

Enduring Pleasures¹

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TEACHING ANCIENT LITERATURE in this much-vaunted visual age is not without its perverse pleasures. There is excitement in the challenge of thrusting seemingly impenetrable, stubbornly verbal writings upon today's so-called "multitextual learners"—people who, in their everyday life, dwell in a world where they are as likely to glean their information from films, photos, television, and the Internet, as they are to acquire it from reading books. And there is a feeling of accomplishment when students discover that the enduring pleasures of the poetry of distant times and places are not just other people's pleasures that they themselves are obliged (by us) to endure. Students today, we are told, like to be able to "see"—to visualize—what they are being taught. And, when queried by educational technologists, they overwhelmingly respond that they enjoy learning best when there are visual components integrated into their classroom experience: so much so that some researchers advocate making sure that course catalogues detail the extent to which a given course implements technological resources.

This preference for what is referred to by educational researchers as "holistic" modes of learning presents a challenge for teachers of literature. How do we sensitize visually attuned minds to the evocative powers of mere words on a page? While I do not have a blanket solution to that question, I would suggest that particular types of writing seem to be especially amenable to the application of our visual imaginations. Much of traditional Chinese lyric poetry, for example—and by that I refer to poetry composed in China as early as perhaps the third century BC, and up to the founding of the Republic of China in 1911—appeals with particular intensity to our perceptual knowledge of the world. If you have ever thumbed through a book of poetry translations

¹Read 11 November 2005.

from the Chinese, then you may recall being confronted with a jumble of images, seemingly finite in kind and simple in conception—scenes that would include high mountains and flowing rivers, a path through the woods to a recluse’s dwelling, homeward-bound birds and dancers in diaphanous robes. Yet, readily conjured-up as these images are, you may have wondered, as I did the first time I confronted such an anthology, what these poems were really doing—what is it exactly that we were supposed to be “seeing”? These innumerable mountains and moons may be easy to visualize, but they stubbornly remained inaccessible as signifiers.

Of course, studying Chinese poetry, and learning in a formal way about the culture of the literati who produced it, opens up a world of meaning, deeper and more varied than any cursory encounter with the material would suggest. We come to recognize the rich connotations that accumulate around particular objects, which, when carefully set within a structure of resonating phrases and images, can be summoned in a harmonious, meaningful whole: the sad irony of the fullness of the moon, evoking the impossibility of union with a friend or lover; the power of wine to symbolize remembrance of the past and forgetfulness of the self; and the strange force that allows tender spring vines to delicately dismantle a city wall that took years to build and an empire to maintain. We learn to pick up on the subtleties of parallel phrasing, where the juxtaposition of a mountain and river stimulates feelings about the paradoxical simultaneity of stasis and change. The rhymes and patterns of contrast between the words’ rising and falling tones become musical in our ears. And, most difficult and satisfying of all, we discover the power of intertextuality, the mechanism whereby poets import and transform images from earlier writings, and enter into dialogue with writers and thinkers long since past.

Viewed through the lens of all of this information and technical savvy, then, individual poems become meaningful. But, still: How is our perceptual experience being engaged by these words, and to what end? True, we have the Confucian answer that dictates, “In reading the words, one knows the man.” And in later, more aesthetically-minded times, we note that the poems seemed geared to reveal the world as seen by the poet, from a particular standpoint, at a particular moment in time. The reader of these poems, or, if you will, the occasional dweller in and viewer of this world, is then thought to comprehend—through the natural empathy that makes us human—the inner world of the poet, a world that would otherwise remain hidden. In other words, the poet provides a window onto the world as he sees it, so that, by standing beside him and borrowing his perspective, readers might see it as he does (or did)—and thus momentarily erase the divide that separates one individual from another.

Over the centuries in China, the many internal contradictions inherent in this view gave rise to some rich speculations on the nature of literature itself. And today, the idea of merged visions emerges as more ideal—and less tenable—than ever. Postmodern readers, for example, can no longer blithely imagine that the sharing of the exact same perspective is possible. In addition, a literal understanding of this ideal seems to bind the poet too rigidly to real-life experiences, not only robbing him of his imagination, but ignoring the undeniable presence in poems of elements that appeal to our senses, even if they do not strictly belong to the realm of immediate experience: elements of mythology, literary and historical allusion, word-play, and just plain old shared references.

One eighth-century writer on the art of writing poetry, in his essay “On Literary Meaning,” helpfully points to a more subtle and complex way of understanding visuality in the poetry of his contemporaries—a way of broadening our sense of what a reader should “see” in a poem. This essay says, “When it comes to poetry, in the very first line one must be able to see where [the poet’s body] is situated. . . . If one speaks ‘emptily’ of the appearance of things, then even if [the words] are good, they will be without savor. One must stabilize the body [in a particular place].”² And then, again, “In all cases, one’s body must be present in [a poem’s] intent; if there is no bodily presence in a poem, then from where can a poem come into existence?”³

Now, these lines have often been read as supporting the notion that the poem must originate in the poet’s real experience—his actual presence in the scene he is depicting. But I also think that the writer of this essay, “On Literary Meaning,” is arguing for a particular relationship, not so much between the poet and the world, as between the poet and the reader. It is the reader, after all, who must be able to discern in a poem a bodily presence from which the perceptions appearing in the poem emanate. In short, traditional Chinese poems don’t so much enable the reader to see *what* the poet is seeing, as they compel the reader to see *the poet seeing*—even when the poet seems to be entirely supplanted by the visualized scene.

This distinction is important. This “chain” of seeing and being seen preserves the intended lyric nature of the poem by unapologetically making room for the unbridgeable gap between the poet’s subjective

² Attributed to Wang Changling (698–ca.757), probably in error. In *Wenjing mifulun*, comp. Kūkai (774–835), ann. Zhou Weide (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1975), 131. This and all translations in this article are my own. For an alternate translation, see Richard W. Bodman’s unpublished dissertation, “Poetics and Prosody in Early Mediaeval China: *Bunkyō bifuron*” (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1978), 378.

³ Ibid.

experience and that of the reader. Because the integrity of the poet's vision—what we can call his subjectivity—depends on being perceived as such, a necessary distance is maintained between the poet and the reader, even as the poem represents an attempt to bridge that gap. In fact, the poem has the paradoxical role of expressing the desire for a union of the two points of view, even as poetry's very existence depends upon the impossibility of that perfect union. The best poems show us the boundaries of the individual subject by confronting us with the boundaries of vision itself.

Two poems, both written in the eighth century, during the Tang Dynasty (618–907)—the period still referred to as the “Great Age of Chinese Poetry”—will serve to illustrate what this means in practice. Both of these poems, each in its own way, enact a dance between the poet and the reader on whom the poet depends: a dance that choreographs degrees of proximity, not according to musical rhythms, but through the habits of vision. The first poem is called “Climbing Stork Tower.”

白日依山盡
黃河入海流
欲窮千里目
更上一層樓

The white sun leans on the mountain. It is gone.
Yellow River enters the sea, flows on.
You want to exhaust your thousand-mile view:
Climb one more story of the tower.⁴

This simple quatrain, one of the few poems by Wang Zhihuan (688–742) that has been passed down to us, has long been regarded as exemplary—as something like a masterpiece, not merely of the Tang Dynasty quatrain, but of Tang poetry as a whole. Traditional critics especially praise the way the solid, substantive scene of the setting sun in the opening couplet seamlessly, almost imperceptibly, leads us into the intangible, imaginative (if not imagined) world of desire in the second couplet, desire that signals the bodily presence of a particular individual. This observation may be valid; but how does this transition from the perceived world to the wished-for world orchestrate the relationship between poet and reader?

First, the poet is clearly situated in what we can think of as an absolute center. The symmetrical opposition of sky and earth in the first two

⁴ *Tangshi sanbaishou*, ann. Jin Xingyao (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), 306.

lines provides the vertical reference points. His view of first the east, where the river flows into the sea, and then the west, where the sun has just set behind the mountain, completes a foursquare frame. He is in a high place, we know, a tower that, compared with man's usual earth-bound perspective, seems closer to the heavens, but that, in the larger scale of things, places him closer to the middle point between heaven and earth, where all men dwell. This point, by virtue of its centrality accessible to poet and reader alike, stands at the opposite end of pure subjectivity.

But the poet occupies this almost perfectly central spot at the precise moment when the last bit of the sun's orb sinks behind the rim of the mountain: at the very moment when the perfect balance will shift, when symmetry will be swallowed up in darkness, and the poet will lose the visual bearings that give him his centrality.

Still, until that moment comes, we envision a scene painted in perfectly aligned parts of speech: white against yellow, sun against river, leaning against entering, the mountain against the sea, and, finally, exhaustion against continuity. Happily, as is always true in the best parallel couplets, equilibrium does not settle into stasis; to the contrary, in this case, it only renders more poignant the inevitability of change that these lines describe—change that is couched in the final words of each of these two lines: “disappears” and “flows [on].” These two verbs, by contrasting abrupt, momentary change with ongoing transformation, ironically introduce visual symmetry into a phenomenon that is inherently invisible and linear. The impermanence of permanence is thus revealed.

And what happens next, in the second half of the poem? The smooth transition praised by critics bodies forth, somewhat ironically, a kind of “falling short”—not just of the ideal of eternal equilibrium and the poet's centrality, but of perception itself. In the third line (“You want to exhaust your thousand-mile view”), the poet's view of the sun and river, caught in a moment when an irrevocable and imminent end seems to coexist with eternity, spurs in him the impossible desire to prolong that view: to go up higher, to remain at the center, and to extend his vision to the point where it can encompass all things, and—as long as he can postpone the disappearance of the sun behind the horizon—all time.

At this moment, in the midst of this scene that, somehow, belongs to everyone, that makes little distinction between the particular poet and the vast, anonymous community of readers, the two suddenly separate. This occurs when, in the fourth and final line, a simple and optimistic bit of advice (“[Just] climb one more story of the tower”) forces the realization that it is advice that can only be followed to a point; there are, after all, only so many stories to any tower. It is here that we notice a definitive split between the reader and poet—the speaker giving the advice (if only to himself), and the reader hearing it and recognizing its futility.

So, just when the infinite, ineffable landscape promises to dissolve all viewers into one—and just when the universality of the poet's inescapable mortality emerges most clearly—the mode of speech slips into apostrophe, and the poet asserts a distinct degree of separateness. Suddenly the reader understands just how the experience of a universal reality can provoke the most profound loneliness, and how a jaunty, almost off-hand, proposition (to “climb up one more story of the tower”) can mask the most solemn sense of resignation. The reader is written into the poem as the silent interlocutor, forced to acknowledge what the poet seems to want to deny; and, she is also the viewer, realizing the emptiness, the transience, of images that appear, to the poet's eyes, as solid and real.

This is lyric poetry constructed as the overlay of several layers of perception—not just perception as a faculty that reveals, but also—and perhaps more importantly—as a faculty that cannot reveal all. These limits of perception, of course, correspond with the limited nature of our own bodies. They also prevent the poetic subject from dissolving into an ineffable (and, thus, poetically unproductive) oneness with the world at hand; in the same way, these limits prevent the reader from merging mutely with the poet.

But no one frames their own perceptions as the object of the reader's view more clearly and blatantly, and keeps their reader in a keener state of yearning, than the great poet Li Bai (or Li Bo; 701–762)—and it is with his famous poem, “Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon,”⁵ that I will close:

A gourd of wine among the flowers,
 Alone I drink, with no one near.
 I raise my cup and invite that old bright moon,
 I turn to my shadow and we become three.
 The moon, as such, does not know how to drink,
 The shadow vainly follows my body.
 For now, my companions are moon and shadow,
 Our celebration must last until spring.
 I sing, the moon sways,
 I dance, the shadow scatters.
 While lucid, together we share in our delight,
 Once drunk, each goes his own way.
 Let us always be bound in this
 wandering-without-attachment,
 And promise to meet on that distant bank of clouds.

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
 暫伴月將影
 行樂須及春
 我歌月徘徊
 我舞影零亂
 醒時同交歡
 醉後各分散
 永結無情遊
 相期邈雲灘

⁵Ibid., 6.

This much-loved poem does not fall into the same category as that of Wang Zhihuan's "Climbing Stork Tower." It's not what anyone would call a landscape poem, and it doesn't immediately strike you as depicting a visual world that easily lends itself to analyses based on principles of pictorial composition. And yet, it contains all of the elements we've been discussing: the sense of the genuine that comes from a clear positioning of the poet's body in space (if not in a place); a delicate dance (this time, a real dance!) between the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal; and the discrete subject's teetering-on-the-brink of immersion and disappearance into the unity of things.

For, what we find is a bodily present self, insistently marked as "I," positioned not in the center of any vast landscape, but smack in the center of the framed poem. The direct result of this positioning is that everything else in the poem—that is, the archetypal, universally accessible moon and shadow—becomes stubbornly personal. The dancing moon emerges directly from the poet's perception; the shadow, from the poet's own physicality. Like that of our earlier poet, Wang Zhihuan, Li Bo's lyricism is utterly dependent on the visual discernment of others, notwithstanding his denial—no, his refusal—of their presence from as early as line 2. "Drinking alone with no one near" proclaims his physical and emotional isolation, even as he trains all eyes on himself. He asserts his impenetrable uniqueness, even as he proclaims his Daoist-inspired desire to dissolve into the unity of all things. And, in these contradictions, he is not merely being funny; he is intently being himself.

"Climbing Stork Tower" and "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" stand as vivid reminders of how the enduring pleasure of words can derive, not in opposition to the sensual satisfaction of vision, but in tandem with it: inviting us to train our eyes, both those of our flesh and those of our mind, to see the limits of all things, including those of seeing itself.