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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 southern hills." The original is ambiguous. I asked a Chinese teacher in Beijing how one knows South Mountain is a proper noun. "One just knows," he replied. This gentleman had a sense of humour. I queried him once, "How do I know you are not spying on us?" This was the spring of 1989. He put his white-gloved hand up to his lips and leaned back laughing, "Oh, you'll never know!"

Our younger daughter and a friend were in my office when they were girls in high school. I had selected several possible titles for a chapbook of translations of classical Chinese poetry. When I read out "Keep an Eye on South Mountain" from the list, they immediately made the call.

Hightower also reminds us that T'ao Ch'ien is alluding to the line from *The Book of Odes*, "Longevity like the Southern Mountain." Literary allusion is a powerful and economical tool in all poetry, but especially in Chinese classical poetry. The glory of the first great anthology of Chinese poetry (sixth century B.C.) has a presence in a simple allusion like that. (The false etymology of "pre-sense" pops up when one talks about the power of allusion.)

Finally one senses the leap to the ineffable in the last two lines. Both the loss of words, which is a trademark of Taoism, and the leap are pleasures often encountered in classical Chinese poetry. Robert Bly called such poems "leaping poetry."

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., *Anthology of Chinese Literature from Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1965),184.
[2] Victor Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 180.