

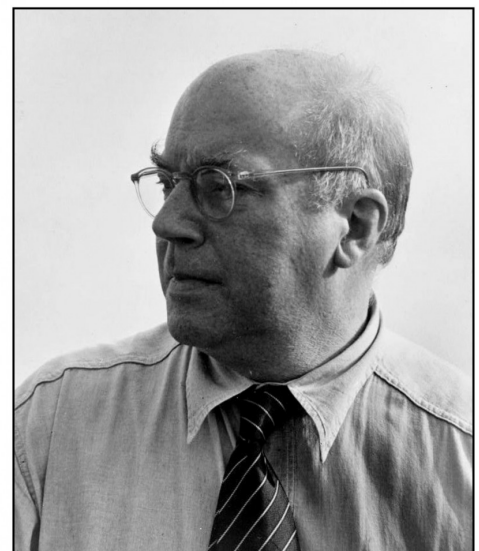
Cosmos Mariner

The poet Conrad Aiken was born in 1889 in Savannah, Georgia. When Aiken was 11 years old, his father, a respected surgeon, shot his wife and then committed suicide. Trying to distance himself from the experience in the third person, Conrad later recounted his discovery of the bodies:

[A]fter the desultory early morning quarrel, came the half stifled scream, and then the sound of his father's voice counting three, and the two loud pistol-shots; and he had tiptoed into the dark room, where the two bodies lay motionless and apart, and, finding them dead, found himself possessed of them forever. (Aiken, 1952, p 302).

Aiken was taken into the care of his aunt, Jane Delano Kempton, in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and later lived with an uncle, William Tillinghast, a college librarian at Harvard. After graduating from Middlesex Preparatory School in Concord, Aiken was admitted to Harvard University in 1907, where he became a friend of T. S. Eliot.

After leaving Harvard in 1912, Aiken decided to devote his life to poetry. Though much more prolific than Eliot, Aiken never achieved his colleague's popularity. Many of Aiken's poems are long and discursive. They might perhaps have benefited from an editor like Ezra Pound, who was so effective in separating out the gold in Eliot's verse (Eliot, 1922/1971). Aiken published more than 30 volumes of poetry, several novels, many short stories and two autobiographical memoirs. Despite receiving the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, and serving as the Consultant in Poetry for the



Library of Congress, Aiken became “one of the country’s best-known and least-read poets and men of letters” (Butscher, 1988, p xvii).

Aiken was a frequent reviewer for newspapers and literary magazines, providing critical evaluations of the new modernist poets. He even anonymously reviewed himself:

It is difficult to place Conrad Aiken in the poetic firmament, so difficult that one sometimes wonders whether he deserves a place there at all ... The musical symbolism, almost obsessively pursued, develops a melodic line only to be broken in upon by a matter-of-factness which in the context appears only malicious. It is questionable whether this sort of counterpoint of ideas can ever be successful in verse. The unity of effect is jeopardized; the reader is more often perplexed than pleased.” (Aiken, 1958, pp 120-121, quotation is from a review, correctly entitled *Schizophrenia*, initially published in 1917 in the *Chicago News*).

After spending some time in England, Aiken returned to North America, settling in Brewster in an old Cape Cod farmhouse near Sheepfold Hill. The hill played a prominent role in the poem *A Letter from Li Po* and became the title of Aiken’s subsequent book of poetry). Aiken’s home was described by Wilbur when he visited Aiken for an interview:

The house, called Forty-one Doors, dates largely from the eighteenth century; a typical old Cape Cod farmhouse, the rooms are small but many, opening in all directions off what must originally have been the most important room, the kitchen. The house is far enough from the center of town to be reasonably quiet even at the height of the summer, and it is close enough to the north Cape shore for easy trips to watch the gulls along the edges of relatively unspoiled inlets. (Wilbur, 1968).

In 1962 Aiken finally returned to Savannah, where he lived next door to his parents' former house. He died there in 1973. His gravestone is a bench beside his parents' grave. His epitaph reads "Cosmos Mariner Destination Unknown. Give my Love to the World."

Aiken was deeply influenced at Harvard by George Santayana (1863-1952), finding inspiration in his books *The Sense of Beauty* (1896) and *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900). He took Santayana's advanced course on the philosopher-poets (Lucretius, Dante and Goethe), lectures that Santayana would later publish as *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910).

Aiken also became fascinated by Freud's analysis of the unconscious and interpretation of dreams. He read reports of Freud's 1909 lectures at Clark University and, despite only having rudimentary German, attempted to understand some of Freud's books. His autobiographical works *Great Circle* (1933) and *Ushant* (1952) are works of intense personal psychoanalysis. Freud, himself, admired *Great Circle* and kept a copy of it on his desk (Wilbur, 1968).

Another major influence on Aiken's life and thinking was his maternal grandfather William James Potter (1829-1893), a Unitarian minister and one of the founders of the Free Religious Association. Aiken only met him once when he was four years old, but the kindly old man made a lasting impression. In his memory, their afternoon together became a laying on of hands:

thee must now and hereafter do *my* thinking for *me*, thee must be the continuance of me, thee will forever, even if intermittently, or only if every so often *consciously*, stand in the ghost of a pulpit, in the ghost of a church, in the ghost of our beloved New Bedford (Aiken, 1952, p 112).

Aiken kept the two books of Potter's sermons always with him,

and many of their themes recur in his poetry. One of the posthumously published lectures concerned

Religion as the affirmation of God in human nature; religion as the proclamation of the veritable incarnation of the Eternal Power, with its attributes of intelligence and moral purpose in the human faculties, not by supernatural, exceptional inspiration, but naturally and inherently there in the very substance, fibre, and organism of the faculties themselves; religion as the organized presence, power, and life of God in the human soul. (Potter, 1895, pp 177-178)

Aiken continued his grandfather's thinking. He became a poet of the human consciousness, attempting to put into words the divinity evolving within the human mind.

This post will comment briefly on Aiken's poem *A Letter from Li Po* (1952). The poem is in 12 sections and takes up 21 pages. I shall consider only the first two sections; any more would exceed the reasonable limits for a post. The complete poem is available at Poemhunter and on the Dutch LiPo website (together with some Chinese paintings). I am also much indebted to Ian Kluge for his insightful evaluation of the poem – *At Home in Exile: "The Liquid I"* – though this remains unpublished. Other evaluations are listed in at the end of the post. The recordings of Aiken reading the poem are from 1955. They are taken from a vinyl recording now long out of print.

A Letter from Li Po was written in Cape Cod. The opening lines describe the clarity of an autumn afternoon in New England before shifting to the China of Li Po (Li Bai in pinyin romanization), one of the Immortals of the Wine Cup. Aiken is invoking his predecessor, trying to understand the process of poetry as it was then and as it is now: the spelling down of meaning on the page, or as he says later in the poem (Section V) transforming "all things to a hoop of flame where through tigers of meaning leap:"

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Fanfare of northwest wind, a bluejay wind
announces autumn, and the Equinox
rolls back blue bays to a far afternoon.
Somewhere beyond the Gorge Li Po is gone,
looking for friendship or an old love's sleeve
or writing letters to his children, lost,
and to his children's children, and to us.
What was his light? of lamp or moon or sun?
Say that it changed, for better or for worse,
sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk
a slant of witch-light; on the pure text
a slant of genius; emptying mind and heart
for winecups and more winecups and more words.
What was his time? Say that it was a change,
but constant as a changing thing may be,
from chicory's moon-dark blue down the taut scale
to chicory's tenderest pink, in a pink field
such as imagination dreams of thought.
But of the heart beneath the winecup moon
the tears that fell beneath the winecup moon
for children lost, lost lovers, and lost friends,
what can we say but that it never ends?
Even for us it never ends, only begins.
Yet to spell down the poem on her page,
margining her phrases, parsing forth
the sevenfold prism of meaning, up the scale
from chicory pink to blue, is to assume
Li Po himself: as he before assumed
the poets and the sages who were his.
Like him, we too have eaten of the word:
with him are somewhere lost beyond the Gorge:
and write, in rain, a letter to lost children,
a letter long as time and brief as love.

Aiken was a master of sounds. Alliterations such as “back blue bays” and “sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk” are entrancing. The repetition of “beneath the winecup moon” sounds like an incantation. The multiple l-sounds last two lines of this section brings to mind the liquid noise of falling rain.

Aiken is very precise in his imagery. In the first line he mentions a “bluejay wind.” Bluejays do not always migrate, but they often move southward along the Atlantic seaboard in the fall. Sometimes there are flocks of a hundred or more. They appear as if the northwest wind had just blown them down from Canada.

Aiken’s description of the petals of the chicory flower changing from “moon-dark blue” to “tenderest pink” made me aware of colors that I had not previously noticed.



As shown in the illustration on the right, the central origin of the blue petals can be a very light pink.

Aiken was a philosophical poet and his poetry is very concerned with ideas. In this first section he asks about the inspiration of Li Po: “What was his light?” His focuses on the idea that everything changes: “Say that it changed.” The poet, be he Li Po or Conrad Aiken, must somehow determine what is

constant in this continual flux. Kluge suggests that the poem

crystallizes his beliefs about the individual's beliefs in a Heraclitean universe in which relentless change constantly subverts our sense of identity.

Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher whose writings survive only in fragments quoted by others. His philosophy revolved about the idea of change. Nothing is ever the same: "one cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you first stepped has flowed on" (translation by Davenport, 1995, p. 160). Another fragment is much in keeping with the view of consciousness proposed by Aiken and his grandfather: "No matter how many ways you try, you cannot find a boundary to consciousness, so deep in every direction does it extend" (p 162)

How do we deal with this continual change? Poetry is one way. Aiken characterizes the poet as one who has "eaten of the word." The allusion is primarily to the Christian Eucharist wherein the wafer and the wine are taken by the communicant to represent the body and blood of Christ, who called himself the Word. But the word of Aiken's poem is actual word as well as philosophical *logos*. The poet experiences the joy of using words to make thoughts more memorable and meaningful. This is the experience of Mark Strand in his poem *Eating Poetry* (1969, p. 3)

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.
I have been eating poetry.

In Aiken's poem, the words come from the exiled Li Po. Late in his life he was banished from the court and made his way toward western China (Waley, 1950). Beyond the gorges of the Yangtze River was a land without the sophisticated pleasures of the court, dotted with occasional temples for meditation and inns for drinking. It was a place for solitude. Li Po

remembers his family but realizes his intense loneliness. The second section of the poem considers the state of the individual consciousness:

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And yet not love, not only love. Not caritas
or only that. Nor the pink chicory love,
deep as it may be, even to moon-dark blue,
in which the dragon of his meaning flew
for friends or children lost, or even
for the beloved horse, for Li Po's horse:
not these, in the self's circle so embraced:
too near, too dear, for pure assessment: no,
a letter crammed and creviced, crannied full,
storied and stored as the ripe honeycomb
with other faith than this. As of sole pride
and holy loneliness, the intrinsic face
worn by the always changing shape between
end and beginning, birth and death.
How moves that line of daring on the map?
Where was it yesterday, or where this morning
when thunder struck at seven, and in the bay
the meteor made its dive, and shed its wings,
and with them one more Icarus? Where struck
that lightning-stroke which in your sleep you saw
wrinkling across the eyelid? Somewhere else?
But somewhere else is always here and now.
Each moment crawls that lightning on your eyelid:
each moment you must die. It was a tree
that this time died for you: it was a rock
and with it all its local web of love:
a chimney, spilling down historic bricks:
perhaps a skyful of Ben Franklin's kites.
And with them, us. For we must hear and bear
the news from everywhere: the hourly news,

infinitesimal or vast, from everywhere.

Occasional end-rhymes occur in this section: “blue” and “flew,” “bear” and “everywhere.” The alliteration persists: “a letter crammed and creviced, crannied full.” Sometimes Aiken juxtaposes words with similar sounds but different meanings: “storied and stored as the ripe honeycomb.” Dickey (1968, p. 61) calls these effects “verbal jugglery.” Bringing ideas together on the basis of how words sound is an indirect way to force meaning. In this case it works: the letter from Li Po contains the stories that have been stored up in his poems.

Li Po’s horse is a reference to a story that the Emperor had rewarded the poet with one of his finest horses (Waley, 1950, p. 63). With his banishment. Li Po had been deprived of family, court and horse. He was left with only consciousness and poetry.

His state was one of “sole pride and holy loneliness.” Despite the love of others, experience ultimately comes down to the individual consciousness, which must make sense of an ever-changing, ever-dying world. Aiken characterizes this process using an image from the war – the lines upon a map marking the advances of an army: “How moves that line of daring on the map?”

Though limited to one person’s mind, the human consciousness can partake of all things – “the news from everywhere.” We are part and parcel of everything we have experienced.

I have commented briefly on only the first two sections of the poem. Later sections tell us further stories of Li Po and his poems. Comparisons are made to Aiken’s experience in Cape Cod. The last section takes place in the South Yarmouth Quaker



Graveyard where one of Aiken's ancestors, Cousin Abiel Akin (in the old spelling) is buried. Abiel saw the same stars as Li Po described in his poems many years before. Human consciousness continues even though the individual dies. The poem concludes with the idea that the creative consciousness can understand the changes we experience and overcome the idea of death. From the graveyard Aiken writes

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/lipo-aiken-XII-ending.mp3>

In this small mute democracy of stones
is it Abiel or Li Po who lies
and lends us against death our speech?
They are the same, and it is both who teach.
The poets and the prophecies are ours:
and these are with us as we turn, in turn,
the leaves of love that fill the Book of Change.

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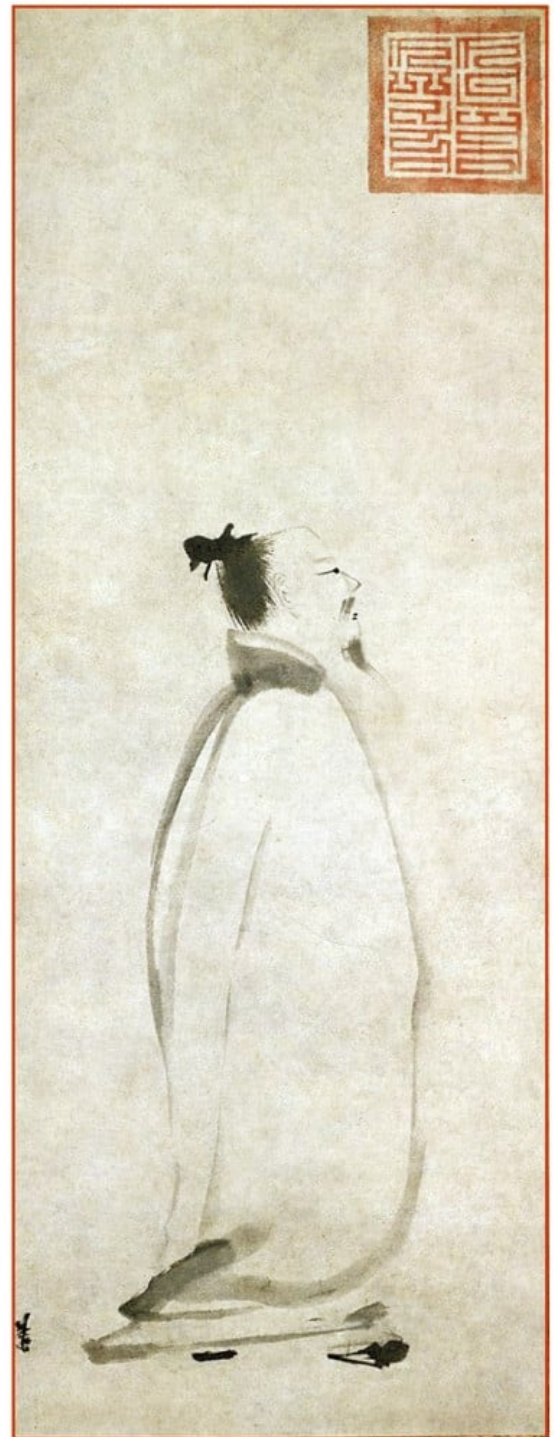
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Wine-Cup Immortal

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:

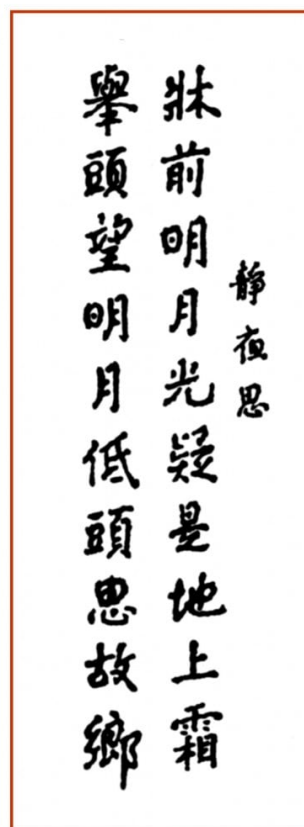
木 (mù, tree)	+	木 (mù, tree)	=	林	lín	forest
口 (kǒu, mouth)	+	"away"	=	言	yán	words
日 (rì, sun)	+	月 (yuè, moon)	=	明	míng	bright
女 (nǚ, woman)	+	子 (zǐ, child)	=	好	hǎo	good



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):



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

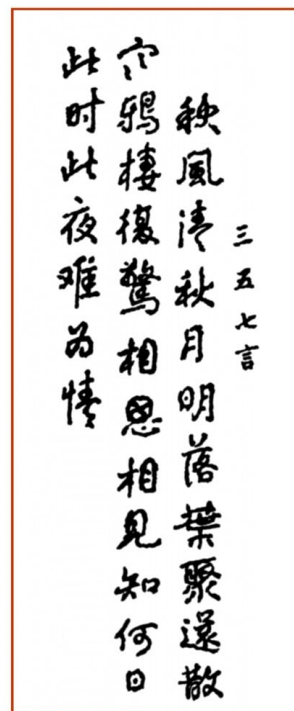
A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;
 Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,
 For he, with my shadow, will make three men.
 The moon, alas, is no drinker of wine;
 Listless, my shadow creeps about at my side.
 Yet with the moon as friend and the shadow as slave
 I must make merry before the Spring 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).



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.

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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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