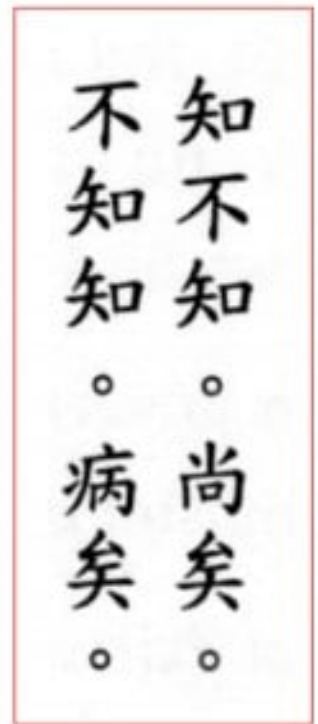


Numinous Experience

This post considers the nature of the human experience of the “numinous:” the sensation that one is in the presence of something beyond comprehension or control. The term is difficult to define. Other words that overlap in meaning are “sublime,” “sacred” and “transcendent” when referring to the source of the experience, and “awe,” “reverence” and “ecstasy” when describing the state of mind induced.

The numinous is an essential component of religion. However, the scriptures warn that understanding the numinous may not come easily. Verse 71 from the *Tao Te Ching* (*dào dé jīng*, The Book of the Way of Virtue) by Lao Tzu claims that



zhī bù zhī shàng yǐ
bù zhī zhī bìng yǐ

The Chinese characters go from top to bottom and from right to left. Red Pine (2009) provides a direct translation:

To understand yet not understand
is transcendence
Not to understand yet understand
is affliction

Perhaps the words mean that we should try to understand what

we do not know because not to do so leads to suffering. However, I may miss the sense as much as I mar the pronunciation when I try to speak the words.

Meaning of the “Numinous”

The word “numinous” derives from Latin word *numen*, meaning divinity, often the god or local presiding spirit of a particular place. The word ultimately comes from the Greek *neuein* for nodding, and may represent the barely perceptible nodding of a divine idol when it approves of being worshipped or grants a wish.

The numinous is essential to religion. William James (1902) suggested that religion

consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. (p 53)

He further suggested that this might derive from a feeling of being in the presence of something beyond the grasp of our normal five senses:

It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call ‘*something there,*’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed. (p. 58)

The term “numinous” was first used to describe this feeling by Rudolf Otto (1917). He considered it to be the state of a creature in the presence of its creator:

I propose to call it ‘creature-consciousness’ or creature-feeling. It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures (pp. 9-10).

He also described it as the *mysterium tremendum* – “terrible mystery.” The experience of the numinous varies:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its profane, non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. (pp. 12-13).

Otto described five “elements” of the numinous experience. First is “awefulness.” In the monotheistic religions this is also called the “fear of God.” Second is “overpoweringness,” or *majestas*. This invokes the humility of the creature in the presence of his creator. Third is “urgency.” This is the sense of an active will or living power in charge of the universe. Fourth is the idea that the numinous is “wholly other.” In mysticism this is described as the experience of the void or nothingness. The abyss is a recurring image. The numinous

has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one, and which at the same time arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind. (p. 29)

This idea leads to the fifth characteristic of the numinous: “fascination.” The experience entrances as well as bewilders. Otto considered this the Dionysiac element of the numinous, that which we describe as intoxication or ravishment.

C. S. Lewis (1940) used the idea of the numinous to explain how one can believe in God when the existence of suffering makes the concept of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God illogical. He described the feeling as being in the presence of a mighty spirit:

You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking – a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it – an emotion which might be expressed in Shakespeare's words "Under it my genius is rebuked." This feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the *Numinous*. (p. 14).

In recent years, cognitive psychologists have considered the numinous under the rubric of "awe." This combines cognitive uncertainty and intense emotion (Keltner & Haidt, 2003):

[A]we involves being in the presence of something powerful, along with associated feelings of submission. Awe also involves a difficulty in comprehension, along with associated feelings of confusion, surprise, and wonder.

A final aspect of the numinous that we might consider is the sense that one is being perceived as much as perceiving. This quotation is from Christian Wiman, a poet, in a book called *My Bright Abyss* (2013):

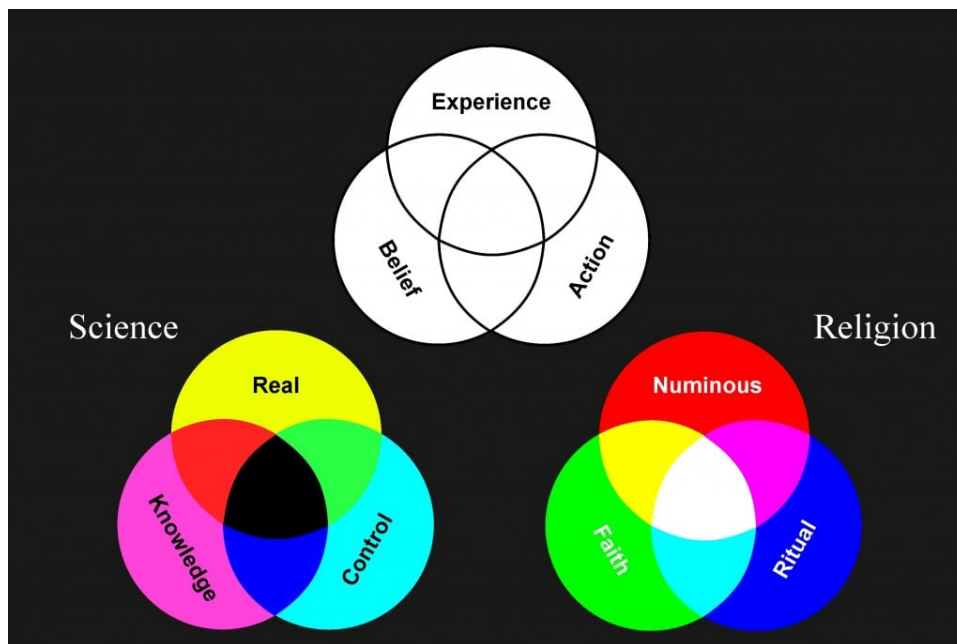
At such moments it is not only as if we were suddenly perceiving something in reality we had not perceived before, but as if we ourselves were being perceived. (p. 82)

In summary, the experience of the numinous combines three main characteristics

- (i) a sense of being in presence of something beyond comprehension or control.
- (ii) an intense emotional arousal, combining fear and wonder, like the feeling at the edge of an abyss.
- (iii) a state of uncertainty and a need to do something about it.

The Context of Numinous Experiences

The experience of the numinous parallels the experience of the real world. In general we experience something, derive from that experience a set of beliefs, and then act according to those beliefs in order to gain more experience. This overlapping sequence is illustrated in the following figure, the upper portion of which derives from a similar representation by Lewis-Williams and Pierce (2005, p.25).



When dealing with the real world we create knowledge that then allows us to act within that world. The experience of the numinous leads to faith and faith lead to practices that bring about further interaction with the numinous. For example, revelations can lead to conversion to a faith that promotes prayer and meditation to enhance the experience of the numinous.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1601, The Conversion on the Way to Damascus, Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

An intense experience of the numinous can lead to a complete re-thinking of one's life. On the road to Damascus the persecutor Saul had a vision that led to him becoming the Apostle Paul:

And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me.

And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? (Acts 22:6-7)

The nature of Saul's vision is not known. Some have suggested that it might have been epileptic in origin. Yet the effect is perhaps more important than the cause.

Visions are not as common in our present day as they seemed to in the past. Nowadays, we have only the artistic

representation of experiences from earlier times – the numinous at second-hand.

Once a religion is founded, behaviors are promoted to maintain the link to the original numinous experience. The mainstay of the Eastern religions is the process of meditation. The goal is to lose the self, to dissolve into the great sea of being. Western religions tend to prayer more than meditation. Communing with a personal God rather than dissolving in a Universal Force.



Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1652,
The Ecstasy of Saint
Teresa, Church of Santa
Maria della Vittoria, Rome

Though mainly peaceful, both prayer and meditation can become ecstatic. Saint Teresa's experience of the angel was as sexual as it was ascetic:

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my

very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God (Teresa of Avila, 1581, 29:17).

The numinous is not necessarily related to religion. The romantic revolution led to the search for the numinous in nature, often described as the “sublime:”

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

*Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern
Abbey, William Wordsworth, 1798*

The term “sublime” has multiple meanings (Saint-Girons, 2014). In the context of Wordsworth’s poem it is used in the manner of Burke in his to mean something that evokes both terror and delight.

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight,

and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience. (pp. 13-14).

The numinous can come from drugs as well as devotion. Wordsworth's friend Coleridge's visions of *Kubla Khan* were induced by opium. In the latter half of the twentieth century psychedelic experiences became a common way to seek the numinous:

Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin' ship
My senses have been stripped, my hands can't feel to grip
My toes too numb to step, wait only for my boot heels
To be wanderin'
I'm ready to go anywhere, I'm ready for to fade
Into my own parade, cast your dancing spell my way
I promise to go under it.
Bob Dylan, *Mr Tambourine Man*, 1967

The near-death experience is another way to the numinous. The anoxic brain is likely awash in psychedelic chemicals. Yet, there is no doubt of the experience, or the memory of an ascent toward the light.

Numinous experiences of whatever kind tend to make people change their thinking. This can lead to a religious belief system or faith. Faith fosters practices, such as meditation, prayer, and asceticism, that promote further numinous experiences.

Psychological Studies of the Numinous Experience

Keltner and Haidt (2003) reviewed our understanding of awe. Many different situations can elicit the mental state. We may awe in the presence of great natural beauty – sunsets, mountains, canyons, galaxies. Artistic creations can also elicit awe – paintings especially when large, music especially

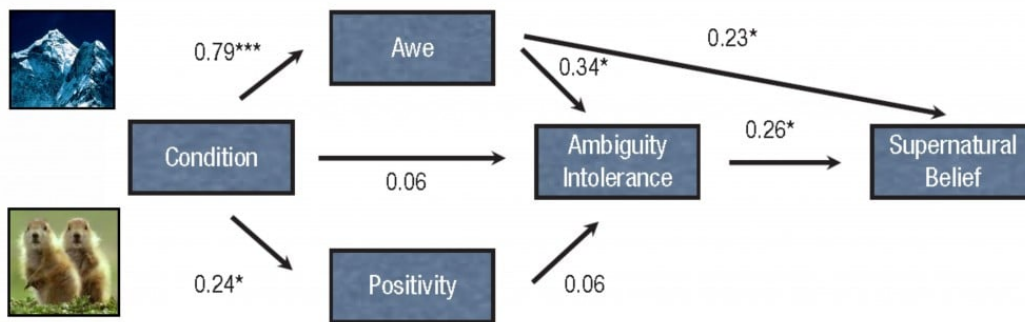
when loud, architecture especially when high. Great leaders and saints can trigger awe and devotion. Science can also bring forth the feeling – the ecstasy of theory rather than theology.

Awe has both emotional and cognitive characteristics. The two main emotions in the experience of awe are fear and wonder. Essential to the experience of awe is an incomplete understanding of what we are experiencing. The vastness of what we perceive overwhelms our cognitive ability. There is a pressing need to come to grips with the source of our confusion and uncertainty.

[A]we involves a need for accommodation, which may or may not be satisfied. The success of one's attempts at accommodation may partially explain why awe can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds).

The experience of the numinous often leads to a belief in supernatural powers. A recent psychological study by Valdesolo and Graham (2014) investigated how this comes about. Subjects were exposed to two conditions. In one they watched awe-inspiring videos of sunsets, mountains, canyons and galaxies. In another they watched humorous videos of animal behavior. Their emotional experience (awe, positivity or neutral) was quantified using simple scales.

Two questionnaires were administered. One determined the subject's ability to tolerate uncertainty: "I feel uncomfortable when I don't understand the reason why an event occurred in my life" Another determined the subject's belief in supernatural forces: "The events that occur in this world unfold according to God's or some other nonhuman entity's plan." A correlational analysis showed that awe induced by the experimental manipulation increased belief in supernatural forces in those that were less able to tolerate ambiguity.



The authors suggest that “in the moment of awe, some of the fear and trembling can be mitigated by perceiving an author’s hand in the experience.” In a related experiment, Kristin Laurin and her colleagues (2008) related the belief in God to the “desire to avoid the emotionally uncomfortable experience of perceiving the world as random and chaotic.” God is what we postulate to make the world make sense and to provide us comfort in the face of deep emotions.

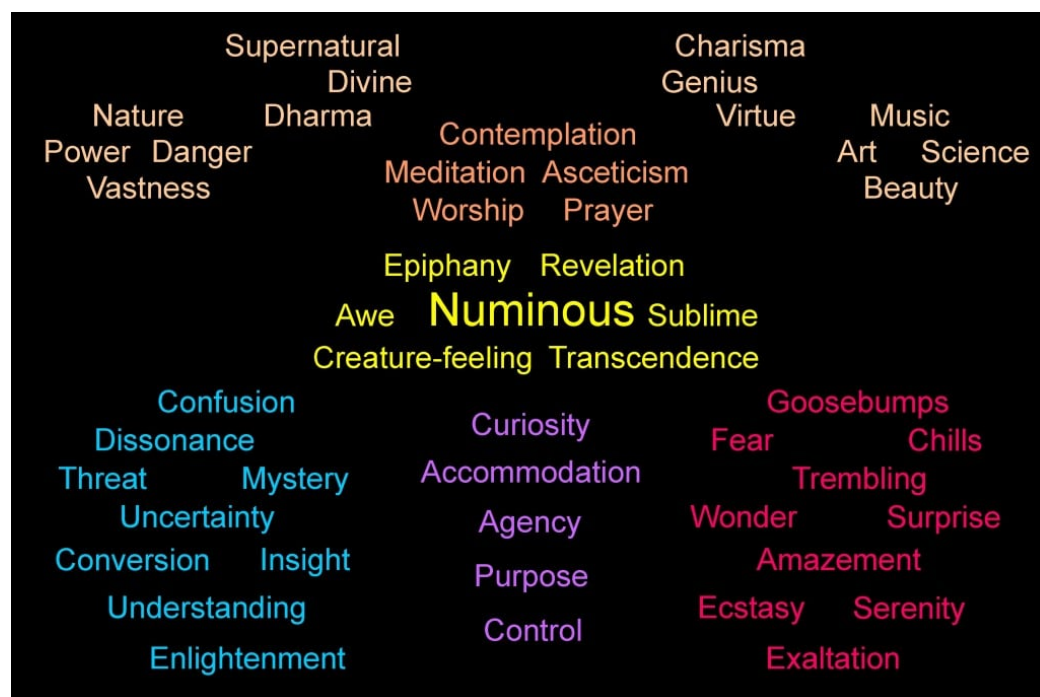
The numinous induces emotional as well as cognitive effects. However, we understand much less about our emotions than about our thoughts. The complex array of human emotions can be considered as mixtures of some primary states. Six basic emotions generally considered: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. Other emotions were considered as combinations of these primary states. Thus hatred may be a combination of anger and disgust. In a recent paper describing computer algorithms for recognizing human emotions from facial expressions, Du and his colleagues (2014) have suggested that awe is a combination of surprise and fear.

Awe may be more complex. The experience of the numinous involves attraction as well as withdrawal: orientation toward as well as flight from, heart rate slowing as opposed to speeding. The *mysterium tremendum* is often also considered the *mysterium fascinans*.

Some categorizations of emotion include curiosity: that which leads us to explore our environment. Curiosity (or “interest”) is an emotional state, personality trait or motivational drive that becomes manifest in a situation where there is either a lack of arousal (boredom) or a disparity between what one experiences and what one understands (information-deprivation) (Litman, 2005). Curiosity is prominent in children. The main facial aspects of curiosity are the fixed stare, widened eyelids and pursed lips (Reeve, 1993). I suggest that the numinous induces curiosity as well as fear and uncertainty.



The numinous is difficult to describe – indeed it is often called ineffable, that which passes understanding. In the dark night of the soul a cloud of words appears as a possible summary of the psychology of the numinous:



The experience of the numinous can be induced (pale yellow) by natural beauty, by supernatural effects, by charismatic people and by works of art. It can be fostered by various religious

behaviors (orange). The numinous induces both cognitive and emotional responses. The main cognitive effects (blue) are confusion and uncertainty. The main emotional effects (light red) are fear and wonder. We must try to cope with these effects through processes of accommodation (purple) so that we might reach enlightenment and exaltation.

Neuroscientific Studies of the Numinous

Unfortunately, we have not been able to determine specific brain concomitants of the numinous experience. Many regions are active and these interact in as yet unknown ways. The three main areas are the prefrontal regions, especially those active during the processing of theory of mind, the temporal regions, especially those related to emotions, and the parietal regions, where different perceptual modalities come together.

Neurological approaches to the numinous have involved studies of both epilepsy and brain lesions. The numinous experience may be part of the aura of an epileptic attack. Fyodor Dostoyevsky suffered from epilepsy, and we presume that the seizures of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* reflect his own experience:

His mind, his heart were lit up with an extraordinary light; all his agitation, all his doubts, all his worries were as if placated at once, resolved in a sort of sublime tranquility, filled with serene harmonious joy, and hope, filled with reason and ultimate cause.

Although the origin of Dostoyevsky's seizures is unknown, most consider them as temporal lobe epilepsy. Surveys show that about 4 % of patients with temporal lobe epilepsy have religious or mystical experience either in the aura or in the post-ictal state (Devinsky & Lai, 2008). The experience is much more likely pleasant than not.

Attempts to trigger the numinous experience in normal subjects by magnetic stimulation of the temporal lobe (Persinger, 2002) have not been replicated (Granqvist et al., 2005). The stimulus levels were likely too low to have any neuronal effect, and the numinous experiences reported were probably related to suggestion rather than to stimulation.

Olaf Blanke and his colleagues (2004) studied five patients who reported out-of-body experiences and found lesions in the temporo-parietal region of the brain. This region where the different perceptual systems come together may be important in the representation of the self within a world. Losing oneself and becoming swept away in a more universal experience may therefore result from damage to these regions. This area of the cortex is very sensitive to anoxia since it is at the furthest reaches of the cortical vascular supply. Some have suggested that the prophets who received divine revelations when they went up into the mountains might have been particularly susceptible to hypoxia (Arzy et al., 2005). A similar hypothesis can be made for the near-death experience.

The *electrical activity* of the human brain changes markedly during the numinous experience. Both alpha and theta activity significantly increase during meditation (e.g. Cahn & Polich, 2006; Cahn et al., 2013; Tsai et al, 2013). The problem is that we do not really know what these rhythms mean in terms of brain processing. Furthermore, we do not know whether the rhythmic changes are an essential part of the meditation process or simply a side-effect. The alpha rhythm is likely an idling activity generated when the visual cortex is not processing information. Theta activity can occur in drowsiness and in emotional arousal. In the sixties, seekers of the numinous trained their brains to increase their alpha rhythm. Whether or not such biofeedback brought forth revelations independently of the pharmaceuticals that were its frequent concomitants remains unknown. As well as changing the ongoing EEG rhythms, meditation also alters the electrical activity

evoked or induced by external stimuli (Cahn et al., 2013). Again we have difficulty determining what this means for the meditative state because we do not really know what these changes indicate.

Functional MRI studies of the numinous experience are difficult. Mystic visions may not come easily in a multi-Tesla magnetic field. Many experiments have occurred and many manipulations have been made (a non-critical review is Fingelkurts & Fingelkurts, 2009). Some studies are woefully inadequate in terms of their design and analysis. Others are intriguing but founder on the difficulty of setting up experimental manipulations that can lead to a sense of the numinous within the confines of the magnet. Two sets of studies illustrate the problems.

Beauregard and his colleagues studied Carmelite nuns as they recalled mystical experiences (Beauregard et al., 2006, 2008). They found multiple regions active in comparison to the resting state, most prominently in the inferior frontal, temporal and parietal regions.

Kapogiannis and his colleagues used a much less effective manipulation – subjects either evaluated religious statements or discriminated fonts (Kapogiannis et al., 2009, 2014). Their only significant finding related to a belief in God's lack of involvement in the world. The brain only betrayed its lack of faith.

Perhaps the numinous is in the interactions of networks rather than the activity of neurons. Brain connectivity is likely as important as brain activity (Yeo et al., 2011). A recent study of meditation by Xu and his colleagues (2014) showed activity mainly in the default, frontoparietal, and limbic networks. The default network involving frontal, parietal and temporal regions is typically active during resting control conditions when the brain is not involved in the experimental task. Intriguingly, the default network was more active during

meditation than during the normal resting state. Perhaps the default mode of the human cerebral cortex allows the experience of the numinous, at least in the sense of the brain freely thinking without external constraint. When we withdraw from the world and look inward, our thoughts often turn to matters of philosophy. As Alfred North Whitehead (1926) said “Religion is the art and theory of the internal life of man.”

Overview

Although the numinous experience is the focus of scripture and the basis for religious belief, we have little knowledge of how it occurs. We have some understanding of the psychology that underlies the experience. Emotions of fear and wonder combine with a cognitive state of confusion and uncertainty. The outcome of the experience can be some accommodation of our thinking to allow a larger view of the world. We know very little about how the brain mediates the numinous experience. This is unfortunate since it is so important. It is what changes lives.



Rainer Maria Rilke wrote about his experience of the numinous while looking at a torso of Apollo in the Louvre. His poem *Archaischer Torso Apollos* (Rilke, 1908) concludes:

denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.

for there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

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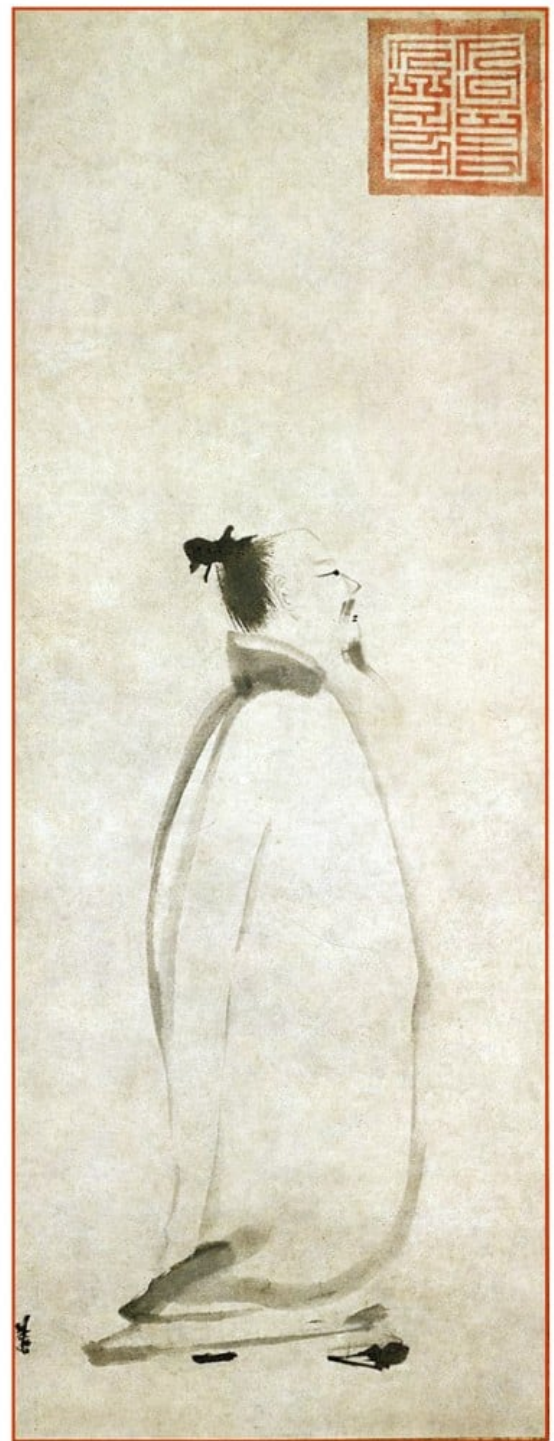
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Wine-Cup Immortal

Li Bai (701-762 CE), also known as Li Po, was one of the famous Tang dynasty poets who called themselves the *Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup* (an irreverent allusion to the Eight Immortals of Taoism). Li Bai wrote prolifically, and over 1000 of his poems survive. Much of his life is mythical, the stuff of novels rather than of history (Elegant, 1997). He was a devotee of Taoism, a fine swordsman, and a great lover of wine. In his youth he served the emperor. After becoming involved in one of the rebellions, however, he was exiled from the court. He then spent much of his later life wandering “beyond the gorges” in the hinterland of Imperial China. Legend has it that he died drunkenly trying to embrace the moon’s reflection in the Yangtze River, but his death was perhaps a suicide. The illustrated portrait (from the Tokyo National Museum) was painted by Liang Kai











in the early 13th century. The seal in the upper right corner signals that the painting was owned by Anigo, an important official in the Imperial court of the Yuan dynasty.

Appreciating Chinese poetry requires seeing as well as hearing. The beauty of the calligraphy is as important to the poetry as the music of the words. The poems are therefore difficult to assess without some feeling for the characters in which they are written, since these allude to meanings beyond

those directly expressed by the spoken words. This post therefore begins with a few notes on Chinese characters.

Some Chinese characters derive from pictograms (simplified images):

Pictogram	Character	Sound	Meaning
	日	rì	sun
	月	yuè	moon
	山	shān	mountain
	水	shuǐ	water
	雨	yǔ	rain
	目	mù	eye
	人	rén	person
	木	mù	tree

Other characters derive from ideograms (graphic representations of an idea):

上	shàng	above	下	xià	below
中	zhōng	middle	不	bù	not
一	yī	one	二	èr	two
三	sān	three	五	wǔ	five

Most characters are formed by combining other characters. Some of the combinations are based on the meaning of the components; others are based on their sound:

木 (mù, tree)	+	木 (mù, tree)	=	林	lín	forest
口 (kǒu, mouth)	+	"away"	=	言	yán	words
日 (rì, sun)	+	月 (yuè, moon)	=	明	míng	bright
女 (nǚ, woman)	+	子 (zǐ, child)	=	好	hǎo	good



In Li Bai's name, the character Li means "Plum" – a tree on top with many children (blossoms) below. The character Bai means "white" – it originally comes from a pictogram of an acorn (which is white inside).

Chinese poetry has a long history. *The Book of Poetry* was compiled around 600 BCE. Confucius (551-479 BCE) made it an essential part of the education of a scholar or statesman. By the time of Li Bai court poetry had become quite regular – common forms were an octet or a quatrain of five-syllable lines, with every second line rhyming. The following quatrain is one of Li Bai's most famous poems. The English translation is by Arthur Cooper and the Chinese calligraphy is by Shui Chien-Tung (Cooper 1973):

靜夜思
牀前明月光
疑是地上霜
舉頭望明月
低頭思故鄉

Quiet Night Thoughts

Before my bed there is bright moonlight
So that it seems like frost on the ground;
Lifting my head I watch the bright moon,
Lowering my head I dream that I'm home.

Chinese poetry is generally written from top to bottom and from right to left. For simplicity, the following representation of the poem together with the word for word translation presents the characters from left to right to facilitate listening to the sound and following the translations.

靜夜思	Quiet Night Thoughts					jìng yè sī				
床前明月光	bed	front	bright	moon	shine	chuáng	qián	míng	yuè	guāng
疑是地上霜	suspect	is	ground	top	frost	yí	shì	dì	shàng	shuāng
舉頭望明月	raise	head	gaze	bright	moon	jǔ	tóu	wàng	míng	yuè
低頭思故鄉	lower	head	think	old	home	dī	tóu	sī	gù	xiāng

The original Chinese for Quiet Night Thoughts is from Zong-Qi Cai's anthology (2008). The reading of the poem in Chinese (by an unknown reader) is from the sound files associated with the anthology:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/lipo_quiet-night-thoughts.mp3

The following is an octet of Li Bai that celebrates the joys of drinking by moonlight:

花間一壺酒	flowers	among	one	pot	wine	huā jiān yī hú jiǔ
獨酌無相親	alone	drink	no	mutual	dear	dú zhuó wú xiāng qīn
舉杯邀明月	lift	cup	invite	bright	moon	jǔ bēi yāo míng yuè
對影成三人	face	shadow	become	three	men	duì yǐng chéng sān rén
月既不解飲	moon	not	not	understand	drink	yuè jì bù jiě yǐn
影徒隨我身	shadow	vainly	follow	my	body	yǐng tú suí wǒ shēn
暫伴月將影	temporary	with	moon	with	shadow	zàn bàn yuè jiāng yǐng
行樂須及春	practise	pleasure	must	catch	spring	xíng lè xū jí chūn
我歌月徘徊	I	sing	moon	linger	to-and-fro	wǒ gē yuè pái huí
我舞影零亂	I	dance	shadow	scatter	disorderly	wǒ wǔ yǐng líng luàn
醒時同交歡	wake	time	together	exchange	joy	xǐng shí tóng jiāo huān
醉後各分散	rapt	after	each	separate	disperse	zuì hòu gè fēn sǎn
永結無情遊	always	tie	no	passion	friendship	yǒng jié wú qíng yóu
相期邈雲漢	mutual	expect	distant	cloud	river	xiāng qī miǎo yún hàn

A translation of the poem by Arthur Waley (1919) reads

Drinking Alone by Moonlight

A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;
Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,
For he, with my shadow, will make three men.

The moon, alas, is no drinker of wine;
Listless, my shadow creeps about at my side.
Yet with the moon as friend and the shadow as slave
I must make merry before the Spring is spent.
To the songs I sing the moon flickers her beams;
In the dance I weave my shadow tangles and breaks.
While we were sober, three shared the fun;
Now we are drunk, each goes their way.
May we long share our odd, inanimate feast,
And meet at last on the Cloudy River of the sky.

Chinese poetry has both rhyme and rhythm (Liu, 1962; Cai, 2008). The rhymes often come at the end of every second line (e.g. in *Drinking Alone by Moonlight*). Rhymes are mainly determined by the vowels, and less related to the attendant consonants. However, many of the rhymes depend on pronunciation that was current in the time that the poem was written, and may not always be apparent in the way the poem sounds nowadays. Chinese is a tonal language with the vowels showing unchanging, descending, descending-ascending, and ascending pitches. These changes are represented in the accents above the pinyin transliterations. The first type of vowel has a longer duration than the others. The rhythm of the poetry depends on both the duration of the vowel and the different changes in pitch.

Recitations of the poem *Drinking Alone by Moonlight* are available in both English and Chinese at Librivox.

Li Bai also invented new poetic forms. The following poem has lines of three, five and seven words (translation and calligraphy in Cooper, 1973).

三五七言
秋風清秋月明落葉聚還散
此時此夜難為情
此時此夜難為情

Three five seven words

The autumn wind is light,
The autumn moon is bright;

Fallen leaves gather but then disperse,
A cold crow roosts but again he stirs.

I think of you, and wonder when I'll see you again?
At such an hour, on such a night, cruel is love's pain!

The translation of Chinese poetry is difficult. The first translations of Chinese poetry into a European language were in French by Judith Gautier and the Marquis d'Hervey Saint-

Denis in the middle of the 19th Century. These were further translated from French into German by Hans Bethge, who published *Die Chinese Flöte* (Chinese Flute) in 1907.

Gustav Mahler adapted seven of the Bethge poems for his 1911 song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*. The following are excerpts from the beginning of two of the songs, translated from the German to English. The tenor is Fritz Wunderlich; Otto Klemperer conducts the New Philharmonia Orchestra; the recording is by EMI in 1967.

Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde (Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow)

The wine already beckons from the golden goblet,
but don't drink just yet – first, I'll sing you a song!
The song of sorrow shall sound out
in laughter in your soul. When sorrow draws near,
the gardens of the soul lie wasted,>
both joy and song wilt and die.>
Dark is life, dark is death.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler_wunderlich_trinklied_beginning.mp3

Von der Jugend (Of Youth)

In the middle of the little lake
stands a pavilion made of green
and white porcelain.
Like a tiger's back
the bridge of jade arches
across to the pavilion.
Friends sit in the little house,
beautifully dressed, drinking, chatting;
some are writing down verses.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler_wunderlich_jugend-beginning.mp3

The “translations” are full of mistakes. The line “Dark is Life, dark is Death” (Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod) is an interpolation that fits with the idea of Li Bai’s poem but is not so directly stated in the original Chinese. The porcelain pavilion is actually the pavilion owned by someone named Tao (which can also mean “porcelain”). Bethge called his poems *Nachdictungen* (recreations). The Mahler Archives has a wonderful website that describes the changes in the translations leading to *Das Lied von der Erde*.

The first major translations of Chinese poetry into English were by Ezra Pound (1885-1972) in his 1915 book *Cathay*. At the time, Pound knew no Chinese, and his translations were based on the notes that Ernest Fenellosa, an American art historian working in Tokyo, had made from discussions with two Japanese professors (Mori and Ariga). These notes were given posthumously to Pound by Fenellosa’s widow. Despite his lack of any understanding of the originals, Pound’s translations are true and forceful (Yip, 1969). Most of the poems in *Cathay* are by Rihaku – the way that the characters of Li Bai’s name are pronounced in Japanese. As well as the *hiragana* and *katakana* symbols (*hiragana* and *katakana*), Japanese writing also uses many Chinese characters (*kanji*), but these are pronounced differently from the Chinese.

The following is one of Li Bai’s poems that became famous with the Pound translation. Pound combined the poem with a summary of Fenellosa’s notes that has its own cryptic beauty

The Jewelled Stair Grievance

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 the 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.

More recent translations are by David Hinton (1996):

Night long on the jade staircase, white
dew appears, soaks through gauze stockings.
She lets down crystalline blinds, gazes out
through jewel lacework at the autumn moon.

and by Charles Egan (in Z-Q Cai, 2008);

On jade stairs, the rising white dew
Through the long night pierces silken hose
Retreating inside, she lowers crystal shades
And stares at the glimmering autumn moon.

The story behind the poem is only hinted at. A lady at the palace in love with the emperor finds herself no longer in his fancy. The autumn moon suggests the cooling of their summer passion. The crystal curtains suggest that the scene is viewed through tears. Pound puts the poem into the first person. Though not indicated in the original, this personal point of view accentuates the longing and the regret. Another translation that follows Pound's use of the first person is available on Mark Alexander's webpage which provides translations for many different Chinese poems.

Discerning the true meaning of a poem through different translations is a little like looking for the numinous through different scriptures.

Another of Pound's translations records the story of a young woman, married in youth and innocence, learning to love her husband and finding out that love can bring sorrow as well as happiness.

The River Merchant's Wife

While my hair was still cut straight across my
forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse;
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the lookout?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river of swirling
eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different
mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden –
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the
river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you

As far as Cho-fo-Sa.

Li Bai was very musical and many of his poems deal with the sounds of the lyre or the flute. Harry Partch composed 17 *lyrics of Li Po* in the early 1930s using the translations of Shigeyoshi Obata (1928). He tried to remove the music from the tonality conventions of the Western traditions. The following is one of the lyrics. It is intoned by Stephan Kalm (who provides the flute sounds as well as the words) with accompaniment on tenor violin by Ted Mook. The recording is by Tzadik, 1995.

Whence comes this voice of sweet bamboo?
Flying in the dark?
It flies with the spring wind,
Hovering over the city of Lo.
How memories of home come back tonight!
Hark! the plaintive tune of "Willow Breaking",p>

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/partch_lipo_flute.mp3

("Willow-Breaking" is the name of a sad folk song.)

Li Bai spent some time in the monasteries that were scattered through the hills of China, and became adept at meditation, or *zazen*. One of his poems (translated by Sam Hamill, 2000) gives the essence of this process. Jing Ting mountain is near Xuancheng city in the Anhui province of China. Further notes on the poem and a version of the poem in song are available on the webpage of Shirley Yiping Zhang.

Zazen on Ching-t'ing Mountain

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

独坐敬亭山

dú zuò jìng tíng shān alone sit Jing Ting mountain

众鸟高飞尽

zhòng niǎo gāo fēi jìn many birds high fly end

孤云独去闲

gū yún dú qù xián solitary cloud alone go free

相看两不厌

xiāng kàn liǎng bú yàn each-other watch two not tired

只有敬亭山

zhǐ yǒu jìng tíng shān nothing-but is Jing Ting mountain

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