

J. GILL HOLLAND

Teasing out an English Translation from a Classical Chinese Poem

Wine Poem No. 1

The traffic where I built is terrible
but I don't hear a thing, not a cart or a horse.

You ask me, "How can that be?"
When the heart is far away, nobody is at home.

I pick never-die 'mums by the hedge to the east
and keep an eye on South Mountain.

At dusk its mountain air makes me promises.
Birds flock in homeward flight.

There was something true in all of this,
but when I started to explain, I'd already lost the words.

This poem by T'ao Ch'ien (T'ao yuan-ming) (365-427) is cast in the familiar question-answer form, and the question in line three is answered by a hard line to pin down. William Acker translates it: "When the heart is far the place of itself is distant."¹ He calls attention to its operative force by enclosing it in quotation marks within the poem.

James Robert Hightower puts it thus: "With the mind detached, one's place becomes remote."²

Mind travel is common the world over in lyric poetry. His mind is on South Mountain, which stood for longevity. T'ao Ch'ien is picking chrysanthemums, which

stand for long life and, as Hightower reminds us in his notes, were used as a life-prolonging medicine.

Judgment calls are of course made every moment in translating. In putting classical Chinese poetry into English one is usually forced into choosing a verb tense, for the verb tense is not supplied in the original. This poem could be put in the past tense or the future tense, not just the present tense as given in the translation above. Number may not be given, so a noun can be singular or plural. Pronouns are often omitted too. These conditions help universalise the poem in Chinese. The English translator may insert tense, number and pronouns and hence restrict and straiten the poem, or leave words out and make the English poem more of an imagist work. The latter choice may explain in part the imagist style popular during the first decades of the last century when the Chinese influence was at work in Ezra Pound and others.

A decision had to be made regarding the mountain in question. For “South Mountain” Acker and Hightower say respectively “the southern mountains” and “the distant s10(south-55 po)-10(em6.nd st4Tn)7(d0.0003E moun .73 Td{ty)19(i{s0(p0(ie)-7 0 Td{0uous.s in).

In creative writing exercises students are astonished and pleased with what they come up with when asked to write a leaping poem. The pleasure is heightened when a tight verse form is expected. As in the case of classical Chinese poetry, much of which is written in couplets controlled by strict rules, the heroic couplet can prove to be a minor miracle. Here are two couplets written this summer by high school students in a three-week course in writing and reading. They follow the usual pattern of rhyming iambic pentameter, with several telling substitutions for the iambic foot and one dramatic extra foot. Astonishingly enough, an heroic couplet may not be too short for a fine final leap. As in Chinese poems, the caesura makes the important pause in the right place.

A Lazy Summer Afternoon

The sun, lounging lazily in the air,
Yawns as it plays with shadows in my hair.

On My Mind

Slinking 'cross the greenery, toes bathed in dew,
My thoughts not yet athinking, yet they think of you.

(By Kate Gillespie and Jack Sterling)

¹ Cyril Birch, ed.,
York: Grove Press, 1965), 184.

² Victor Mair, ed.,
UP, 1994), 180.

(New

(New York: Columbia