¹ is much the same sort of disaster as Waley's. Wang's scholarship and scholarliness in dealing with an earlier period, if not immaculate, must command the deepest respect. But as I ploughed through his *The Poet Li Po*, my mind, like the dying Arthur's, was constantly 'clouded with a doubt'. There were too many unsubstantiated assertions, too many unauthenticated details. And, as I got to the post-script, I could not suppress the feeling that I had been cheated: you are told *at the end* that the book has no claim to being a scholarly contribution, that there are not enough reliable sources,

⁹ *Li T'ai-po nien-p'u* 李白年譜 (A year by year chronicle of the life of Li Po; Peking, 1958).

¹⁰ Wang Shih-ching 王士著, *T'ang-tai shih-ko* 唐代詩歌 (T'ang poetry; Peking, 1959).

¹¹ Wang Yao 王瑤, *Shih-jen Li Po* 詩人李白 (The poet Li Po; Hong Kong, 1960).

whether primary or secondary, to go by. Li Ch'ang-chih's book¹² used to be taken quite seriously, but is really an extremely tendentiously argued thesis to the effect that if you want to understand Li Po's poetry, you have got to see the poet as a Taoist. Kuo Mo-jo's recent book,¹³ which descended on us from formidable heights, was obviously intended for purposes mere academics could never hope to guess at, and strikes one as merely perverse and pretentious. If these books do not make one throw up one's hands in despair, the undaunted sufferer from the personal heresy can continue his pilgrimage by consulting articles on such obscure matters as Li Po's lineage.¹⁴

Nor is the life of Li Po the only slippery ground for us to tread upon. The question of the authenticity of particular poems in the poet's extant corpus, too, can be — indeed, has been — a dry, barren bone of contention. It is widely held that Li Po's style can be imitated without much difficulty, and that from the Sung Period on forgeries have found their way into almost every new edition of Li's poems. Much energy has been expended (and, in some cases, wasted) on distinguishing the 'authentic' poems from the Chattertonian products. Su Shih 蘇軾 (1036-1101), Huang T'ing-chien 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), Sung Min-ch'iu 宋敏求 (1019-1079), Yen Chih-chih 晏知止 (dates uncertain) and Mao Chien 毛漸 (dates uncertain) in turn contributed to this witch hunt.

¹² Li Chang-chih 李長之, *Tao-chiao t'u ti shih-jen Li Po chi ch'i t'ung-k'u* 道教徒的詩人李白及其痛苦 (The Taoist poet Li Po and his sufferings; Shanghai, 1940).

¹³ Kuo Mo-jo 郭沫若, *Li Po yü Tu Fu* 李白與杜甫 (Li Po and Tu Fu; Peking, 1972).

^{14a} Ch'en Yin-ch'eh 陳寅恪, *Li t'ai-po shih-tsu chih i-wen* 李太白氏族之疑問 (The question of Li Po's race and ancestry), in *Ch'ing-hua hst'eh-pao* 清華學報, X, no. 1 (1935).

^b Chan Ying 詹鏗, 'Li Po chia-shih k'ao-i' 李白家世考異 (An examination of Li Po's ancestry), in *Li Po shih lun-chi* 李白詩論集 (Collected essays on Li Po's poetry; Peking, 1957).

^c Chien Mei 劍梅, 'Li po ti chi-kuan chia-shih yü chung-tsu tien-ti' 李白的籍貫家世與種族點滴 (A few observations on Li Po's race and lineage), in *T'ang-shih yen-chiu lun-wen chi* 唐詩研究論文集 (Collected Essays on Tang Poetry), II, (Hong Kong, 1967).

But it took the gifted, somewhat exhibitionist scholar/poet of the Ch'ing Period, Kung Tzu-chen 龔自珍 (1792-1841) to pronounce that no more than one hundred and twenty-two authentic Li Po poems had survived the passage of time.¹⁵ Kung Tzu-chen may well have been out to shock, but there is a learned chapter in Chan Ying's book¹⁶ which demonstrates with great virtuosity how this game of authentication can be played. The question must be asked, however, whether or not such a game is worth playing. The question has to be asked for two reasons. It is most unlikely that we shall arrive at a final conclusion in regard to each and every poem in the so-called *Complete Works*. In any case far too many poems that Li Po did write had already descended into oblivion at the end of the poet's life. Li Yang-ping 李陽冰 (dates uncertain), to whom Li Po, from his death bed, handed over his manuscript, says, perhaps with some exaggeration, '..... of his writings done in the eight years when Li Po was travelling as a refugee from troubled Central China, nine-tenths have been lost; what we do have now have been obtained from a number of different sources' (... 自中原有事，公避地八年，當時著述，十喪其九，今所存者，皆得之他人焉)¹⁷

Given the circumstances I discussed in the last few paragraphs, what better can we do than to study the extant poems of Li Po's as they stand, to discover in them what human interest, what beauty, what artistry there are in them?

¹⁵ Wu T'ien-jen 吳天任, *Chung-kuo liang ta shih-sheng 中國兩大詩聖* (Two eminent poets of China; Hong Kong, 1972), pp. 37-38.

¹⁶ *op. cit.*, pp. 45-63.

¹⁷ ch. 31, p. 3.

II. Woman and the Moon in Li Po's Poetry: a Thematic Analysis

WHAT ARE some of the more common motifs that appear in the daedal fabric of Li Po's work? Woman, I suppose, is one. The moon is another. And when he deals with these two themes, there is something Keatsian about Li Po's imagination. By that I do not mean that there is anything particularly sensuous in Li Po's touch. It is the way that both poets celebrate woman and the moon as symbols of beauty to be wondered at, to be regarded as objects of admiration and longing that links the two poets together. The Moon-Goddess, Cynthia, for Keats, is the spirit of beauty, the spirit of poetry itself, and it is the combination of the feminine, the celestial, the ethereal that holds such fascination for the young Romantic. She would, too, for the Chinese poet.

This is not the place to pursue the differences between the two poets in their treatment of two of their favourite subjects, differences though there are between them. My concern is with what Li Po does with the two subjects.

It is relatively unusual for Li Po to dwell on the visual beauty of his women. If we recognize them as beautiful, it is because the poet does; but he does not *delineate* their beauty in detail, what he often does is to place them in a dramatic situation which is presented with such evocative power that, in one single glimpse of them, in the understanding of their plight, we come to an awareness of their physical appeal as well. There is a much anthologized quatrain which should lend force to my argument.

The fair one rolls up

The beaded curtains.

Deep in the recesses of her room she sits

With lovely contracted brows.

Stains of tear drops

Are still seen moist on her face —

Who knows who it is

That makes her rue.

美人捲珠簾，
 深坐擊蛾眉。
 但見淚痕濕，
 不知心恨誰。¹⁸

All we are told of her beauty is contained in the rather hackneyed 'the fair one' (*mei-jen* 美人), which in itself is not at all informative in any detailed kind of way. But the reference to 'the beaded curtains' provides us with a background of luxury which, in turn, somehow enhances the suggestion of beauty subtly delivered in the cliché. Next we are invited to compare the woman in question with the famous historical beauty Ssu Shih 西施 in the allusion to 'contracted brows' - 'lovely contracted brows': at what we might call the subterranean level, we are made to see this anonymous woman as one who possesses proverbial beauty and charm. But it is the part of the second line which I have had to expand into 'Deep in the recesses of her room she sits' (in the original only two characters, *shen tso* 深坐) that heavily underlines her utter loneliness and sends a direct appeal to whatever human sympathy we are capable of feeling for a stranger. In the last two lines with what consummate artistry the poet compels us see the anonymous woman in relation to ourselves: we see (*chien* 見) 'the stains of tear drops on her face', but 'she does not know who it is/ That makes her rue' - her suffering is thus thrust on us, for us to share with her. That is how the poem works on us; as for the poet, he has obviously been made by his contemplation of the situation to enter into a deep communion with the woman.

¹⁸ 'yüan-ch'ing' 怨情 (Complaint), ch. 25, p. 17b.

Another quatrain, which has the blessing of translation by Ezra Pound,¹⁹ is even more marvellously subdued and reticent:

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
 It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
 And I let down the crystal curtain
 And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

玉階生白露，
 夜久侵羅襪。
 却下水晶簾，
 玲瓏望秋月。²⁰

The poem vibrates with unarticulated, repressed emotions - repressed, and yet at the same time both violent and tremulous. This woman has spent her night waiting, watching, but her lover does not turn up and she has, finally, to give up in despair, to 'let down the crystal curtain'. The moon and the clear autumn, tranquil and indifferent, mock her implacable longings; and her sufferings in love become equated with the general misery of humanity - her sufferings, so similar to those of Isabella:

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;
 Surely she wept until the night came on,
 And then, instead of love, O misery!
 She brooded o'er the luxury alone:
 His image in the dusk she seem'd to see,
 And to the silence made a gentle moan,
 Spreading her perfect arms upon the air,
 And on her couch low murmuring, "Where? O where?"²¹

¹⁹ Ezra Pound, 'The Jewel Stairs' Grievance', in *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, (revised edition, London, 1948), p. 131.

²⁰ 'yü ch'ai yüan' 玉階怨 (The jewel stairs' grievance), ch. 5, p. 12.

²¹ M. Robertson (ed.), 'Isabella', in *Keat's Poems Published in 1820* (Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 64.

What Li Po conveys with firm restraint, Keats expresses expansively. But Keats does help us to understand the forlornness of a particular woman, of a specimen of humanity, which Li Po pencils in perhaps rather too faintly for some of us.

Most of Li Po's poems with a woman occupying the centre of the stage are about the sorrows of separation, of loneliness, confronted with which one becomes totally helpless. Whether the separation is a result of the husband or lover being constantly away on business,²² or his having to 'guard the frontiers',²³ or his being 'unfaithful',²⁴ seems of minor importance. Whatever the situation, how well Li Po understands and captures in a few lines the emotional state of his subject:

I stop my weaving shuttle and,

In melancholy, I dream

Of the one far,

Too far away.

In this unshared room I sleep,

And tears pour down like rain.

停梭悵然憶遠人，

獨宿空房淚如雨。²⁵

The two telling words *t'ing so 停梭* (to stop one's weaving machine), encapsulate the pang of a sudden attack of loneliness and grief: no, one cannot continue with one's routine activities. The sudden attack the woman

²² 'Chiang-hsia hsing' 江夏行 (Song of Chiang-hsia), ch. 8, p. 15.

²³ 'Sai hsia ch'u, ch'i ssu' 塞下曲 其四 (Songs of the frontiers, no. 4), ch. 5, p. 9.

²⁴ 'Ch'u fu tz'u' 去婦詞 (Song of the deserted wife), ch. 6, pp. 20-21.

²⁵ 'Wu yeh t'i' 烏夜啼 (The crow cries at night), ch. 3, p. 11b.

suffers from recalls too well the poet's own occasional attacks of intolerable suffering: yet another indication that, frequently, writing about unhappy women, the poet identifies himself with them. Yet he is also capable of understanding the peculiar nature of the unhappiness of frustrated women:

Is there no way for us to meet,

If only briefly, if only a single time,

When we can

Put out the light

And take off this silken dress?

何由一相見，

滅燭解羅衣。²⁶

How much more direct and explicit, in the affirmation of a physical desire, can we expect an eighth century poet to become?²⁷

I have already spoken about one poem, the one translated with such preciousness by Pound, in which the unutterable anguish of a woman finds an 'objective correlative' in the moon. There are many other instances in Li Po's poetry where it is the moon that prompts in the poet some of his deepest sympathetic feelings for forsaken women. There is one²⁸ which begins thus:

²⁶ 'Chi yüan shih-erh shou, ch'i ch'i' 寄遠十二首 其七 (The seventh of twelve poems entitled 'Dispatches'), ch. 25, p. 12b.

²⁷ See also 'Ch'ang hsiang-ssu' 長相思 (Lingering thoughts of love), ch. 3, p. 20, and Ch'ang-kan hsing 長干行 (Song of Ch'ang-kan), ch. 4, pp. 19b-20b.

²⁸ 'Ch'ang hsiang-ssu', see note 27.

Day's light is about to die,
 The flowers are dimmed
 By a mist.
 Then the moon rises,
 Bright as white:
 In sorrow
 Sleep I cannot
 日色欲盡花含煙，
 月明如素愁不眠.....

Then we get a description of how the woman finds no joy in music, followed by these poignant lines:

The eyes that once spoke
 The language of love,
 Are now
 Pools of tears.
 If you cannot believe
 That your loved one's heart is broken,
 Come back and fill your eyes
 With the image I see now
 In the bright mirror.
 昔時橫波目，
 今作流淚泉。
 不信妾腸斷，
 歸來看取明鏡前。

The last line in the original is yet another example of how much can be suggested in a restrained, reticent manner: no details as to what the woman looks like are given, all is left to be imagined.

Endowed with human sentience, the moon is more than one of the 'characters' in the poet's works. She provides the poet with company when

he wants it. She also witnesses the poet's experiences as an ordinary mortal, his drinking, his meetings with friends, his separation from them. Indeed, when friends are away, the poet counts on the moon to be a bond between them. But the moon is also infinitely superior: she is beautiful, omnipresent, reliably 'there'; she is also unreachable, only to be admired from a distance. ('How I wish to climb the clear sky/ And embrace the bright moon' 欲上青天攬明月;²⁹ but, alas, it is not for man to achieve such a feat: 'Man may well wish/ to climb the bright moon,/ but that he can never do' 人攀明月不可得.³⁰

From his youngest days, the poet has entertained a sort of obsessive curiosity about the moon:

When small I did not know
 What the moon was;
 'The white jade plate'
 I called it.
 I also wondered if it was not
 A mirror of Fairyland
 Flown into the clear clouds.
 I thought I saw in it
 The Immortal One
 Dangling his feet,
 And the cassia tree growing
 As the moon grew more and more
 Into an orbit.

²⁹ 'Hsüan-chou hsieh-t'iao-lou chien-pieh chiao-shu shu-yün' 宣州謝朓樓餞別校書叔雲 (At the parting feast given in honour of Shu-yün at the Hsieh T'iao Pavilion of Hsüan-chou), ch. 18, p. 13b.

³⁰ 'Pa chiu wen yüeh' 把酒問月 (With a cup of wine in my hand I ask the moon), ch. 20, p. 12.

They told me
 A white rabbit
 Was there
 Constantly pounding herbs;
 And I asked them,
 For whom the herbs were prepared.
 Sometimes, late at night,
 The moon grew paler,
 And I was convinced that
 It was the toad
 That had nibbled away its rotundity.
 When Hou I shot down
 The nine surplus suns,
 The population of heaven
 Was left in quiet peace,
 And the moon was left
 Undisturbed.
 But why then are there times,
 When even the moon
 Gives me no pleasure?
 When anguish comes,
 And misery plays havoc
 With my heart,
 What, let me ask what,

Am I to do?

小呀不識月，
 呼作白玉盤。
 又疑瑤台鏡，
 飛在青雲端。
 仙人垂兩足，
 桂樹何团团！

白兔搗藥成，
 問言與誰餐？
 蟾蜍蝕圓影，
 大明夜已殘。
 羿昔落九鳥，
 天人清且安。
 精陰此淪惑，
 去去不足觀。
 愛來其如何？
 悽愴摧心肝。³¹

I introduced the poem as evidence of the poet's fascination by the moon from days when he was a boy. Without the concluding lines, the poem would have been that and no more. But those last lines of the poem stand out so oddly against what comes before that we cannot afford to pass them by without a few comments. As a grown man, Li Po seems to be informing us with the greatest possible emphasis, even the simple pleasure of contemplating the mysteries of the moon can, at times, be drowned by sudden invasions of sorrow of unrecognised origin.

Only at times though. There is another poem in which the poet testifies to the comfort and consolation he can nearly always derive from the moon:

'When will the moon appear?
 It should be there in the clear sky.'
 I ask as I pause in my drink.
 It is not for men
 To climb up to the bright moon.
 But the moon can, at will,
 Follow wherever man may go.

³¹ 'Ku lang ytleh hsing' 古朗月行 (The bright moon — a traditional air), ch. 4, p. 21.

Flying mirror, white object
That comes to crimson palace portals.
With the green
Haze gone, a pure light is seen
To glow.
At night it comes up
From the sea;
In the morning may be
It vanishes into the clouds.
In autumn as in spring,
The white rabbit goes on
Pounding herbs.
Poor Ch'ang-0,
She lives alone,
Without a neighbour.
We of today never saw
The moon of years
Gone by; but the moon we see
Shone upon our forefathers.
Still, past and present
Humanity is a flowing stream,
And the moon is admired tonight
As on ancient nights.
Let us pray that the moon
Will continue to shine
On the golden flask,
Whenever we drink
And allow ourselves
The pleasure of a song.

青天有月來幾時？
我今停盃一問之。
人攀明月不可得，
月行却與人相隨。
皎如飛鏡臨丹闕，
綠煙滅盡清輝發。
但見宵從海上來，
寧知曉向雲間沒？
白兔搗藥秋復春，
嫦娥孤棲與誰鄰？
今人不知古時月，
今月曾經照古人。
古人今人若流水，
共看明月皆如此，
唯願當歌對酒時，
月光長照金樽裡。³²

The poem, we are informed by a brief prefatory note, is an 'occasional' one. But nonetheless, we do get a feeling of Li Po's sense of admiration, of wonder in the presence of the moon. And, as I have remarked earlier, the kind of human bond that the moon represents has a moral significance in the poet's emotional life.

That 'bond' is not necessarily in temporal terms, it can be in spatial terms as well. Here is a parting poem³³ in which it is the all-pervading

³²'Pa chiu wen yüeh', see note 30.

³³'Song of the moon of Mount O-mei: for Yen a Shu monk, on his way to the capital', see note 34.

presence of the moon that constitutes the unifying theme:

When I was at Pa-tung,
 Where the Three Gorges were,
 I often looked westward
 At the moon
 And recalled Mount O-mei,
 Recalled how,
 Out of Mount O-mei,
 The moon rose
 And shone on land and sea;
 Recalled how
 Faithfully she followed
 The footsteps of men,
 However far they travelled.
 This night
 The moon shines in her white splendour
 On the Yellow Crane Pavilion,
 Where, by chance encounter,
 I see my friend from O-mei again —
 Sent here, no doubt,
 By the moon of Mount O-mei.
 My friend is continuing on
 To Ch'ang-an,
 Accompanied by the west wind.
 The broad boulevards of Ch'ang-an
 Spread out in majesty
 Almost celestial.
 The moon of O-mei
 Sheds her light on
 The streams of Ch'ang-an.

the poem, we are informed by a brief note...
 but nonetheless, we do get a feeling...
 in the presence of the moon. And, as I have...
 human bond that the moon represents...
 That bond is not necessarily...
 seems as well. Here is a further poem...
 Pa chin wen yeh, see note 10.
 'Song of the moon of Mount O-mei' for Yen a Sun monk, on his way to the
 'Capital', see note 34.

In the Capital,
 My friend
 Will ascend
 The Golden Lion Chair,
 And, with a jade-handled
 Buddhist whisk in hand,
 Pontificate on
 Matters of much mystery.
 Yes, he will be in the Capital,
 That scarlet city,
 And, he
 By chance may see
 The Emperor.
 In the East, in Wu and Ylleh,
 I have to linger on,
 Though tie-less
 As a solitary cloud.
 I can only hope that
 My friend, having made himself
 Known in the Capital,
 Will yet come back
 And enjoy with me
 The moon of Mount O-mei.

我在巴東三峽時，
 西看明月出峨眉。
 月出峨眉照東海，
 與人萬里長相隨。
 黃鶴樓前月華白，

望月懷遠
 海上生明月
 天涯共此時
 情人怨遙夜
 竟夕起相思
 舉頭望明月
 低頭思故鄉
 又見隨州月
 一時千里光
 誰知千里外
 相去幾何長
 願隨明月影
 長照我衣光

It would not be enough to say that the moon is...
 Li Po's poetry. The moon is more than a personal...
 old-quoted poem:
 Amidst the flowers,
 A flask of wine,
 I drink alone
 With no company,
 I raise my cup
 And extend my invitation
 To the moon.
 'O-mei' shan yueh ko sung shun tsang yan...
 Translation of the title is in note 33.

此中思見峨眉客。
 峨眉山月還送君，
 風吹西到長安陌。
 長安大道橫九天，
 峨眉山月送秦川。
 黃金獅子乘高座，
 白玉麈尾談重玄。
 我似浮雲滯吳越，
 君逢聖主遊丹闕。
 一振高名滿帝都，
 歸時還弄峨眉月。³⁴

It would not be enough to say that the moon is 'personified' in Li Po's poetry. The moon is more than 'personified' in a justifiably oft-quoted poem:

Amidst the flowers,
 A flask of wine,
 I drink alone
 With no company.
 I raise my cup
 And extend an invitation
 To the moon.

³⁴ O-mei shan yüeh ko sung Shu tseng Yen ju ching 峨眉山月歌送蜀僧還入京
 (Translation of the title is in note 33), ch. 8, p. 13b.

With the moon,
 Myself and my shadow, we
 Have a party of three.
 It matters little
 That the moon is no lover of wine,
 And that my shadow
 Merely follows me.
 With them as my company,
 I make the best of spring.
 I sing,
 And the moon hovers about;
 I dance,
 And my shadow seems to reel and rout.
 Sober, we are in happy
 Communion.

Drunk, we drift our several ways.

Our eternal tie

Is unfettered by human emotions.

We shall meet again yet,

Far away in the distant sky.

花間一壺酒，

獨酌無相親。

舉杯邀明月，

對影成三人。

月既不解飲，

影徒隨我身。

我歌月徘徊，

我醉影凌亂。

醉時同交歡，
醉後各分散。
未結畫情遊，
相期遊雲漢。³⁵

If we could overcome the familiarity with the poem from which it is possible for us to suffer, we should be able to see how much the moon means to the poet: a friend when in solitude, a noble friend, an unfailing friend whose friendship involves no obligations.

III. Some Technical Aspects of Li Po's Poetry

TO DISCUSS the technical aspects of Li Po's poetry is a fiendishly difficult task, as we can see from the way so many traditional critics have floundered in the subject, usually through being vague and imprecise, and ascribing every excellence to the poet's 'genius'.

It is true that Li Po did much of his writing in a state of alcoholic stupor, a fact that can easily lead us to the conclusion that his poetry is artless, uncontrived: some of it is, but some of it can never be supposed to be. There are occasional moments in reading Li Po when I feel like borrowing A. Alvarez's words in his description of Laurence Sterne: 'yet the effect he achieved with all his effort was of a fined-down disregard for art.'³⁶ These words would certainly be true of some

³⁵ 'Yüeh hsia tu cho ssu shou, ch'i i' 月下獨酌四首·其一
(The first of four poems entitled 'Drinking alone in the moonlight'),
ch. 23, p. 2b.

³⁶ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* (Penguin edition, 1968), p. 7.

of the technically most interesting poems I will be examining.

That Li Po's writing was often done while he was drinking I have already briefly stated. It would be easy to produce further testimony to the fact. Tu Fu observes:

In great rapidity
A thousand verses
[Emerge],
Tossed about in the world,
A cup of wine
[He has for consolation].
敏捷詩千首，
飄零酒一杯。³⁷

Li Po's contemporary, Jen Hua 任華, addresses these lines to Li:

At times you get hold of
Your writing pad in drink;
At times, when the interest comes,
Your exercise your brush.
And all of a sudden,
From your hands
Emerge fleeces of cloud,
In your eyes,
Sharply defined,
One solitary peak
Presents itself.

或醉中操紙，
或興來走筆，
手下忽然片雲飛，
眼前劃見孤峯出。³⁸

³⁷ Tu Fu 杜甫, 'Pu chien' 不見 (The absence), ch. 32, p. 5.

³⁸ Jen Hua 任華, 'Tsa-yen chi Li Po' 雜言寄李白 (To Li Po, in mixed metres), ch. 32, p. 7.

Another T'ang poet supplies further evidence:

Already drunk,
He drafts his *ylleh-fu* poems:
The brush is given no rest
Until tens of pages are done.
醉中草樂府
十幅第一息。³⁹

And Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修 of the Sung Period writes:

Poems are made
When the poet is drunk:
They are forgotten
When he comes to.
醉裏成詩醒不記。⁴⁰

Li Po himself frequently describes how he bursts into song when drinking, in this sort of manner:

Gathered in this hall are
Three thousand men of quality.
Who, amongst these, tomorrow will pay you
For your good turn of today?
My hand is on my hilt,
I lift my brow.
Limpid flows the stream —
How white the pebbles are:
I doff my cap,
To the gentlemen present
I smile;

³⁹ P'i Jih-hsiu 皮日休, 'Li Han-lin' 李翰林 (On Li Po), ch. 33, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修, 'T'ai Po hsi Sheng-yü' 太白戲聖俞 (On Li Po: written playfully for Sheng-yü), ch. 33, p. 3.

I drink my drink —
For these gentlemen

Will I put together my rhymes

堂中各有三千士，
明日報恩知是誰？
撫長劍，一掃眉，
清水白石何離離！
脫吾帽，向君笑，
飲吾酒，為君吟⁴¹

The poet is in a complex state of mind. Certainly there is touch of cynicism in the mood, but the poet also feels that goodness will be recognized, and with a measure of light-heartedness, he settles down to more drinking and to verse-making.

There are qualities in Li Po's poetry which can be accounted for by the fact that the poet often drinks and writes at the same time, writing, as we may have noticed, at great speed. One of them is the sheer extravagance of thought and language, extravagance that comes closer to fantasy than imagination in any ordinary sense of the words.

In one well-known poem,⁴² we are told three times in exactly the same verbal formula that 'to travel to Shu is as difficult as to reach the blue sky' 蜀道之難難於上青天. We are also told that 'the linked ranges are so tall that there is not the distance of a foot between them and the sky' 連峯去天不盈尺.

In a set of six typical, popular verses,⁴³ we get these lines:

⁴¹ 'Fu-feng hao-shih ko' 扶風豪士歌 (The heroic men of Fu-feng), ch. 7, p. 9b.

⁴² 'Shu tao nan' 蜀道難 (Traacherous are the roads of Shu), ch. 3, pp. 3b-5b.

⁴³ 'Heng-chiang tz'u liu shou' 橫江詞六首 (Six songs of Heng-chiang), ch. 7, pp. 17-18b.

The billows are startled into action,
And the Three Mountains are shaken;
驚波一起三山動，

and,

The wind blows for three days,
And hills are reduced to flat land.
When the white billows rise,
They rise higher than
Wa-kung Monastery.

一風三日吹倒山，
白浪高於瓦宮閣。

— the monastery referred to, our commentators remind us, was two hundred and forty Chinese feet high.

Comparable hyperbolic effect is achieved in this short poem:

In the sun,
From the Hsiang-lu Peak
Emanates a purple haze.
The waterfall,
Viewed from a distance,
Is a vertically hanging river,
It darts and plunges down
Three thousand feet —
Do we happen to have
The Milky way
Pouring down
From the Ninth Heaven?

日照香爐生紫煙，
遙看瀑布掛前川。
飛流直下三千尺，
疑是銀河落九天。⁴⁴

But the boldness of expression is more than matched in a poem⁴⁵ which begins with:

To wash away the sorrow of eternity,
Let us permit ourselves
A hundred flasks of wine,
滌蕩千古愁，
留連百壺飲，

and contains these lines:

Having had enough to drink,
We lie down on this
Deserted hill:
Heaven and earth
Are our bedclothes.
醉來臥空山，
天地即衾枕。

Our poet's best known exaggeration is perhaps contained in this popular poem:

Thirty hundred feet of white hair!
Thirty hundred feet in length —
Because my griefs are as long.

⁴⁴ 'Wang Lu-shan pao-pu erh shou, ch'i erh' 望廬山瀑布二首，其二 (The second of two poems entitled 'Viewing the waterfalls of Lu-shan'), ch. 21, p. 11b.

⁴⁵ 'Yu-jen hui-shu' 友人會宿 (Meeting a friend to spend the night together), ch. 23, p. 5b.

Looking into the mirror

I ask,

Whence comes this autumn frost?

白髮三千丈，

緣愁似箇長。

不知明鏡裡，

何處得秋霜？⁴⁶

照見白髮三千丈，
緣愁似箇長。
不知明鏡裡，
何處得秋霜？

Length reminds me of a comparison the poet consciously invites us

to make:

Pray ask the river

That eastward flows.

Is it any longer

Then my parting sorrows?

請君試問東流水，

別意與之誰短長？⁴⁷

請君試問東流水，
別意與之誰短長？

And how long does the best of scent linger on? -

When the fair one was here,

Flowers filled the hall.

Now that the fair one is gone,

Nothing is left but

An empty bed.

The embroidered bedclothes

Are neatly rolled up -

Never to be used again.

當君在此時，
花開滿堂。
如今佳人已去，
唯剩空床。
繡衾捲起，
永不復用。

⁴⁶ 'Ch'iu-p'u ko shih-ch'i shou, ch'i shih-wu' 秋浦歌十七首 其十五 (The fifteenth of the seventeen songs of Ch'iu-p'u), ch. 8, p. 3b.

⁴⁷ 'Chin-ling chiu-ssu liu pieh' 金陵酒肆留別 (At a pub in Chin-ling; being asked to stay before my departure), ch. 15, pp. 12b-13.

It's been three years now

And the fragrance still lingers on

美人在時花滿堂，

美人去後餘空床。

床中繡被卷不復，

至今三載聞餘香⁴⁸

美人在時花滿堂，
美人去後餘空床。
床中繡被卷不復，
至今三載聞餘香。

One of the most vivid images of extravagance we get from Li Po is, however, a more physical one:

Let me, because of you,

Hammer to pieces the Yellow Crane Pavilion;

And I hope, because of me,

You will smash the Parrot islet.

The battle of the Red cliffs⁴⁹

Was no more than a heroic dream.

We need song and dance

To salve our souls

In their parting sorrow.

我且為君搥碎黃鶴樓，

君亦為君倒却鸚鵡洲。

赤壁爭雄如夢裏，

且須歌舞覓離憂。⁵⁰

我且為君搥碎黃鶴樓，
君亦為君倒却鸚鵡洲。
赤壁爭雄如夢裏，
且須歌舞覓離憂。

We have, so far, been looking at isolated instances of Li Po's bombastic style, his extravagance in imagination and expression. There is one recurrent word in Li Po's poetry which I must comment on by way of

⁴⁸ 'Chi y'uan shih-erh shou, ch'i shih-i' 寄遠十二首 其十一 (The eleventh of twelve poems entitled 'Dispatches'), ch. 25, p. 13b.

⁴⁹ An historical event of the period of the Three Kingdoms, third century A.D.

⁵⁰ 'Chiang-hsia tseng Wei Nan-ling Ping' 江夏贈韋南陵冰 (A poem presented to Wei Ping of Nan-ling; written at Chiang-hsia), ch. 11, p. 15.

concluding this discussion. The word is *sha* 殺, meaning, literally, 'to kill'. Li Po uses it, usually adverbially, to suggest intensity or extremity. Often he uses it in combination with the word *ch'ou* 愁, 'sorrow'. *Ch'ou-sha*, 'extreme sorrow', 'sorrow that kills', etc., occur in a large number of poems.⁵¹ Now if we consult one of the standard dictionaries of Chinese poetic diction,⁵² we will easily discover that it is relatively rare for T'ang poets to employ this expression of extravagance, that Sung poets writing in the *tz'u* 詞 genre use it sometimes even for purposes of padding. This is no important discovery. But we are confirmed in our impression that first, Li Po does differ from his contemporaries in his occasional turgidity and, secondly, often in unrecognized particular ways, he is a harbinger of later poets.

In the preceding paragraphs, in discussing Li Po's extravagant, sometimes almost hallucinatory, *statements*, I have permitted myself to use the word 'image' where, strictly speaking, the professional critic would not have allowed the use of the word. But there *are*, in Li Po's poetry, innumerable examples of audacious, almost 'metaphysically' impossible images and vivid pictorial descriptions. These I propose to cull out and discuss, not only for their ability to surprise, but also for their almost inevitable aptness.

Li Po is good at conveying the sense of speed. There is a well-known quatrain which, without containing any conscious image, is itself an image of speed:

*In the morning we leave
Cloud-clad City of the White Emperor.
Chiang-ling is a thousand li away,*

⁵¹ For example, 'Lü-shui ch'ü' 淩水曲 (Song of Lü-shui), ch. 6, p. 10; 'Meng hu hsing', 猛虎行 (The fierce tiger: A song), ch. 6, p. 16; 'Heng-chiang tz'u liu shou', *op. cit.*, ch. 7, pp. 17-18b; 'Tsui-hou tseng tsung-sheng Kao Chen 醉後贈從甥高鎮 (To Kao Chen, a nephew; written after drinking), ch. 10, pp. 15b-16.

⁵² Chang Hsiang 張翔 *Shih tz'u ch'ü yü tz'u hui shih* 詩詞曲語辭匯釋 (Words and phrases in Shih, Tz'u and Ch'ü poetry: a selection accompanied by their definitions; Hong Kong, 1962).

*We get there and
Return
On the same day.
Our skiff has passed
A thousand ranges of mountains,
Before the gibbons have done
With their wailing.*
朝辭白帝彩雲間，
千里江陵一日還。
兩岸猿聲啼不盡，
輕舟已過萬重山。⁵³

Similarly,

*The rapids whirl,
The traveller's skiff
Onward darts:
Fragrant flowers of the hills
Brush my face.*
水急客舟疾，
山花拂面香。⁵⁴

The verb *fu* 拂 'brush' suggests so vividly not only how close to the bank the skiff sails, but also with what speed the skiff 'onward darts'. Another short poem includes these lines:

⁵³ 'Tsao fa pai-ti-ch'eng' 早發白帝城 (Leaving the City of the White Emperor in the morning), ch. 22, p. 8.

⁵⁴ 'Ch'iu-p'u ko shih-chi shou, ch'i shih-i' 秋浦歌十七首，其十一 (The eleventh of the seventeen 'Songs of Ch'iu-p'u'), ch. 8, p. 3.

River Pa speeds on

Like an arrow;

Boats sail on

At flying speed.

巴水急如箭，
巴船去若飛。⁵⁵

In yet another poem,

Deckered boats fly,

Like whales.

樓船若鯨飛。⁵⁶

Some of Li Po's more static descriptions are equally bold and vivid.

The best known example is probably the two lines which, in Pound's translation, read:

The walls rise in a man's face,

Clouds grow out of the hill

at his horse's bridle.⁵⁷

山從人面起，

雲傍馬頭生。⁵⁸

As a picture of a rider on a steep, rugged hill viewed from a lower level, these lines are unsurpassingly accurate, the accuracy deriving from the poet's sharp observation and his audacity in the use of language. Almost as evocative

⁵⁵ 'Pa-nü tz'u' 巴女詞 (The maidens of Pa: a song), ch. 25, p. 25.

⁵⁶ 'Yü-chang hsing' 豫章行 (Song of Yü-chang), ch. 6, p. 8b.

⁵⁷ Ezra Pound, 'Leave-taking near Shoku', in *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, p. 13. See also note 19.

⁵⁸ 'Sung yu-jen ju Shu' 送友人入蜀 (Seeing a friend off to Shu), ch. 18, p. 3.

of a specific scene are these lines:

Here armoured Chinese soldiers once

Fought with barbarians,

Then did dust and sand

Darken the sea of clouds.

Trees and grasses trembled

At the men-slaughter;

The stars

Lost their lustre and grew dim.

Bleached bones piled up

Into mounds —

What crimes did these

Blue mountains commit

That they had to be

Punished thus?

漢軍連胡兵，

沙塵暗雲海。

草木搖殺氣，

星晨無光彩。

白骨成丘山，

蒼山竟何罪！⁵⁹

Another vivid scene, achieved through the use of similar techniques of personification, is this:

⁵⁹ 'Ching luan li hou t'ien-en liu Yeh-lang i chiu yu shu huai tseng Chiang-hsia Wei Tai-shou liang-tsai 經亂離後天恩流夜郎憶舊遊書贈江夏韋太守良宰 (To prefer Wei of Chiang-hsia: written on my banishment to Yeh-lang at the end of the war, with recollections of old friends and deep thoughts to express), ch. 11, p. 7b. (The passage quoted is on p. 9.)

High above
 Birds have flown by.
 One solitary could
 Moves on at leisure.
 Mount Ching-t'ing and I
 Remain alone
 And eye
 Each other with much pleasure.
 眾鳥高飛盡，
 孤雲獨不閑。
 相看兩不厭，
 只有敬亭山。⁶⁰

Mount Ching-t'ing is animated in a manner which reminds one of Byron's

The mountains look on Marathon —
 And Marathon looks on the sea

in 'The Isles of Greece'. But Mount Ching-t'ing comes alive even more than the Greek mountains in that it dominates the entire poem and is not reduced to being the object of a poet's musing. Li Po's extraordinary imagination is sometimes capable of even more astonishing creative effects:

One night I made my sojourn
 At a monastery
 On the peak.
 There as I lifted my arm
 I touched the stars.

⁶⁰ 'Tu tso Ching-t'ing shan' 獨坐敬亭山 (Sitting alone on Mount Ching-t'ing), ch. 23, p. 10.

We dared not
 Raise our voice —
 For fear of disturbing
 The peace of the inhabitants of heaven.
 夜宿峯頂寺，
 舉手捫星辰。
 不敢高聲語，
 恐驚天上人。⁶¹

The tremendous physical elevation of the peak is communicated to us with poetic licence in the form of what I think can be correctly referred to as a conceit.

In the suggestion of emotional experiences, too, Li Po often succeeds by being boldly inventive, by transgressing the possible — even, at times, the probable.

Who would have expected

This reunion at such a place?

How in amazement,

In sheer joy

I feel lost,

As if cast into a deep fog!

寧期此地忽相遇，⁶²
 驚喜花如墜煙霧！

The happiness of an unexpected reunion is expressed in lines which I would describe as highly characteristic of Li Po in their easy rhythmic movement. The sadness of separation is recorded in a short, pregnant poem, not so

⁶¹ 'T'i feng-ting ssu' 題峯頂寺 (On the Peak Monastery), ch. 30, p. 11.

⁶² From the same poem referred to in note 50.

characteristic of Li Po in rhythmic movement, but characteristic of him in inventiveness of imagination.

Here is the heart-rending spot on earth.

Here is the Lao-lao Pavilion⁶³

Where, travellers being seen off,

Must say farewell.

The spring breeze knows full well

The pains of separation,

And refuses to let

The willow branches grow green.

天下傷心處，

勞勞送別亭，

春風知苦別，

不遣柳條青。⁶⁴

It was customary in China to break a willow branch and give it to the friend one was seeing off. By investing the spring breeze with an understanding of human emotions as well as a will, the poet does more than personify the breeze, he magnifies 'the pains of separation' into something universally known and understood. The same kind of fancy or fantasy that is allowed free play in the next poem produces similar effects:

The white horse, the bridle of gold

Are now in Liao-hai in the far east.

The silk bed-curtain,

The embroidered bedclothes

Lie here with the spring breeze.

⁶³ Near modern Nanking.

⁶⁴ 'Lao-lao t'ing' 勞勞亭 (The Lao-lao Pavilion), ch. 25, p. 3b.

The descending moon

Comes down to the level

Of the balcony, and peers

At the burnt out candle.

A flower flies into the room,

And laughs at the empty bed.

白馬金羈遼海東，

羅幃繡被臥春風。

落月依軒窺燭盡，

飛花入戶笑床空。⁶⁵

The dramatic situation is clear. Some lonely woman stays sleepless all night, thinking of the 'white horse and the bridle of gold', metonymy for her husband or lover who is far away. It is the unsympathetic parts that the personified moon and flower are made to play — the way that the moon intrudes into her personal sorrow by peering in, the way that the flower mocks at her grief — that intensify the pathos of her situation and underline her utter loneliness.

The general purport of my discussion of Li Po's poetry in terms of peculiar characteristics and techniques has so far been to focus on his extravagance and the bold fantastic leanings of his imagination. It is not easy to distinguish which qualities are unconscious characteristics and which are results of conscious craftsmanship. I began by repeating the common belief that Li Po's poetry was often written under the effect of drink, often written at considerable speed. What I have said so far cannot — and has not been intended to — dispel that popular belief. I can only hope that I have produced enough specific examples to confirm with a degree of objectivity what is widely held and often said without sufficient articulateness or analysis of the nature of Li Po's art.

⁶⁵ 'Ch'un yüan' 春怨 (Melancholy thoughts in spring), ch. 25, pp. 14b-15.

IV. 'Form' in Li Po's Poetry

TRADITIONAL CRITICS who have paid tribute to Li Po's verse have repeatedly acclaimed it for its 'strangeness', for its nonconformity with accepted rules. The pages of the thirty-second to thirty-fourth *chüan* 卷 of the *Complete Works* are dappled with expressions of marvel at the freedom with which Li Po manipulates verse forms. A few quotations from these critics should suffice to confirm my point. 'When the brush comes to be exercised by Li Po, the genius at work is of such a magnitude that the realized verbal form is always surprising' 筆端降太白，才大語終奇。⁶⁶ 'And when Li Po writes, clouds and smoke come into existence; then there are innumerable mountains too steep and rugged to scale' 李白落筆生煙雲，千奇萬險不可攀。⁶⁷ Another critic, aware of the fact that it is generally agreed that Li Po's verse obeys no recognized rules, expresses himself rather more cautiously: 'it is not true that in Li Po's verse there are no rules; rather one should say that in verse, Li Po moves at ease amongst the rules' 李白詩，非無法度，乃從容于法度之中。⁶⁸ There are two impressions that one cannot escape. The first is that Li Po often deliberately challenges the established conventions of versification. The second is that in turn, his finished poems defy traditional methods of criticism, leaving the critics in a state of awe-struck bewilderment. We have therefore to try other avenues and see if it is indeed impossible to explore the variety and subtleties of Li Po's versification.

One historical fact has to be noted first. In Li Po's extant *oeuvre* of more than one thousand poems, relatively few are in the 'regulated' *lü-shih* 律詩

⁶⁶ Ch'ien Ch'i 錢起, 'Chiang hsing wu t'i' 江行無題 (On the river; otherwise untitled), ch. 33, p. 1b.

⁶⁷ From the same poem referred to in note 40.

⁶⁸ Chu Hsi 朱熹, *Chu Tzu Yu Lei* 朱子語類 (Collected sayings of Chu Hsi), ch. 34, p. 4.

form. There are about ten seven-character ones, and between seventy and eighty of five-character lines. If we consult the collected poems of some of Li's contemporaries, and also take into account the works of his one peer in poetry, Tu Fu, we soon come to realize that Li Po wrote at a time when the *lü-shih* with its many restrictions was in its ascendancy. It was enjoying great popularity among ambitious poets who took pride in mastering and overcoming its genuine technical difficulties, and also among less able poets who would have been content to prove that they had acquired this new-fangled medium. In a way it would be impossible to say which of the two media, the *lü-shih* or the *ku-t'i-shih* 古體詩 (the 'old' style) was, after all has been said, the more 'difficult' one to handle. The rules of *lü-shih* are, of course, almost tyrannical, but the writing of Tu Fu is a shining example of the way these harsh rules can be turned into advantages, an example of how, even accepting these rules, one could move with complete freedom. On the other hand, writing in the 'old' style, which has no meretricious ornamentations of any kind, one can become totally monotonous, lacking even the easy elegance that 'form' confers. What I am suggesting is that, while it is equally difficult to triumph in either medium, failure in the 'old' style is much more obviously recognizable. And I suggest this in order to argue that, where Li Po succeeds, he should be given due credit for his success and to counter the accusation we sometimes hear, that Li Po was too undisciplined a poet to have opted for the more exacting medium. But when we get down to examining particular instances of Li Po's art of versification, we shall see that his preference for the 'old' style has a greater significance still. Of the two media, it is, in fact, the 'old' style that lends itself more readily to experimentation. The rules for a poem in the 'regulated' verse form are all there for one to follow and make the best of. The 'old style', whether of the *ku-shih* 古詩 or of the *ylleh-fu* 樂府 type, can be employed in ways that allow for much greater variety, and it is precisely this potential for variety that Li Po so often successfully capitalizes on.

Lest I should seem to be contradicting myself, I must point out that what I go on to say about Li Po's achievements only applies to certain poems. I still contend that Li Po is not usually a 'conscious artist', to use that pompous expression once again. He achieves miraculous ingenuity in a limited number of poems. But the fact that a poet sometimes writes badly or carelessly should not be used to negate, or even diminish the importance of the great things he is capable of.

The infinite formal variety of Li Po's verse forces itself on our attention as we wend our slow way through his *Complete Works*. The large number of swift-moving quatrains, poems which Dryden would have described as 'the fairy way of writing'⁶⁹ are amongst Li Po's most celebrated achievements: they are unsurpassed in grace and beauty throughout all Chinese poetry, and I shall have more to say about them. In contrast to these, there are also poems of great length, poems that extend on and on with ease and smoothness. Two of them I have already had occasion to refer to. The poem addressed to Wei T'ai-shou liang-tsai⁷⁰ written when the poet is in exile, is made up of one hundred and sixty-six five-character lines. This is probably the longest poem in the *Works*, and the fact that all lines are of the same consistent length is significant in that it contributes towards the tone of unrelieved remorse of the poem. Another fairly long poem is the one addressed to Yüan Ts'an-chün.⁷¹ The sixty-two lines are mostly seven-character in length, with the admixture of three-character and five-character lines. The poem presents a number of different moods and the occasional departure from the prevalent seven-character unit is for that reason appropriate. It would not be difficult to discuss a few more poems to strengthen

⁶⁹ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 419.

⁷⁰ See note 59.

⁷¹ 'I chiu-yu chi Chiao-chün Yüan Ts'an-chün' 憶舊遊寄題郡元參軍 (To commander Yüan of Chiao-chün: thinking of friends of the past), ch. 13, p. 8b; Pound's translation is in 'Exiles Letter', *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, pp. 132-135.

my argument. We might, for instance, ask why, in one primarily septasyllabic poem,⁷² the two opening lines should be eleven syllables long. There can be a number of answers. But the two lines

The yesterday that deserted me is a day I cannot call back,

The today that is with me confounds me with woes and worries.

棄我去者昨日之日不可留，
亂我心者今日之日多煩憂。⁷²

do carry the burden gradually unfolded by the rest of the poem. But I think I have said enough about a characteristic of Li Po's poetry which should be obvious — that the varying length of the poems and the varying length of lines serve specific purposes in Li Po's poetry, and should not, on the whole, be dismissed as incidental.

There are times when Li Po adopts particular established styles. For instance, we find him employing the *ch'u-tz'u* style with great aplomb:

君不來兮，
徒蓄怨積思而孤吟。

.....
餘留香分染繡被，
夜欲寢兮愁人心。⁷³

You come not hsi,

Hoard I my sorrow, sing alone.

.....
Scent lingers hsi on bed-clothes,

Drowsy night hsi pains my heart

⁷² The poem is referred to note 29.

⁷³ 'Tai chi ch'ing ch'u-tz'u t'i' 代寄情楚詞體 (Expressing the feeling of another: written in the *ch'u-tz'u* style), ch. 25, p. 6.

The *ch'u-tz'u* style permits irregular line lengths. Li Po's poem does not remind us of any particular piece in the *ch'u-tz'u*;⁷⁴ in other words it is not a mechanical imitation; but the insertion of the 'carrier-sound'⁷⁵ *hsi* at what are invariably the right places of his lines is evidence enough of his perfect familiarity with the style, evidence of his being able to 'play by ear' as it were.

When in the mood to do so, Li Po also experiments with fairly rigid patterns and comes off triumphantly. Consider his poem entitled 'In three-, five-, seven-character lines'⁷⁶

秋風清，秋月明；
落葉聚還散，寒鴉栖復驚。
相思相見知何日？此時此夜難為情。

Autumn wind,

Autumn moon;

Fallen leaves adrift,

The crow, roosting, starts.

When are we to meet again?

Night is such a cruel time.

My translation does scant justice to the original: apart from retaining the syllabic lengths of the original lines and suggesting a very inadequate contour of the prose sense of the poem, it has nothing: none of the neat parallelism of the original, none of its musicality, none of its complete spontaneity. Li Po, when he chooses to, can impose a form of great asperity on himself and then moves with complete freedom in the form.

⁷⁴ See David Hawkes, *Songs of the South* (Oxford University Press, 1959).

⁷⁵ Hawkes' invented descriptive label.

⁷⁶ 'San wu ch'i yen' 三五七言 (In three, five, seven character lines), ch. 25, p. 10b.

Li Po's technical resources are such a rich mine that often, in his poetry, we come across examples of dare-devilry which we can imagine few other poets admitting into their lines. Who else, for instance, would have concluded a ballad-like poem with two lines, derived from the *Tao-te-ching*, which are clearly prose in rhythm and grammatical organization?

X 乃知兵者是凶器，
聖人不得已而用之。⁷⁷

In this way we come to know that everything which is
military is unlucky;
Whenever good kings use it, they do so only because
they have no choice.

And what other poet would have introduced into a poem that is dominated by five- or seven-character lines a single eight-character one? We all know that, apart from the four-character unit, the 'natural' units in Chinese verse are made up of odd number syllables, three, five, seven, nine, eleven. The eight-syllable line, particularly when it occurs in a poem of conventional rhythm, *can jar*. But Li Po, it seems, can afford to do what he fancies. The lines

日月照之何不及此？⁷⁸

The sun and moon shine, but not here

and

為我吹行雲便西來。⁷⁹

(addressing the east wind)

Blow the clouds westward here for me.

⁷⁷ 'Chan ch'eng nan' 城南 (Fighting south of the city), ch. 3, p. 12.

⁷⁸ 'Pei feng hsing' 北風行 (Song of the north wind), ch. 3, p. 30b.

⁷⁹ 'Chiu pieh li' 久別離 (Long separation), ch. 4, p. 12.

seem justifiable in the respective poems, largely because of the sense they convey; so far from being obtrusive, they seem to emphasize what deserves emphasis in each context.

I would like to conclude this discussion on Li Po's versification and prosodic effects with a formal analysis of one of his best known poems, 'A dream visit to Mount T'ien-mu: A poem composed at my departure from my friends of eastern Lu' (*Meng yu T'ien-mu yin liu pieh*).⁸⁰

The poem begins with four neatly organised lines, of which line 1 runs parallel to line 3 and line 2 to line 4.

海峽談瀛洲，
煙濤微茫信難求。
越人語天姥，
雲霓明滅或可覩。

1. Travellers speak of Ying-chou:
2. Lost in billows and sea mists it's hard to find.
3. The men of Ylloh talk about T'ien-mu:
4. In the glimmer of clouds and rainbows the mountain can at times be seen.

The four lines constitute a single unit of formal organisation which is made up of two contrasting statements. The actual existence of Mount T'ien-mu is affirmed against the make-belief existence of the fairy island Ying-chou. The contrast deserves to be noted: throughout the poem dream and reality jostle with each other, and reality and wish are seen to clash.

Lines 5 to 10 (six lines) make up the next unit. The lines are uniformly seven-character long. They describe the stupendous height and steepness of

T'ien-mu, ending with an announcement of the poet's wish for dream-travel in the 'provinces' of Wu and Ylloh:

天姥連天向天橫，
勢拔五岳掩赤城。
天台四萬八千丈，
對此欲倒東南傾。
我欲因之夢吳越，
一夜飛度鏡湖月。

5. T'ien-mu meets the sky, cutting the sky line.
6. It overtowers the Five Peaks, it over-shadows Mount Ch'ih-ch'eng.
7. T'ien-t'ai is four hundred and eighty thousand feet high;
8. South-eastwards towards T'ien-mu it seems to incline.
9. Such heights, how I wish to see all of Wu and Ylloh in a dream,
10. To flit across moonlit Lake Mirror this night.

Then we get two transitional lines, both five-character long, standing out against the preceding six lines and what follows:

湖月照我影，
送我到剡谿。

11. The moon and the Lake brighten my shadow,
12. And I am delivered to Yen Ch'i.

The next two lines are again in seven-characters, so that we are back from narrative to description:

謝公宿處今尚在，
渌水瀟瀟清猿啼。

13. The place where Hsieh Ling-yü spent his nights are still here:
14. Limpid waters flow and clear is the gibbon's call.

Separated by the shorter lines 11 and 12, the descriptive thirteenth and fourteenth lines belong to the dream world. Time is telescoped and memories of Hsieh Ling-yün, poet of the Liu Sung Period, remembered for his enthusiasm for mountaineering, are conjured up. The fantastic element becomes more dominant.

The next four lines are in five characters again: the quickened tempo hurriedly takes us through the poet's dizzy experience:

脚著謝公屐，
身登青雲梯。
半壁見海日，
空中聞天雞。

15. Wearing clogs of Hsieh's invention,
16. I climb the Clear Cloud Ladder Mountain.
17. Half way up I see the sun in the sea;
18. In the air I hear the crow of the fabled Cock.

Hsieh's clogs had removable heels which were fixed to the front part of the clogs for descent, to the back part for ascent. But of course the poet need not necessarily be actually wearing them. The allusion has the effect of unifying past and present. The fabled Cock was placed on top of a gigantic tree in the South-east by legend and charged with the responsibility of crowing before any mundane cock crowed at sun-rise. The four lines are a fusion of temporal and spatial distance into a single vision of here-and-now.

Then comes another four seven-character lines: this is formally necessary for the Xanaduish description of a scene more unrestrained in imagination than anything we have been presented with so far:

千巖萬壑路不定，
送花倚石忽已暝。
熊咆龍吟殷巖泉，
瀑深林兮驚層巖。

19. Cliffs, precipices everywhre, twirling, whirling,
I'm lost in the maze.
20. Rugged rocks, a confusion of flowers, suddenly darken.
21. Bears roar, dragons moan, the mountain streams gurgle.
22. Peak upon startling peak, and the forest trembles.

The scene changes, becomes tame and subdued and the new scene is revealed in two lines each of five characters plus the 'carrier sound' *hsi*, the occurrence of which we have been prepared for by its earlier occurrence in line 22, (where it functions in a different way, and where it is not conspicuous because of the regularity of the group of four lines of uniform length):

雲青青兮欲雨，
水澹澹兮生煙。

23. The clouds are blue, yet it seems about to rain.
24. The water everywhere shakes, emanating a haze.

Something earth-shaking happens, and it is described in a series of four four-character lines:

列缺霹靂，
丘壘崩摧。
洞天石扉，
訇然中開。

25. A flash of lightning in the sky, a thunder bolt.
26. The mountain ranges are shattered.
27. The stone portals of heaven
28. Are thrown open with a deafening noise.

And what is seen in the heavens? We get a series of five seven-character lines (the predominant line-length of the poem) with one nine-character line interpolated:

青冥浩蕩不見底，
日月照耀金銀台。
霓為衣兮風為馬，
雲之君兮紛紛而來下。
虎鼓瑟兮鸞回車，
仙之人兮列如麻。

29. A tossing ocean of unfathomed darkness is there.
30. A pavilion of silver and gold, illumined by the sun and moon.
31. Clad in rainbows, as their chargers ride the wind,
32. A host of Cloud Gods descend.
33. Tigers are their musicians, and phoenixes hover above their chariots.
34. The host of immortal ones form a hemp-like band.

The poet's reaction to the vision is reported in four six-character lines:

忠魂悸以魄動，
恍驚起而長嗟。
惟覺時之枕席，
失向來之煙霞。

35. Wonder-struck in body and soul;
36. I start up and sigh a long sigh.
37. Awake, I'm left with the mat and pillows for sleep:
38. The gloriously misty scene has vanished.

The dream is over, but the poet draws a lesson from it, communicated to us in five seven-character lines:

世間行樂亦如此，
古來萬事東流水。
別君去兮何時還，
且放白鹿青崖間，
須行即騎訪名山。

39. The pleasures of the world are not unlike my dream.
40. From time immemorial all that's happened has gone by like water that flows into the eastern sea.
41. And now that I am leaving, who knows when I'll return?
42. Like a white deer set free to range the green hills,
43. I'll seek out the famous mountains: I must now mount my horse.

But the 'moral' is not finished yet. There is something else, far weightier it seems, that the poet wishes to declare. And the declaration is made in the two concluding lines of unequal length: the nine syllable penultimate line is defiant in spirit as well as in form, the final line, of seven characters, returns us to the basic rhythm of the poem:

安能摧眉折腰事權貴，
使我不得開心顏！

44. How can they make me lower my brows and bow to serve the rich, the influential?
45. What means have they to make me miserable?

My formal analysis of the poem, chiefly in terms of line length and how it is related to the structure of the poem, should have led us to a number of conclusions. The first is that the poem, like many others by Li Po, is not as artless as we are often asked to believe. Form is closely related to content, and there is in the poem what we have to call conscious art. The second conclusion is that the conscious art is not at all obtrusive and, for that reason, is of the highest order. I would like to quote what an American critic has to say on the subject: 'The truest and finest art is disarming in its *seeming* simplicity. It makes its observers aware of the result. Technical display is not art.'⁸¹ Li Po's, I think we should now have been convinced, is 'the truest and finest art'.

⁸¹ Charlotte I. Lee, *Oral Interpretation* (Boston, 1952), p. 3.

V. The Musicality of Li Po's Verse

LI PO'S style, it has often been suggested, has the impress of earlier popular poetry on it. With this view I concur. But as the subject has already been dealt with,⁸² I have no intention of rehearsing what is available in print. There are, however, qualities in Li Po's poetry which are related to the subject that I would like to discuss. Li Po's poetry possesses a fluency and musicality which are reminiscent of the best of the *yüeh-fu* poetry of the Han Period and of the Six Dynasties. Very often it is this fluency and musicality that make Li Po's poetry 'popular' in both senses of the word.

The techniques employed that contribute towards the particular kind of smoothness in style can be singled out for examination. The use of internal echoes (within a line or within a poem), of controlled repetitions and reduplications, is everywhere evident in Li Po's poems.

There is a good example of how these techniques work in the poem 'Sitting up of Night: a Song',⁸³

1. 冬夜夜寒覺夜長，
2. 况吟久坐坐北堂。
3. 冰合井泉月入闌，
4. 金釵青黛照悲啼。
5. 金釵滅，
6. 啼轉多，
7. 掩妾淚，
8. 聽君歌。

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For example see Wang Yün-hsi 王運熙, 'Han Wei liu-ch'ao yüeh-fu tui Li Po ti ying-hsing' 漢魏六朝樂府詩集的新考 (The influence of *Yüeh-fu* poetry of the Han, Wei and Six Dynasties period on Li Po), in *Li Po Shih lun-ts'ung* 李白詩論叢 (Collected essays on Li Po's poetry; Hong Kong, 1972), p. 80.

⁸³'Yeh tso yin' 夜坐吟 (Sitting up of night: a song), ch. 3, p. 23b.

9. 歌有聲，
10. 妾有情，
11. 情聲合，
12. 兩無遺。
13. 一語不入意，
14. 從君萬曲梁塵飛。

1. Winter night, the cold of a winter night, I feel the length of the night.
2. Sitting in the room facing north, sitting long, you sing your song.
3. Ice is formed in wells and rivers, moonlight comes into the chamber.
4. The lantern of deadly green shines on my tearful sorrow.
5. The light is put out,
6. The tears faster stream.
7. Hiding my tears
8. I listen to your song.
9. There's sweetness in your song,
10. There's love in me.
11. Love meets sweetness
12. And there is no lack of harmony.
13. That word of disagreement
14. Should follow your songs and fly like dust up to the beams.

The poem has that faint suggestion of a dramatized situation ('That word of disagreement,' etc.) which many other poems by Li Po share, a suggestion that arouses curiosity and interest. But it is not this quality that one admires most. It is the uninterrupted flow, the neat structure, both results of the employment of techniques I have referred to that account for the pleasure the poem gives: some of the devices engaged I have discussed in connection with other poems. The poem is made up of four seven-character, fast-moving lines, one five-character line and one seven-character concluding line. But there are other devices. The character *yeh* 夜 for 'night' occurs three times in

line 1. The character *tso* 坐 for 'sitting' occurs twice in line 2. The word 'chin-kang' 金缸 for 'lantern' in poetic diction begins both line 5 and line 6. Line 5 is, of course, the beginning of the run of short lines. That it should begin with the same word of two characters as its preceding line gives the poem extra cohesion; this is further reinforced by the fact that *t'i* 啼, 'tears', comes in both line 4 and line 6, so that lines 5 and 6 function almost as variations on a theme, the theme being in line 4. The word *ko* 歌, 'song' ends line 8 and begins line 9; the word *ch'ing* 情, 'love', ends line 10 and begins line 11. This employment of a word or any linguistic unit to link up two consecutive lines is discoverable in Chinese poetry as early as Ts'ao Chih's 曹植 (192-232). In the hands of Li Po, particular modes of versification are often handled in ways that lead to unexpectedly pleasing effects.

But let us consider another poem⁸⁴ as supporting evidence of what I claim for Li Po's poetry. The poem is addressed to a friend on the occasion of the latter's retirement to a hermit's life. Again, the poem is specifically called 'a song' - 'The White Cloud Song':

1. 楚山秦山皆白雲，
2. 白雲處處長隨君。
3. 長隨君，
4. 君入楚山裡，
5. 雲亦隨君渡湘水——
6. 湘水上，
7. 女蘿衣，
8. 白雲堪臥君早歸。

⁸⁴'Pai-yün ko sung yu-jen' 白雲歌送友人 (Song of the white clouds: A valedictory poem for a friend), ch. 18, p. 1b.

1. White clouds above the Ch'u mountains, above the Ch'in mountains.
2. White clouds that always follow you wherever you go.
3. They always follow you;
4. As you go to the mountains of Ch'u,
5. The clouds, too, follow you and cross the Hsiang River —
6. The Hsiang River
7. On which dodder floats.
8. Though the white clouds are a comfort to rest with, please come back soon.

In translation, the poem interests us largely because of the poet's transformation of the white clouds into a rival of the poet's in the claim they make on his affections. The technical ingenuity is hardly felt. That this is so is partly a result of the limitation of the translator's abilities, but it should also be understood in terms of one of the many differences between the genius of the Chinese language and that of English. Song-like effects can be achieved relatively easily by repetition in Chinese. In English, however, repetition sometimes gives rise to a sense of cumbersome monotony, except, perhaps, in the hands of Tennyson. The melliflence of Li Po's poem is, in fact, Tennysonian, — Tennysonian, however, only in effect, not in the way in which the effect is achieved.

How then, do we explain the dulcet lyricism of the poem? For a start the two words *pai yün* 白雲 (white clouds) are used three times in what, after all, in a relatively short poem; they are also placed in strategically important positions: at the end of the first line, at the beginning of the second and, finally, in the concluding line. The poem is, as a result, forged into a closely organized artefact, a Gestalt. There are other repetitions in the poem. The three words *ch'ang sui chün* 長隨君 (always follow you) occur at the end of line 2 and become a complete unit in line 3. *Hsiang sui* 湘水 (River Hsiang) similarly link up lines 5 and 6. We have yet another repetition, in the words *Ch'u shan* 楚山 (The Ch'u mountains), in lines 1

and 4. It is miraculous that when so many repetitions are posited in so short a poem the poem does not become Edward Learish, but flows on, from line to line, with graceful and charming fluency.

Of course the repetitions are not the only factor that contributes towards the sweet lyricism of the poem. The simplicity of language, for instance, is another obvious factor. But I am, for the present anyway, interested in Li Po's use of repetitions. Instead of discussing other points of stylistic interest in the poem, I think it should be useful to get our perspective right once more and see the *historical significance* of Li Po's artistic triumph. What I would like to stress is that, in this poem, Li Po, in his eschewal of the fashionable *li-shih* form, inherits the *ylleh-fu* tradition of the Han Period and of the Six Dynasties, keeps it alive in the T'ang Period, and, unwittingly perhaps, opens the door of Chinese poetry for the admission of the *tz'u* 詞 *genre* — soon to become an undeniably important mode of poetic expression: the similarity between the poem I have been examining and so many *tz'u* poems of the Sung Period does not, in my opinion, have to be entered into in detail.

All that was by way of parenthesis. Let us get back to the main thesis of this section and consider a few more examples. Take the poem 'On Seeing Azaleas in Hsüan Ch'eng'⁸⁵

1. 蜀國常聞子規鳥
2. 宣城還見杜鵑花
3. 一叫一迴腸一斷
4. 三春三月憶三巴

1. There was a time when, in Shu, the song of the cuckoo was heard.
2. Today in Hsüan Ch'eng Azaleas are still to be seen.
3. Every note I hear, every echo, rends my heart once again.
4. In the third month of Spring, the third month of the year, one recalls the three Pa prefectures.

⁸⁵ Hsuan-ch'eng chien t'u-chüan hua' 宣城見杜鵑花, ch. 25, p. 10.

A couple of necessary explanatory notes first, before we go back to critical analysis. The bird 'cuckoo' and the flower 'azalea', have various appellations in Chinese, and *tu-chüan* is one that is equally applicable to the flower and the bird — after all, the blossoming of azaleas was supposed to be connected with the cuckoo's song. In line 3 of the poem, *i* 一, 'one, each, every', is used three times, although, in translation, I had to say 'once again' after using the word 'every' twice. In line 4, the word *san* 三 'three' or 'third' is used three times. The 'three Pa prefectures' refers to the creation of three prefectures by Liu Chang 劉璋 at the end of the Han Period, the prefectures of Pa-tung 巴東, Pa-hsi 巴西 and Pa-chün 巴郡.

The critical comments I have to make are relatively few. The sentiments conveyed by the poem are fairly conventional — the appreciation of the permanence of nature and the transience of human endeavours and successes. The main reason why this poem is of interest in the present discussion is the *extreme* boldness of stroke in the poet's use of one word three times in line 3, of another, again, three times, in line 4, when both words are numeral and *could* have produced the effect of complete lifelessness. The actual effect is far from lifelessness: it is one of strong, regular rhythm, one of incredible inventiveness and originality.

Li Po also uses what may conveniently be called 'reduplications' fairly frequently and effectively.

Consider these two lines from a love poem:⁸⁶

枝枝相糾結，
葉葉竟飄揚。

Branches intertwine,

But their leaves are blown away.

The reduplications *chih-chih* 枝枝 'branches' and *yeh yeh* 葉葉 'leaves' in the original carry with them a suggestion of generality and vaguely hint at the

⁸⁶ 'Ku i' 古意 (Age-old feelings), ch. 8, p. 18.

lover's fear that the love relationship is threatened by unavoidable separation. The same sense is not evident in the translation, and probably can hardly be made to be: 'branches' does not call to mind as many branches as *chih-chih*, nor does the word carry the connotation of 'each and every'. And the same can be said of 'leaves' when compared with *yeh yeh*, no matter what epithets you might choose to suggest multiplicity.

One of the seventeen 'Songs of Lake Ch'iu-p'u'⁸⁷ is made up of six lines, the first four of which begin with reduplications

千千古楠樹，
萬萬女貞林，
山山白鷺滿，
澗澗白猿吟。
君莫向秋浦，
猿聲碎客心。

Thousands upon thousands of cedar trees

A whole forest of privets.

From hill to hill egrets throng.

Mountain torrents here, mountain torrents there,

Their gurgle mix with the gibbons' cry.

Let's not come near Lake Ch'iu-p'u:

The gibbons' cry breaks the stranger's heart.

The reduplications so freely used seem, on the surface, to serve no more than descriptive purposes. But on closer inspection, they turn out to be responsible for suggesting the sense of unbearable loneliness the stranger away from home has to put up with. They represent a *tone* of impatience, of fret: there are *too* many cedars and privets, *too* many hills and mountain torrents. The scene depicted, though impressive for its grandeur, is not enjoyed by the poet, but instead is oppressive to him — that much we gather from the last two lines,

⁸⁷ 'Ch'iu-p'u ko shih-ch'i-shou, ch'i shih' 秋浦歌十七首，其十 (The tenth of the seventeen songs of Ch'iu-p'u), ch. 8, p. 2b.

but should have already been apparent to us from the manner the reduplications are deployed.

Some of Li Po's reduplications are perhaps less purposeful. For instance the first one of a series of poems on 'Palace Pleasures'⁸⁸ begins with these lines:

小小生金屋，
盈盈在紫微。

Small this house of gold may well be,

Yet it's nobly set in the precincts of the palace.

In this case I do not think the poet is doing any more than echoing the general rhythm and the reduplications of the famous 'Nineteen Old Poems' 古詩十九首, in which we have, for instance,

青青河畔草，
鬱鬱園中柳。
盈盈樓上女，
皎皎當窗牖。⁸⁹

In Waley's translation,

Green, green,

The grass by the river-bank.

Thick, thick,

The willow trees in the garden.

⁸⁸ 'Kung chung hsing-lo tz'u pa shou, ch'i i' 宮中行樂詞八首，其一 (The first of eight poems entitled 'Palace Pleasures'), ch. 5, p. 13b.

⁸⁹ Chao-ming wen-hsuan 昭明文選 (Taiwan reprint of the Hu K'e-chia 明克家 edition), ch. 29, p. 1.

Sad, sad,

The lady in the tower.

White, white,

Sitting at the casement window 90

The reduplication *ying-ying* 盈盈 which Waley translates as 'sad, sad' without the sanction of the most authoritative commentator of the *Chao-ming-wen-hsuan* 昭明文選 and which I have translated somewhat freely as 'nobly' should further strengthen my conclusion — that, in this instance, Li Po's recourse to the 'figure of speech' serves no obvious purpose. But such a conclusion does not nullify what I have said earlier on.

VI. Li Po's Simplest Poems

SOME OF Li Po's best poetry is to be found in his simplest poems. I shall now attempt to characterize a few of these poems, to account for their almost impenetrable beauty and charm.

Let us begin with a poem every schoolboy knows: 91

床前明月光，
疑是地上霜。
舉頭望明月，
低頭思故鄉。

The moon shines bright on my bed.
I wonder if it isn't frost formed on the floor.
To gaze at the moon I raise my head
My head droops as I recall what my home town was like before.

90 Arthur Waley, *Chinese Poems* (London, 1946), p. 50.

91 Ching yeh ssu' 靜夜思 (Thoughts on a quiet night), ch. 6, p. 10.

The linguistic simplicity of the poem has always been noted and is, indeed, one of the important features of the poem, a feature which, up to a point, gives the poem a sense of immediacy and an impression that the poet is being totally informal and friendly with his reader. But there is more to the poem than its easy diction. In four lines we have been presented with a self-contained, complete experience. The range of moods is considerable. By chance the poet notices the moonlight. Then, in his child-like association of ideas, he vividly describes how bright the moon is with a striking metaphor in the second line; the word *i 疑* 'wonder' is extremely forceful in an unobtrusive way, for it not only informs us of the poet's reaction, but also quietly introduces the poet to us as a person of innocence, capable of a child's imaginings. The third and fourth lines are parallel in grammatical construction, which makes the contrast between them particularly tangible. The unexpected excitement and simple happiness aroused by the moon are dashed by the moon itself, and the poet finds himself being reminded of his absence from home. The word *ssu 思* 'think of', 'recall', etc. is not, on its own, an exceptionally evocative word; preceded by *ti t'ou 低頭* 'the head lowers, droops' it acquires a strong sense of nostalgia and sadness.

Another well-known poem is 'A Reply to a Vulgar Person: Written in the Hills', 92

問余何意棲碧山，
笑而不答心自閑。
桃花流水杳然去，
別有天地非人間。

You ask me why
I choose my abode
In these green hills.

92 'Shan chung wen ta' 山中問答 also known as 'Shan chung ta su jen wen' 山中答俗人問, ch. 19, p. 2b.

I have no reply

Other than a smile

And the contentment

Of my heart.

See how the streams carry

The peach blossoms away

In mystery.

Other heavens, other earths,

This is not the mundane world

Of ordinary

Men.

Conforming as this poem does to the requirements for a seven-character quatrain, it is completely free of any self-conscious manners or mannerism of poetic expression. With a few extra words superadded to it the poem could read very well as prose. The pellucidity derives, then, from the poet's adherence to the expectations of ordinary speech, which, if we bear in mind what the poem is 'about', makes of the poem an example of 'form' serving the needs of 'content'. But the poem does not verge on prose. It possesses that compactness which distinguishes the best of poetry from prose. In other words, the poem is, again, complete and self-contained. Having said that he is not going to answer the 'vulgar person's' query, the poet in fact does offer a full reply — an irony which easily escapes the casual reader, an irony which is part and parcel of the tone and spirit of superiority that prevail in the poem: the 'smile' referred to, the 'contentment', the single, almost symbolic, description in line 3, and the provocative declaration in the final line. As in 'Night Thoughts' 靜夜思, the personality of the poet and the mood he happens to be in are communicated effortlessly, perhaps unconsciously as well. This, at least to some extent enhances the 'artistic' merits of the poem we have discovered.

The next poem I will consider is 'Drinking with a Person of Purity in the Mountains':⁹³

兩人對酌山花開，
一盃一盃復一盃。
我醉欲眠君且去，
明朝有意抱琴來。

Amidst the blossoming flowers

Of the mountains

You and I

Have been drinking

One cup,

One cup more,

Yet another cup.

Now that a drowsiness

Has come over me,

You'd better go your way.

To-morrow,

If your mood dictates,

Come again,

And don't forget

To bring your lute.

The admirable spontaneity we saw in the last poem is here too. But there is one interesting difference between the two poems. 'The Reply' is, in diction and in sentiment much more exalted and graceful than 'Drinking in the Mountains'. The first line of the latter poem is a fairly matter-of-fact statement. The second line comes perilously close to spoken speech. The third line, too, is conversational. It takes the fourth line to elevate the poem to the 'poetic'

⁹³ 'Shan chung yü yu jen tui cho' 山中與幽人對酌, ch. 23, pp. 7b-8.

level which is expected in traditional verse. What I am suggesting is that 'Drinking in the Mountains' is not as good, as well organized, as firmly controlled a poem as 'The Reply'. But to say this is not to be detrimental to the poet if we take his output as a whole, for the contrast should once more remind us how Li Po's manner of expression is properly related to what he has to express. The vision of the poet in a drunken state more than ten centuries ago is revived by the formal characteristics of the poem.

Let us take two more simple poems for analysis. The first is 'To Wang Lun':⁹⁴

李白乘舟將欲去，
忽聞岸上踏歌聲。
桃花潭水深千尺，
不及汪倫送我情。

Li Bai, in his boat,
Is about to depart.
Suddenly, he hears
A song,
Sung to the rhythm of footsteps,
From ashore.
The waters of
The Peach Blossom Pool
Are a thousand feet deep;
Deeper still,
When he is seeing me off,
Are Wang Lun's affections.

⁹⁴ Tseng Wang Lun' 贈汪倫, ch. 12, pp. 20b-21.

The second is the third of the five songs about the 'Maidens of Yüeh':⁹⁵

耶溪採蓮女，
見客棹歌迴。
笑入荷花去，
佯羞不出來。

Picking lotus roots

In the Jo-Yeh Stream,

The maidens

See strangers singing, sailing by.

Giggling they seek shelter

Amidst the lotus blossoms,

Feigning shyness

They refuse to come out.

In another connection I have commented on the last two lines of 'To Wang Lun'. But that poem and the third one on 'The Maidens of Yüeh' share certain qualities which should be considered pertinent to my present discussion. The basic question is in what way are so many of Li Po's simple short poems effective. The two poems we have just read are both dramatic in nature, the latter poem being more so than the former. By 'dramatic' I mean they capture the events and situation of a moment. But the two poems work in different ways. The 'action' of the Yüeh maidens are described vividly and in detail. And the poet even finds room for *commenting* on their behaviour in the two words *hsiang hsiu* 佯羞 'feigning shyness' in so limited a space. The authorial presence in the poem helps us to see the little drama more closely — as if we were also there. In 'To Wang Lun', the drama is largely contained in the first two lines, and there is not much detailed description of what goes on. What makes the poem 'dramatic', as distinguished from 'narrative' is, in actual

⁹⁵ 'Yüeh-nu tz'u wu shou, ch'i san' 越女詞五首·其三, ch. 25, p. 23b.

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