

**Dislocating Language into Meaning: Difficult Anglophone Poetry & Chinese Poetics in Translation—Toward a Culturally Translatable Li Shangyin**

*T. S. Eliot wrote, “We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult.” But what of poets outside “our” civilization? This article considers the translation of the famously—or infamously—difficult poet Li Shangyin (c. 813 – 858) in light of the history of poetry translation from Chinese into English which, from Coleridge to Pound to Rexroth and Snyder to Perelman to Prynne, coincides with and even helped create the history of poetic difficulty in English. My argument here concerns the elements of Li Shangyin that can be crystallized and made relevant for the present through translation into English.*

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“The difficult poem,” writes American poet Charles Bernstein, “has created distress for both poets and readers for many years. Experts who study difficult poems often tie the modern prevalence of this problem with the early years of the last century, when a great deal of social dislocation precipitated the outbreak of 1912, one of the best-known epidemics of difficult poetry” (*Attack of the Difficult Poems* 3). Indeed, not long after that epidemic, T. S. Eliot wrote that poetry now *must* be difficult: “Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (“The Metaphysical Poets” 248). But is such difficulty properly the property of our civilization and our

era (whoever “we” might be)? Does difficulty in poetry from different times and places mean the same thing (can difficulty be commensurable?), and can some of our techniques of poetic difficulty be used to highlight, if not resolve, difficult poetry from other times and civilizations?

The value I see in poetic difficulty is its ability to counter dominant ideologies—not only what Bernstein elsewhere calls “official verse culture” (“The Academy in Peril”), but also the epistemologies that prevail in society as a whole. I will here examine the commensurability of difficulty and its counter-ideological work in light of my ongoing project to translate the complete poetry of Li Shangyin 李商隱 (c. 813 – 858), whose difficulty, or ambiguity, is a well-established critical fact: James J. Y. Liu calls him, plainly, “one of the most ambiguous, if not *the* most ambiguous, of Chinese poets” (27); Yves Hervouet speaks of Li Shangyin’s « *difficultés d’interprétation qui ont embarrassé toute la tradition chinoise* » (11); and Stephen Owen has noted that while “some of Li Shangyin’s poetry is as straightforward as that of any of his contemporaries, much of his poetry is difficult, and some of it is impenetrably obscure”—Owen even hints that Li Shangyin’s poetry might have done counter-ideological work against the “official verse culture” of his own day, given the “general distrust of poets and poetry” at the time (*The Late Tang* 338, 25). But if this late medieval Chinese poet was as comprehensive, allusive, and indirect as poets of our era have felt the need to be, how does that fit into the goal also to dislocate, in Eliot’s words, language into his meaning? And what does the answer to that question tell the translator?

This article will consider the translation of Li Shangyin in light of the history of poetry translation from Chinese into English over the last century—which history, as I trace it, coincides with and even helped create the history of poetic difficulty in English in the same time span. The poetic difficulty that has extended from Samuel Taylor Coleridge through twentieth-

and twenty-first-century English language poetics from Ezra Pound to Robert Perelman and J. H. Prynne developed at the same time as a tradition of translating and representing Chinese poetry in English, and poetic difficulty and representations of China are therefore intertwined with each other, perhaps even causally dependent on each other. Paola Iovene has demonstrated that since the 1980s Li Shangyin has represented for readers and writers in China “a crystallization of those aspects of the Chinese literary past that they deem relevant to the present” (73). As an example and examination of the comparative framing that must take place in world literature’s presentation of writing from another time and place, my argument here concerns the elements of Li Shangyin that can be crystallized and made relevant through translations for *our* present.

***Hey guess what? What? I’ve learned how to talk. Great.***

In a 2008 lecture in Hebei province, contemporary British poet J. H. Prynne addressed the audience on “Difficulties in the Translation of ‘Difficult’ Poems.” The topic was directed primarily toward encouraging Chinese translations of contemporary English-language poetry (including his own), yet his thoughts are relevant to the translation of Chinese into English, and to the alignment of such translations with an Anglophone poetic tradition. He could be speaking of Li Shangyin’s poems as easily as his own, for instance, when he talks about the characteristic condensation of complex poems in which “a diversity of apparently incompatible reference is often deliberate and a valued feature” (“Difficulties” 154). While there is pressure for a translator to keep the translation “recognisably still a poem” (153), Prynne says the task of the translation is nevertheless to recreate, rather than resolve, the poem’s difficulty: “the language used in the translation of a difficult and surprising poem must also be difficult and surprising ... translate one ambiguity by another! Don’t try to solve the problem: translate it!” (156, 159).

Prynne's juxtaposition of translation and difficulty is useful for organizing the dual histories I am tracing here. Against the old saw that "poetry is what gets lost in translation," Prynne writes that "it may at least sometimes be true that 'poetry is what can be discovered in translation'"—and not only, I'll add, because poetry that "at first may resist understanding may after deep study in fact promote understanding and enrich it" (158), but also because Prynne's own poetry has certainly been discovered in and created through translation, particularly vis-à-vis Chinese poetry. Prynne—who has studied Mandarin and been visiting China since 1986, teaching English at Suzhou University for six months in 1991—also peppers his work with allusions to and from China. Take the following from, from 1983:

[...] Endless sorrow  
rises from the misty waves, like a wick  
in the light of conscience. Not feudal  
nor slave-owning but the asiatic mode  
as locally communal within a despotic state:  
the slant of *imperium* coming sideways  
"through the competitive examination (*chin-shih*)  
on Confucian literature." Either contract  
or fancy, each framing the other, closed  
in life. A flickering lamp burns dimly  
at the window, ready for snuff brilliance  
which lights the mirror and shades the door.

The lines, "The denial of feudalism in China / always leads to political errors, of an / essentially Trotskyist order" (*Poems* 336–337) continues the evocation of China in the next section, or poem.

I find Prynne here both compelling and nearly completely opaque. Translator Li Zhimin 黎志敏 writes that in *The Oval Window* Prynne borrows many lines from *Among the Flowers*, Lois Fusek's 1982 translation of Zhao Chongzuo's 趙崇祚 compilation *Huajian ji* 花間集 (940)

(Li)—but I could not find the quotation about imperial exams (*jinsshi* 進士) in that book. Could Prynne have known about the *menglong* 朦朧 poets, often translated as “Misty,” who were making news about the time the above lines would have been written, and do the misty waves and hazy mist on the river obliquely indicate them and their work? Or does the mistiness only extend the imagery that recalls premodern Chinese poetry (flickering lamps at the window, bridges on frozen banks, willow branches)? And the Marxist rhetoric, from the Asiatic mode of production to Trotskyist political errors—does it narrate Chinese Communism, or a Maoist reading of Chinese history? Does the juxtaposition of this rhetoric against the premodern poetics signify anything about China, or about poetry in general? Is the shaking red candle an apotheosis of such juxtaposition? Such unyielding, even overwhelming, questioning is the goal, I think, of Prynne’s difficulty and poetic deployment of tropes of China.

The representation of China has created difficult poetry in English since before William Hazlitt said, in 1816, that “Kubla Khan” “shews that Mr Coleridge can write better *nonsense* verses than any man in England” (qtd. in Leask 1). In some ways Prynne is extending the Coleridgean tradition, but he is also drawing from a closer precedent, Ezra Pound, “the inventor,” per Eliot, “of Chinese poetry for our time” (“Introduction” xvi). Eliot was referring to the translations in Pound’s 1915 *Cathay*, but the invention would not have been possible without the notebooks of Ernest Fenollosa, whose widow entrusted them to Pound. Alongside the source texts for the *Cathay* versions Pound also found the drafts of what would later be published as “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” with formational statements of a new poetics of juxtaposition, or what Pound would call the “ideogrammic method”: “two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation to them”

(Fenollosa and Pound 46, see also 81). And in this statement is the foundation of much poetic difficulty to come.

Because of the breadth of references smashed together as if through an electromagnetic particle accelerator, much of Pound's poetry—especially his Chinese characters—feels like it is there to demonstrate, like Prynne's, intractable illegibility, or Eliot's comprehensiveness, allusiveness, and indirectness dislocating language into meaninglessness. But that is not, I think, the intent. From the *Pisan Cantos* (LXXIV), for instance:

**莫** ŌY TIS

**a man on whom the sun has gone down  
the ewe, he said had such a pretty look in her eyes;  
and the nymph of Hagoromo came to me,  
as a corona of angels  
one day were clouds banked on Taishan  
or in a glory of sunset  
and tovarish blessed without aim  
wept in the rainditch at evening**

**Sunt lumina** (*The Cantos* 450)

The Chinese character up against Greek; an allusion to the swan maiden from the Nō 能 drama *Hagoromo* 羽衣; Mount Tai 泰山, atop which Confucius pronounced on the smallness of the world 登太山而小天下 (Mencius 913); a Russian “comrade” (*tovarishch*, товарищ); an abbreviation of the Latin *Omnia quae sunt, lumina sunt* “All things that are are lights” ... Yet the point is for things to make sense, for the “general idea” to be “based on something everyone KNOWS,” as Pound explained his ideogrammic method elsewhere (*ABC of Reading* 22). For instance, his handwritten mò 莫, which means “no,” or “do not” (reproduced more sloppily than

most of the Chinese in *The Cantos* because he wrote it by hand in a military prison cage) is elucidated etymologically as “a man on whom the sun has gone down,” which then juxtaposes with Οὐ̃ τις (*Ou tis*), the name Odysseus called himself when he poked the cyclops Polyphemus’s eye out (see Sieburth 122).<sup>1</sup> That our education has corrupted or failed us beyond the point where we can follow his ideogrammic references, he would say, is not the responsibility of *The Cantos*.

While both Prynne’s poetics and his economic ethics are at the other side of the spectrum from Pound’s, he nevertheless derives the possibility of his poetic difficulty from Pound’s use of Chinese. The irony is that Pound’s poetics are so difficult when he was clearly trying for clarity, trying to relocate, not dislocate, language into meaning. In Canto CXVI he admitted that he “cannot make it cohere” (*The Cantos* 816), but it was nevertheless an attempt to write against Coleridge’s “deep romantic chasm which slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover! / A savage place! as holy and enchanted / As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!” (Coleridge 1:511–512). It was an attempt at a Confucian “rectification of names” 正名, or what in Canto LX he quoted (from a Jesuit condensation of Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019–1086) *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* 資治通鑑) as an order “qu’ils veillèrent à la pureté du langage / et qu’on n’employât que des termes propres” (*The Cantos* 332–333; see Brooke-Rose 121–122). Ensuring the purity of the language through the employment of only proper terms might not, as Pound hoped, guarantee the moral operation of a society and its economy, but it would, at least, guarantee that poetry could be understood.

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<sup>1</sup> Unusually for Pound, his poetic etymology of the character is not too inaccurate. It originally meant “dusk” (so, sundown), and he saw a person (大, from 人) beneath the sun 日, itself under the grass 艸. The second century dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 explains it as “the sun in the grass” 从日在艸中, as the 大 at the bottom is in fact a corruption of an earlier grass 艸.

But the guarantee that poetry could be understood yields the importance of the struggle to understand poetry. Describing how Chinese becomes an emblem of the poetics, and poetic difficulty, for both Pound and for Prynne, Joshua Kotin writes that Chinese “offered a way to universalize Pound’s poetics and, as a result, confirm his understanding of its political efficacy. Rather than learn to identify the essential in a work of art, one could access it directly. Rather than train one’s critical capacities, one could transcend them” (134). For Prynne, on the other hand, “Authorial intention does not govern significance [...] Poems respond to ever-changing norms,” requiring that we “give up a conception of poetic immortality as a kind of timelessness. It also forces us to accept partial responsibility for a poem’s meaning” (139). This is true: the political implications of Chinese in Pound and Prynne are distinct from each other, the former constructing universalism and the latter demanding the reader’s participation in that construction. Yet my argument is that the reader’s responsibility for contributing to the poem’s meaning also derives in large part from *Cathay*, and how it taught readers of English poetry to read.

Most of the stylistic descendants of *Cathay* in the English writing of Chinese poetry have, in fact, like Pound’s 1915 translations, been defined by their accessibility. Kenneth Rexroth’s “Imitations of the Chinese,” for instance: “Jade pendants chime before the dawn audience. / Peach blossoms drown in the swollen stream. / Barbarian fires overwhelm the guards. / Together two skylarks rise towards heaven. / Two hearts singing like chiming jade” (Rexroth 710). Or Gary Snyder, who, even when not explicitly mentioning or referring to China, nevertheless speaks in the unmistakable voice of what Robert Kern has called “English-as-Chinese” or “Chinese as American Speech” (221–272). See the pared-down grammar and noticeable lack of possessives, not to mention the pose of old-age and exile in the complaint of failing memory from a poet not yet thirty: “Down valley a smoke haze / Three days heat, after five days rain /



[...]” and then: “I cannot remember things I once read / A few friends, but they are in cities. / Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup / Looking down for miles / Through high still air”

(Snyder 399). But while these poems extend the aesthetic of Pound’s *Cathay*, and in so doing extend their facility in a way that seems at odds with the effect of his ideogrammic *Cantos*, this extension nevertheless also points to the difficulty associated with Prynne and his more conspicuously reader-created poetry.

Noting that “some sixty-five years elapsed” between Pound’s “invention” of a discourse for Chinese poetry translation and its codification in practice, Haun Saussy writes that those years constitute the process through which “Chinese poetry has come to have a voice in English” (65). “A voice,” he adds, “not ‘its voice,’” and indeed, immediately after the “sixty-five years,” something with the look of the new-and-improved emerges in the writing of China in American poetry. From Bob Perelman’s “China” (1981): “We live on the third world from the sun. Number three. Nobody tells us what to do. / [...] / Time to wake up. / But better get used to dreams” (*Ten to One* 32–33). Perelman here is barely easier than Prynne. Fredric Jameson calls the poem an “interesting exercise in discontinuities” that is nevertheless in its “secret way a political poem,” capturing the excitement of the “unfinished social experiment of the New China [...] the unexpected emergence, between the two superpowers, of ‘number three’ [...] a collectivity which has become a new ‘subject of history’ and which, after the long subjection of feudalism and imperialism, again speaks in its own voice, for itself, as though for the first time” (Jameson 28–29). Jameson’s (anachronistic and, post-1989, disturbing) enthusiasm for post-Sino-Soviet split Maoism notwithstanding, however, China in Perelman’s poem is neither speaking in *its own voice* nor for *the first time*—as the poem implies with a line appearing three-quarters to the end, “Hey guess what? What? I’ve learned how to talk. Great.” One of the so-called so-called

Language Poets, Perelman is usually understood as reacting against Snyder and the generation included in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry* (indeed, Perelman has critiqued Snyder for the "ahistorical, antitheoretical stance" of poetry that was "crisply efficient in laying out the elements and ethics of the counterculture of the sixties" ("Poetry in Theory" 163)). But Perelman's "China" is just as much an extension, with a twist, of the Snyder tradition as it stretches back to the Poundian invention of China c. 1915.

While it itches with a Derridean irony about written expression of the priority of speech ultimately inscribing the primacy of writing, then, Perelman's "*I've learned how to talk*" also refers to the poem's own voice being learned from and through the tradition of representing Chinese poetics. I mean this in two ways. First, finding or making meaning in what Jameson calls the discontinuities and fragmentation also finds an early and important example in *Cathay*. Pound's translation of "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance" 玉階怨, by Li Bai 李白 (701 – 762; Pound called him Rihaku):

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.

NOTE.—Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach. (*Poems and Translations* 252)

玉階生白露 夜久侵羅襪 卻下水晶簾 玲瓏望秋月

Though Pound's lines are of course not as disjunctive as Perelman's, and barely call for explication now a century after their first publication, the translator's note nevertheless instructs the English-language reader how to appreciate and make sense of the poem. Eric Hayot writes, "the annotation shows the reader how to extend the subtleties of Poundian images into larger themes and narratives. Pound is teaching the reader to read modernism, to take each line as the miniature and concatenated version of some larger idea, or a clearer and more specific referent" (24). If we who read poetry in English no longer require a note such as Pound's to appreciate translations as seemingly unadorned as "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance"—not as much as we might hope for annotative explication, say, for poetry by Prynne or Perelman!—it is in large part because of how thoroughly saturated the realm of our reading is with Poundian Chinese-derived or -inspired poetics.

A second item evidencing disjunctive and difficult poetry's descent from Chinese translation is in the explicit statement of poetics behind Perelman's writing—and, *mutatis mutandis*, Prynne's, as well. Though "The New Sentence," Ron Silliman's foundational essay for what became known as Language Poetry, does not mention translation or Chinese (or, for that matter, Pound, except briefly in passing), it nevertheless resuscitates the poetics of Fenollosa and Pound on the Chinese character. Silliman's essay earned its most concise encapsulation and elaboration from Perelman: "New sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial: the internal, autonomous meaning of a new sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences" (Perelman, *Marginalization* 61; see Silliman). This heightening, questioning, and changing by separation or connection is, at root, "two things added together [not to] produce a third thing but [to] suggest some fundamental

relation to them”—in other words, Chinese written characters mediating poetry.<sup>2</sup> The New Sentence is the ideogrammic method, and Eliot’s dislocation of language into meaning and Perelman’s reader’s perception of separation and connection are the after-effects of Pound’s invention of Chinese poetry for our time.

### **Filiations and Affiliations**

Though my argument is that poetic difficulty in contemporary English poetry descends from a tradition of translation and representation of Chinese, one of the reasons this may be counter-intuitive is that Chinese poetry in English translation still has a reputation for being accessible. This ease and accessibility has to do with the particular poets translated, of course—overwhelmingly Li Bai, Wang Wei 王維 (699–759), Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), Han Shan 寒山 (fl. 9<sup>th</sup> cent.), and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101). These are canonical, easy writers whose ease in some measure accounts for their canonicity and having been so often translated into English. While the tendency to translate easy writers, and the concomitant creation of an “easy” aesthetic, is easy enough to understand, the problem is that it fuses the Chinese premodern too easily to official verse culture and the hypotactic mainstream of English-language poetry. Whereas Pound invented his translational representation of China in the context of an avant-garde poetics, defining and constituting his oppositional “minor literature” (in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s sense) on the minority of Chinese and translation, the further avant-garde poetics gets from Pound’s translations, the more premodern China becomes relegated to the *traditional*—not only of “traditional China,” but of “traditional English verse.” Eliot’s dislocation of language into meaning never takes place, and translation gives up its ideological potency. My goal here is

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<sup>2</sup> The missing link here is Charles Olson raving about “what Fenollosa is so right about, in syntax, the sentence as first act of nature, as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object, quick” (Olson 244).

to see how the translation of a premodern Chinese poet might be able to take that ideological antagonism back.

When difficult poetry from Chinese premodernity has been translated, it is often packaged in terms of earlier literary movements in the West, such as when Li Shangyin is proposed as a *Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet*. This categorization and characterization, of course, subtitled James Liu's *Poetry of Li Shang-yin* (1969), which he explains (only in the book's final pages) by saying that, like seventeenth century Europe, "the ninth century in China came after an age of expansion and creativity and preceded one [...] that might be called 'neo-classical' in its conservatism, its emphasis on reason rather than emotion in poetry and art" (254). While I see no evidence of Liu's translating Li Shangyin into an English resonant with the baroque style he proposes, such a comparison is nevertheless quintessential to comparative literature and world literature studies. The possibility of these fields depends on scholars and translators making links between otherwise disparate works and their contexts, whether of filiation or affiliation (and insofar as Deleuze says "The Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function" that "endlessly produces folds," the comparison is apt indeed (3)). But whereas Liu's proposal of Li Shangyin as baroque is a comparison of affiliation, or conceptual similarity, my argument involves a search for a filiation, or contextual consistency within which to place my translations. I am not suggesting that my translations could be the true heir to Li Shangyin's poetry as written and read in the late Tang, but rather that by tracing back some of the history and trajectory of translation from Chinese into English poetry, they could regain some of the lost or obscured significance of that tradition of translation and its creation of poetic difficulty.

In recreating the significance of this difficulty, such translations could even end up opening up access to whatever oppositional minority may have defined Li Shangyin's departure from the dominant ethic and aesthetic of accessibility in his day. Stephen Owen contextualizes that a "general distrust of poets and poetry seems to have increased in the second quarter of the ninth century," resulting in a period-style of difficulty and a sense that to "admire poetry, moreover, might be looked upon as a dangerous diversion from serious pursuits" (*The Late Tang* 25). If Li Shangyin's poetics represent at least a semi-conscious challenge to other ideologies of poetry, then we have the potential for a confluence of oppositional poetics from medieval China to postmodern English created and consecrated via translation. While the dangerous diversion from serious pursuits is not quite the dislocation of language into its meaning, translation can draw these two modes of difficulty together.

Counter-intuitively, Li Shangyin's dangerous-diversion difficulty may make him all the more translatable into a linguistic-dislocational difficulty. This translatability is implicit in Liu's asserted parallel between Li Shangyin's time and the baroque: narrating three successive phases of Tang poetry—formative, full maturity, and "a phase of sophistication (*ca.* 770–900) typified by tendencies toward the exuberant or the grotesque"—Liu links "the sophisticated phase to the seventeenth-century poets traditionally called 'metaphysical,' and more recently labeled 'baroque,' such as Donne, Marvell, and Crashaw" (254). T. S. Eliot says "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*" because of the seventeenth-century "dissociation of sensibility," or thought from feeling, "from which we have never recovered" ("The Metaphysical Poets" 247; emphasis in original). Eliot's and Liu's histories of poetic difficulty converge on Li Shangyin's metaphysical dissociation.

Yet I say counter-intuitive because Li Shangyin's distance from the style of those poets who have been more often translated into English, and whose facility underlies such conceptions of Chinese in English, has bestowed upon his work—especially the “Untitled” 無題 pieces—an aura of untranslatability. Zhang Longxi, for instance, calls Li Shangyin's most famous poem “a puzzling maze of elegant words and phrases, a labyrinth of alluring yet evasive imagery,” because of which it “is virtually untranslatable” (148–149). This is usually meant as a kind of praise, although of course to call something “untranslatable” is to do nothing but admit failure, rather than to say anything meaningful about the text or language in question. Conversely, however, readers' by now high comfort level with difficult poetry means that Li Shangyin's difficulty might make him not less translatable, but more.

Poetry readers today, as the above section implies, do not necessarily expect or want to understand everything, even after repeated readings. In part this is because of a confusion of poetic *difficulty* with *obscurity*, which Prynne distinguishes in a footnote to “Difficulties in the Translation of ‘Difficult’ Poems”: poetry is *obscure* because “information necessary for comprehension is not part of the reader's knowledge,” but *difficult* poetry happens when “the language and structure of its presentation are unusually cross-linked or fragmented, or dense with ideas and response-patterns that challenge the reader's powers of recognition”; whereas filling in information gaps “may dispel much of the obscurity” for the reader, Prynne explains, “extra information may not give much help” in solving difficulty (“Difficulties” 160, n. 1). This is behind Owen's brief consideration, for instance, that Li Shangyin in fact titled his poems only for the titles to be lost, in which case “we would possibly have a great body of poetry emerging out of historical misunderstanding” (*The Late Tang* 402). But in fact Prynne says that, like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Li Shangyin's poems “are hard for readers because they are obscure and

also difficult; indeed, their difficulties are deliberate and integral to poetic method” (“Difficulties” 160, n. 1). The unusual cross-links and fragmentation of his poems make them dense with ideas and response-patterns, which challenge the readers’ powers of recognition. Or, in other words, they play upon variety and complexity to produce various and complex results, comprehensive, allusive, and indirect, forcing a dislocation of language into meaning.

With that in mind, and in the interest of translating in conscious consistency with the context of Chinese – English poetry translation as traced above, here is a translation that looks to make use of the tradition of poetic difficulty in English to highlight that of Li Shangyin. One of his many “Untitled” poems 無題:

*I'll come is empty talk, yet I'll go without a trace. The moon slants over the tower at the fifth  
clack of the bell. Dreams of distant separation,* Mo Pi: “When separated, dreams return;  
hence dreams in distant separation.” *calls that are  
hard to recall, a letter rushed through writing before the ink had been ground thick. Candle  
glow that half encircles a golden kingfisher,* Zhu: “Jiang Yan’s ‘Rhymeprose on the Kingfisher’: ‘A mélange of  
purples and golds its coloring.’ Liu Zun: ‘The golden scrim encloses  
the kingfisher.’” Feng: “The *Songs of the South*: ‘Bedspreads of kingfisher feathers seeded with pearl, alluring and brilliant.’ Wei  
Zhuang: “The fragrant lamp half enrolls the flowing perilla canopy.” Wen Tingyun: “Paintings on gauze of golden kingfishers, per-  
fume candles melt-  
ed into tears.” *musk partly permeating hibiscus embroider-  
ing. Young Liu resents Mount Penglai for being far  
away,* Zhu: “Cui Hao: ‘The crystal curtain a veil of  
embroidered hibiscuses.’” Feng: “Bao Zhao:  
‘A feathered bed-curtain of multicolored hibiscuses,’ like  
in Du Fu: ‘The mattress hides embroidered hibiscuses.’” Zhu: “Li He: ‘Young Liu of Maoling [Emperor Wu of Han], traveling in the autumn wind.’” Feng: “Emperor Wu of  
Han prayed for immortality; the *Latter Han* states, ‘Scholars say Laozi’s library was East Guan, but the Daoists say  
Mount  
Penglai.’” *but I’m cut off from my Penglai another ten-thousand fold.*

來是空言去絕蹤 月斜樓上五更鐘 夢為遠別啼難喚 書被催成墨未濃  
蠟照半籠金翡翠 麝熏微度繡芙蓉 劉郎已恨蓬山遠 更隔蓬山一萬重

(Li Shangyin 4:1632–1651)

I have elsewhere written about my use of notes in these translations, which aims to dissolve the need to explain culture-bound references into the desire not to take the reader’s eyes away from the main text, drawing from techniques both of pseudotranslation in English-language



poetry as well as the visual layouts of premodern Chinese print culture (see Klein). Suffice it to say here that the annotations also torque the question of poetic difficulty: they trace the allusions as made available in the authoritative and critical editions of Li Shangyin in the Sinophone sphere, but they also demonstrate some of the futility of such tracing to contemporary readers who might otherwise want to lock down a critically authoritative meaning to the poems—as Prynne said about filling in information gaps dispelling obscurity but not resolving difficulty. That the allusions, in other words, are illusions.

The form of the poem in my translation is also a braiding and upbraiding of both premodern Chinese print editions and the history of Chinese poetry translation. On the one hand, contemporary free-verse lineation, composed “in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (Pound, *Pavannes and Divisions* 95), earned great justification from the *Cathay* translations; on the other hand, prose poetry is one of the dominant modes of “New Sentence” writing. Premodern Chinese poetry is of course as a rule rhymed and heavily metered (insofar as “meter” is the *mot juste* for poetry in a language without stresses or long vowels), and Li Shangyin’s verses in particular are usually written according to a tonal prosody derived from Sanskrit metrics (see Mair and Mei). Nevertheless, the visual layout of my translations is a mimesis of the text blocks that defined poetry printing in premodern Chinese books before cheap paper made line breaks possible. The form also honors the importance of Chinese translation to the development of the *poème en prose* in the West, from Judith Gautier’s *Le Livre de jade* (1867) to Victor Segalen’s *Stèles* (1912, 1914) and beyond. Prose poetry as a presentation of premodern Chinese poetry, then, can realign the New Sentence with the reading of the Chinese Written Character that underpins it, putting it back into literary history and the tradition of translation from Chinese from which it offers itself as either a transcendence or apostasy, and can also

continue Chinese poetry translation's critical development of the acoustics of poetry in English while looking for new ways to represent China and the notions of the Chinese that form part of the West's literary imagination. The form, that is, can also form a self-aware component of the dislocations and relocations of poetic language into meaning.

### **Dislocating Meaning into Language**

Introducing his magisterial translation of Paul Celan's later poetry, Pierre Joris writes about "the present episteme of American poetry, that is, the set of presuppositions, linguistic and historical, that determine to a great extent how we hear and what we recognize as 'good' poetry and, by extension, good translations," which Joris traces to the valorization of spoken, colloquial language in Pound and others. Yet Joris states that his "first aim has not been to create elegant, easily readable, and accessible American versions of these German (under erasure) poems," but, rather, "to get as much of the complexity and multiperspectivity of Celan's work into American English as possible"; he has therefore translated simultaneously through and against the tradition and episteme of American poetry he describes: "In my versions I have drawn on every possible scrap of information I could garner concerning the poems and on all possible poetic knowledge I have been able to gather in English" (lxxv – lxxvi). My translation of Li Shangyin is motivated by a similar ethic, epistemology, and methodology: not to make late Tang poetry clearer to the contemporary reader of English than it was to the medieval reader of Chinese, but rather to avail myself of the root aesthetics of the avant-gardist representation of Chinese in English language poetry through which Li Shangyin's complexity and multiperspectivity can be accessed, if not accessible. This is Prynne's sense of using difficult and surprising language to keep a translation of a difficult and surprising poem difficult and surprising, with the changes translation has

brought to and wrought on poetry in English ensuring that my translation will be, in Prynne's words, "recognisably still a poem." What "must remain the aim of any translator, just as it is the aim of any poet," Joris writes, is "to transform his or her language." I see this, too, to be the goal not just of my translations, but also of Li Shangyin.

We have a vision, then, of how premodern Chinese poetry has shaped and simultaneously can be reshaped by world literature. This reshaping will, I expect, never reach culmination or final fulfilment. As Joshua Kotin writes about Prynne's difficult poetics, "Every poem is endlessly occasional, and we are part of its most recent occasion. We must illuminate its contexts and reception history as we moderate the impact of our own position in culture" (Kotin 139)—an openness Kotin links to Stephen Owen's comment on how in the Chinese poem, "fullness lies outside the text, as the end of the reading process [...] a T'ang or Sung poem moves toward a fullness that is never attained" (Kotin 137, quoting Owen, *Omen of the World* 70). Likewise, the process and procedure of world literature, and its shapings by and through Chinese poetry, move toward a fullness unlikely ever to be attained. Without sacrificing the foundational clarity of the Poundian image (conceived upon the medium of the Chinese character) that underlies the definitional uncertainty of Li Shangyin's poems, translations can embody their difficulty through the openness Prynne's poetry explores, and which he accessed from Chinese poetry conceptualized both through and against Pound. In this way, translations can themselves work to shape and reshape world literature, dislocating Li Shangyin's meaning into their language.

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