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THE GENIUS OF LI PO
A.D. 701-762

WONG SIU-KIT

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THE GENIUS OF LI PO
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CONTENTS

I. The Approach 1

II. Woman and the Moon in Li Po's Poetry: a Thematic Analysis 7

III. Some Technical Aspects of Li Po's Poetry 22

IV. 'Form' in Li Po's Poetry 38

V. The Musicality of Li Po's Verse 50

VI. Li Po's Simplest Poems 58
I. The Approach

As I sat down to write this study of Li Po's poetry, I found myself confronted with a number of questions. Why is there so little accurate and incisive criticism of the poetry? Why is there such a gargantuan accumulation of writing on the poet's life, writing which is usually speculative in nature, conjectural because there is no sufficient unchallengeable information to rely upon? Why all this guesswork on what Li Po may or may not have been doing at particular points of his career? Why all this kerfuffle aroused by the question whether he was a Buddhist as much as a Taoist? Why, as I have suggested, so little descriptive analysis of Li's poetry itself? ..... An 'explanation' soon presented itself — not in any sudden, unexpected understanding of Li's poetry, but in a few familiar lines by Li's contemporary, Tu Fu (712-70).

'By nature I am obsessed with the well-wrought line.// Never shall I die content till my verses are made startlingly fine.'

"人情人愛人,\" 語不驚人死不休. 1

'To feed and nourish my soul and senses there is only one thing:// To make and alter new verses to my heart's content before I sing.'

1 Ch'ien shang chih shui ju hai shih liao t'uan shu' (江上懷秋日中秋). Chou Ch'iao-po (A short lyric, written when the river rushes on like the open sea), in Chou Ch'iao-po's Li Po. (Tu Fu's poems: an annotated edition; Hong Kong, 1966), ch. 10, p. 8.

Other occupational 'confessions' from Tu Fu found their way into my mind.

2 "Chiai meng shih-erh shou, ch'i ch'i' (謝圖二首, 其二). No. 7 of a sequence of 12 poems entitled 'Unhappiness Overcome', op. cit., ch. 17, p. 82.
And it dawned on me that Tu Fu was a 'conscious artist', always aware of the nature of his art and determined to control it. By contrast, Li was, by and large, an untutored poet, whose achievement, in a sense, 'passeth all understanding'; the precise characteristics of Li's work are elusive, hard to pin-point and dissect whether with the relatively blunt tools of much of traditional Chinese literary criticism, or with the scalps and scalpels provided us by Empson, Leavis, the Chicago Aristotelians, or Northrop Frye. That much, upon further reflection, it seemed to me, should have been no new revelation. The qualities of Li Po's poetry are syl-like, being at the same time unprecedented and unsurpassed, and magical. The only way to label them would have to be, and should be, to call them manifestations of genius. (Instances of Li Po experimenting consciously with verse forms can be found in his Collected Works; but, in comparison with Tu Fu, Li Po displays contrivance only on rare occasions.)

Such a conclusion is by no means original. On the contrary it is very much the consensus of a host of Chinese critics. To name a few instances: Kao Ping 考平 (1350-1423) the compiler of an influential anthology of T'ang poetry, observes, 'Li Po, possessing an unbridled, unrestrained genius, moved with superior abandon among men...'. This observation is echoed by Yang Shen 燕申 (188-1959), who says, 'in the art of writing, Chuang Tzu and Li Po have attained the magical (or "divine", or 'superhuman!') and cannot be matched by merely "skillful" writers. Without being "skillful", you can never hope to be "magical"; at the same time the "magical" cannot be attained through mere "skill",...'.

In comparing Li Po and Tu Fu, Wang Chih-teng 王治庭 (1535-1597) expresses a very widely shared view: 'Li Po was endowed with talent by Heaven; Tu Fu had to exert human efforts...'. In a similar vein, the earlier Fang Hsiao-yü 方孝孺 (1357-1402) has declared, 'Li Po alone with his genius robbed the gods of their mysteries; how can ordinary mortals delve into and understand (the mysteries of) his work?'.

This chorus of praise is no doubt 'valid', but does it live up to our expectations of modern literary criticism, or enable us to better understand the poet Li Po and the nature of his art — the meaning and possible significance to us of his poetry? One would not have discharged one's duties as a critic or a teacher by repeating the commonplace that one was in the awesome presence of a 'banished immortal'. There must be ways of suggesting how, if not why, Li Po's poetry should occupy a unique position of eminence in the Chinese tradition. Even in bafflement one must take on the responsibility of admiring the silencing qualities of Li Po's work. That task I shall attempt to undertake, in all humility, relying on no single style of criticism, but drawing upon whatever methods may seem apt for dealing with particular problems.

I do not intend to deal with the treacherous subject of the life of Li Po. There is an account of the life in Waley's book, the worst book

---


4. "Li T'ai-po chuan-chi 李太白全集 (The complete works of Li Po; Hang Kong, 1972), ch. 34, p. 20. Where I give only the page and ch'an numbers, I refer to this edition of Li Po's collected (by no means 'complete') works.

5. "ch. 34, p. 2b.


by that great Sinologist I have read: idiosyncratic in the author's choice of poems, thin and unrounded as biography, exasperatingly evasive on issues that any serious reader would be seeking - I do not think Waley could have spent much time writing the book, and I certainly do not think that his appreciation of Li Po's poetry came at all close to that of Po Ch'i-i's. There are numerous lives of Li Po in Chinese, of varying lengths, and a few in Japanese. The Li T'ai-po ch'ien-ch'i we use contains a few, as well as the year-by-year reconstruction of the life of the poet, the nien-p'u by Wang Ch'i (1191-1566), whose commentary, incidentally, should, I think, be regarded as the safest to follow. (Wang Ch'i's nien-p'u has of course been superseded by the Li T'ai-po nien-pu by Huang Hai-kui, (1869-1906). But even Huang's contribution is found wanting in places, an indication of the insurmountable difficulties that a biographical study of Li Po always entails.)

Among the more recent studies of the life of Li Po, I find the brief one by Wang Shih-ch'ing least gratifying. The book-length one by Wang Yao is much the same sort of disaster as Waley's. Wang's scholarship and scholarliness in dealing with an earlier period, if not imitable, must command the deepest respect. But as I ploughed through his The Poet Li Po, my mind, like the dying Arthur's, was constantly 'clouded with a doubt.' There were too many unsubstantiated assertions, too many unauthenticated details. And, as I got to the post-script, I could not suppress the feeling that I had been cheated: you are told at the end that the book has no claim to being a scholarly contribution, that there are not enough reliable sources.

9 Li T'ai-po nien-p'u (A year by year chronicle of the life of Li Po: Peking, 1958).
11 Wang Yao, Shih-jen Li Po (The poet Li Po: Hong Kong, 1960).

whether primary or secondary, to go by. Li Ch'ang-chih's book used to be taken quite seriously, but is really an extremely tendentiously argued thesis to the effect that if you want to understand Li Po's poetry, you have to regard the poet as a Taoist. Kuo Mo-jo's recent book, which descended on us from formidable heights, was obviously intended for purposes mere academics could never hope to guess at, and strikes one as merely perverse and pretentious. If these books do not make one throw up one's hands in despair, the unaunted sufferer from the personal heresy can continue his pilgrimage by consulting articles on such obscure matters as Li Po's lineage.

Kuo Mo-jo's Life of Li Po, the only slippery ground for us to tread upon is not. The question of the authenticity of particular poems in the poet's extant corpus, too, can be said to have been, - a dry, barren bone of contention. It is widely held that Li Po's style can be imitated without much difficulty, and that from the Sung Period on forgeries have found their way into almost every new edition of Li Po's poems. Much energy has been expended (and, in some cases wasted) on distinguishing the 'authentic' poems from the Chattertonian products. Su Shih-ch'ien (1036-1101), Huang T'ing-chien (1015-1105), Sung Min-ch'iu (1097-1079), Yen Chih-ch'ing (dates uncertain) and Mao Chien (dates uncertain) in turn contributed to this witch hunt.

12 Li Ch'ang-chih, Shih-jen Li Po (The Taoist poet Li Po and his sufferings: Shanghai, 1940).
13 Kuo Mo-jo, Li Po (Peking, 1972).
14a Ch'en Yin-ch'eng, Li T'ai-po shih-tsu chih j-wen (The question of Li Po's race and ancestry), in Ch'ing-hua hsü hsien-pao, (Ch'ing-hua hsien-pao (Chin-hua), X, no. 1 (1935).
14b Chan Yung, 'Li Po Chia-shih k'ao-i' (An examination of Li Po's ancestry), in Li Po shih lun-chi (Collected essays on Li Po's poetry: Peking, 1957).
15a Chien Mei, 'Li Po ti chi-kuan chia-shih yu chung-tsu tien-ti' (A few observations on Li Po's race and lineage), in T'ang-shih yu chiu-lun chi (Collected Essays on T'ang Poetry), II, (Hong Kong, 1967).
I. Woman and the Moon in Li Po's Poetry: a Thematic Analysis

II. Woman and the Moon in Li Po's Poetry: a Thematic Analysis

WHAT ARE some of the more common motifs that appear in the skeletal fabric of Li Po's work? Woman, I suppose, is one. The moon is another. And when he deals with these two themes, there is something Katsian about Li Po's imagination. By that I do not mean that there is anything particularly sensual in Li Po's touch. It is the way that both poets (I'm celebrating woman and the moon as symbols of beauty to be wondered at, to be regarded as objects of admiration and longing that links the two poets together. The Moon-Goddess, Cynthia, for Keats, is the spirit of beauty, the spirit of poetry itself, and it is the combination of the feminine, the celestial, the ethereal that holds such fascination for the young Romantic. She would, too, for the Chinese poet.

This is not the place to pursue the differences between the two poets in their treatment of two of their favourite subjects, differences though there are between them. My concern is with what Li Po does with the two subjects.

It is relatively rare for Li Po to dwell on the visual beauty of his women. If we recognize them as beautiful, it is because the poet does; but he does not delineate their beauty in detail, what he often does is to place them in a dramatic situation which is presented with such evocative power that, in one single glimpse of them, in the understanding of their plight, we come to an awareness of their physical appeal as well. There is a much anthologized quatrain which should lend force to my argument:

The fair one rolls up
The beaded curtains.
Deep in the recesses of her room she sits
With lovely contrasted brow.

Statue of tear drops
Are still seen moist on her face —
Who knows who it is
That makes her rue.
Another quatrain, which has the blessing of translation by Ezra Pound, is even more marvelously subdued and reticent:

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.

The poem vibrates with unarticulated, repressed emotions — repressed, and yet at the same time both violent and tremulous. This woman has spent her night waiting, watching, but her lover does not turn up and she has, finally, to give up in despair, to 'let down the crystal curtain'. The moon and the clear autumn, tranquil and indifferent, mock her implacable longings; and her sufferings in love become equated with the general misery of humanity — her sufferings, so similar to those of Isabella:

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;
Surely she wept until the night came on,
And then, instead of love, O misery!
She brooded o'er the luxury alone;
His image in the dusk she seem'd to see,
And to the silence made a gentle moan,

Spreading her perfect arms upon the air,
And on her couch low murmuring, "Where? O where?"

---

20. 'Yu chi yüan' 煎熬 (The jewel stairs' grievance), ch. 5, p. 12.
What Li Po conveys with firm restraint, Keats expresses expansively. But Keats does help us to understand the forlornness of a particular woman, of a specimen of humanity, which Li Po pencils in perhaps rather too faintly for some of us.

Most of Li Po's poems with a woman occupying the centre of the stage are about the sores of separation, of loneliness, confronted with which one becomes totally helpless. Whether the separation is a result of the husband or lover being constantly away on business, or his having to 'guard the frontiers', or his being 'unfaithful', seems of minor importance. Whatever the situation, how well Li Po understands and captures in a few lines the emotional state of his subject:

I stop my weaving shuttle and,
In melancholy, I dream
Of the one far,
Too far away.
In this unshared room I sleep,
And tears pour down like rain.

The two telling words tung so 停梭 (to stop one's weaving machine), encapsulate the pang of a sudden attack of loneliness and grief: no, one cannot continue with one's routine activities. The sudden attack the woman suffers from recalls too well the poet's own occasional attacks of intolerable suffering: yet another indication that, frequently, writing about unhappy women, the poet identifies himself with them. Yet he is also capable of understanding the peculiar nature of the unhappiness of frustrated women:

If there is no way for us to meet,
If only briefly, if only a single time,
When we can
Put out the light
And take off this silken dress

How much more direct and explicit, in the affirmation of a physical desire, can we expect of a eighth century poet to become?

I have already spoken about one poem, the one translated with such preciseness by Pound, in which the inexpressible anguish of a woman finds an 'objective correlative' in the moon. There are many other instances in Li Po's poetry where it is the moon that prompts is the poet some of his deepest sympathetic feelings for forsaken women. There is one which begins thus:

22. Chiang-hiai hing (Song of Chiang-hiai), ch. 8, p. 15.
23. Sui hsia ch'i, chi sau (Songs of the frontiers, no. 4), ch. 5, p. 9.
24. Ch'u fu tzu' (Song of the deserted wife), ch. 6, pp. 20-21.
25. Wu yeh t'i' (The crow cries at night), ch. 3, p. 11b.
26. Chi yian shih-eh shou, ch'i ch'1. (The seventh of twelve poems entitled 'dispatches'), ch. 25, p. 12b.
27. See also Ch'ang hsiang-sou' (Lingering thoughts of love), ch. 1, p. 20, and Ch'ang-tan hsing (Song of Ch'ang-tan), ch. 4, pp. 19b-20b.
28. Ch'ang hsiang-sou', see note 27.
he wants it. She also witnesses the poet's experiences as an ordinary mortal, his drinking, his meetings with friends, his separation from them. Indeed, when friends are away, the poet counts on the moon to be a bond between them. But the moon is also infinitely superior: she is beautiful, omnipresent, reliably 'there'; she is also unreachable, only to be admired from a distance. ('How I wish to climb the clear sky/ And embrace the bright moon'/欲上青天揽明月'; but, alas, it is not for man to achieve such a feat: 'Man may well wish/ to climb the bright moon,/ but that he can never do'/人攀明月不可得'.

From his youngest days, the poet has entertained a sort of obsessive curiosity about the moon:

when small I did not know
what the moon was;
'the white jade plate'
I called it.
I also wondered if it was not
A mirror of Fairyland
Flown into the clear clouds.
I thought I saw in it
The Immortal One
Dangling his feet,
And the cassia tree growing
As the moon grew more and more
Into an orbit.

---

29 'Hsüan-chou hsi-eh-t'iao-chien-pieh chiao-shu shu-yun', 胡元橋校詩 頂頂篇吉書(At the parting feast given in honour of Shu-yun at the Hsüan T'iao Pavilion of Hsüan-chou), ch. 18, p. 13b.

30 'Pa chiu wen yeh' 把酒問月(With a cup of wine in my hand I ask the moon), ch. 20, p. 12.
They told me
A white rabbit
Was there,
Crystalline pounding herbs; that was at noon, the old
Method. And I asked them,
For whom the herbs were prepared.
Sometimes, late at night,
The moon grew paler,
And I was convinced that
It was the road
That had nibbled away its rotundity.

When I shot down
The nine surplus snows,
The population of heaven
Was left in quiet peace,
And the moon was left
Undisturbed.

But why then are there times,
When even the moon
Gives me no pleasure?
When anguish comes,
And misery plays havoc
With my heart,
What, let me ask what
Am I to do?

Calling the moon,
Calling the moon,
Calling the moon,
I call in the moon,
And I ask, 'Why are you
Here far away from me?'

I introduced the poem as evidence of the poet's fascination by the moon
day when he was a boy. Without the concluding lines, the poem would
have been that and no more. But those last lines of the poem stand out so
oddly against what comes before that we cannot afford to pass them by without
a few comments. As a grown man, Li Po seems to be informing us with
the greatest possible emphasis, even the simple pleasure of contemplating
the mysteries of the moon can, at times, be drowned by sudden invasions of
sorrow of unrecognised origin.

Only at times though. There is another poem in which the poet testifies
to the comfort and consolation he can nearly always derive from the moon:

'When will the moon appear?
It should be there in the clear sky.'
I ask as I pause in my drink,
It is not for men
To climb up to the bright moon,
But the moon can, at will,
Follow wherever man may go.'

31 'Ku lang yeh sheng' (The bright moon - a traditional air),
ch. 4, p. 21.
Flying mirror, white object
That comes to crimson palace portals.
With the green
Base gone, a pure light is seen
To glow.
At night it comes up
From the sea;
In the morning may be
It vanishes into the clouds.
In autumn as in spring,
The white rabbit goes on
Pounding herbs.
Poor Ch'ang-I
She lives alone,
Without a neighbour.
We of today never saw
The moon of years
Gone by, but the moon we see
Shone upon our forefathers.
Still, past and present
Humanity is a flowing stream,
And the moon is admired tonight
As on ancient nights.
Let us pray that the moon
Will continue to shine
On the golden flask,
Whenever we drink
And allow ourselves
The pleasure of a song.

The poem, we are informed by a brief prefatory note, is an 'occasional' one. But nonetheless, we do get a feeling of Li Po's sense of admiration, of wonder in the presence of the moon. And, as I have remarked earlier, the kind of human bond that the moon represents has a moral significance in the poet's emotional life.

That 'bond' is not necessarily in temporal terms, it can be in spatial terms as well. Here is a parting poem\textsuperscript{33} in which it is the all-pervading

\textsuperscript{32}Pa chiu wen yih', see note 30.

\textsuperscript{33}'Song of the moon of Mount O-mei: for Yen a Shu monk, on his way to the capital', see note 34.
presence of the moon that constitutes the unifying theme:

When I was at Pa-tang,
Where the Three Gorges were,
I often looked westward
At the moon
And recalled Mount O-mei,
Recalled how,
Out of Mount O-mei,
The moon rose
And shone on land and sea.
Recalled how
Faithfully she followed
The footsteps of men,
However far they travelled.
This night
The moon shines in her white splendour
On the Yellow Crane Pavilion,
Where, by chance encounter,
I see my friend from O-mei again.
Sent here, no doubt,

By the moon of Mount O-mei,
My friend is continuing on
To Ch'ang-an,
Accompanied by the west wind.
The broad boulevards of Ch'ang-an
Spread out in majesty.
Almost celestial.
The moon of O-mei
Shone her light on
The streams of Ch'ang-an.

In the Capital,
My friend
Will ascend
The Golden Lion Chair,
And, with a jade-handled
Buddhist whisk in hand,
Pontificate on
Matters of much mystery.
Yes, he will be in the Capital,
That scarlet city,
And, he
By chance may see
The Emperor.
In the East, in Wu and Yeh, I have to linger on,
Though tie-less
As a solitary cloud.
I can only hope that
My friend, having made himself
Known in the Capital,
Will yet come back
And enjoy with me

The moon of Mount O-mei.
我在巴東三峽時，
西看明月出峨眉，
月出峨眉照大江，
異人萬里長相隨，
黃鶴樓前月華白.
It would not be enough to say that the moon is 'personified' in Li Po's poetry. The moon is more than 'personified' in a justifiably oft-quoted poem:

Amidst the flowers,
A flask of wine,
I drink alone
With no company.
I raise my cup
And extend an invitation
To the moon.

With the moon,
Myself and my shadow, we
Have a party of three.
It matters little
That the moon is no lover of wine,
And that my shadow eats all the rice wine we laboured so long to make.
Merely follow me,
Of sides of blunts or rolls of my jade yin yang disk.
With them as my company,
I make the best of spring.
I sing,
And the moon hovers about;
I dance,
And my shadow seems to reel and rout.
Sober, we are in happy
Communion.
Drunk, we drift our several ways.
Our eternal tie
Is unfettered by human emotions.
We shall meet again yet,
Far away in the distant sky.

34. O-mei shan yeh ko sung shu tseng yen ju ching
(Translation of the title is in note 33), ch. 8, p. 13b.
If we could overcome the familiarity with the poem from which it is possible for us to suffer, we should be able to see how much the moon means to the poet: a friend when in solitude, a noble friend, an unfailing friend whose friendship involves no obligations.

III. Some Technical Aspects of Li Po's Poetry

To discuss the technical aspects of Li Po's poetry is a fiendishly difficult task, as we can see from the way so many traditional critics have floundered in the subject, usually through being vague and imprecise, and ascribing every excellence to the poet's 'genius'.

It is true that Li Po did much of his writing in a state of alcoholic stupor, a fact that can easily lead us to the conclusion that his poetry is artless, uncontrived: some of it is, but some of it can never be supposed to be. There are occasional moments in reading Li Po when I feel like borrowing A. Alvarez's words in his description of Laurence Sterne: 'yet the effect he achieved with all his effort was of a finedown disregard for art.' These words would certainly be true of some

35 'Yueh hsia tu cho ssu shou, ch'i i' 月下錦釣四首·其一  
(The first of four poems entitled 'Drinking alone in the moonlight'), ch. 23, p. 2b.


of the technically most interesting poems I will be examining.

That Li Po's writing was often done while he was drinking I have already briefly stated. It would be easy to produce further testimony to the fact. Tu Pu observes:

In great rapidity
A thousand verses
Tossed about in the world,
A cup of wine
He has for consolation.

Li Po's contemporary, Jen Hua 任華 , addresses these lines to Li:

At times you get hold of
Your writing pad in drink;
At times, when the interest comes,
Your exercise your brush.
And all of a sudden,
From your hands
Emerge fleshes of cloud,
In your eyes,
Sharply defined,
One solitary peak
Presents itself.

37 Tu Pu 杜甫 , 'Pu chien 朴展 (The absence), ch. 32, p. 5.
38 Jen Hua 任華 , 'Tsa-yan chi Li Po' 題玉緩李庭. (To Li Po, in mixed metres), ch. 32, p. 7.
Another T'ang poet supplies further evidence:

Already drunk,
He drafts his pillen-ju poems:
The brush is given no rest
Until tons of pages are done.
醉中草堂前：
十幅豪放画。 39

And Ou-yang Hsii 欧陽修 of the Sung Period writes:

Poems are made
When the poet is drunk:
They are forgotten
When he comes to.
醉裏成詩醉不記。 40

Li Po himself frequently describes how he bursts into song when drinking
in this sort of manner:

Gathered in this hall are
Three thousand men of quality.
Who, amongst these, tomorrow will pay you
For your good turn of today?
My hand is on my hilt,
I lift my brow.
Limpid flows the stream —
How white the pebbles are:
I doff my cap,
To the gentlemen present
I smile;

I drink my drink —
For these gentlemen
Will I put together my rhymes ...

The poet is in a complex state of mind. Certainly there is touch of cynicism
in the mood, but the poet also feels that goodness will be recognized, and
with a measure of light-heartedness, he settles down to more drinking and to
verse-making.

There are qualities in Li Po's poetry which can be accounted for by the
fact that the poet often drinks and writes at the same time, writing, as we
may have noticed, at great speed. One of them is the sheer extravagance of
thought and language, extravagance that comes closer to fantasy than imagination
in any ordinary sense of the words.

In one well-known poem, 42 we are told three times in exactly the same verbal
formula that 'to travel to Shu is as difficult as to reach the blue sky' 難難難於上青天. We are also told that 'the linked ranges are so tall
that there is not the distance of a foot between them and the sky' 頂並去天
不盈尺.

In a set of six typical, popular verses, 43 we get these lines:

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39 P'i Jih-hsii 皮日休, 'Li Han-lin' 李翰林 (On Li Po), ch. 33, p. 2.
40 Ou-yang Hsii 欧陽修, 'Ts'ai Po hai Sheng-yü' 太白醉養生 (On Li Po:
written playfully for Sheng-yü), ch. 33, p. 3.
41 'Pu-feng hao-shih ko' 扶風豪士歌 (The heroic men of Pu-feng), ch. 7,
p. 9b.
42 'Shu tao nan' 蓬道難 (Treacherous are the roads of Shu), ch. 3, pp. 3b-5b.
43 'Heng-chiang ts'iu liu shou' 橫江詞六首 (Six songs of Heng-chiang), ch. 7,
pp. 17-18b.
The billows are started into action,
And the Three Mountains are shaken;
Wind blows for three days,
And hills are reduced to flat land.

When the white billows rise,
They rise higher than
Wu-kung Monastery.

— the monastery referred to, our commentators remind us, was two hundred and forty Chinese feet high.

Comparable hyperbolic effect is achieved in this short poem:

In the sun
From the Liang-lu Peak
Emanates a purple haze.

The waterfall,
Viewed from a distance,
is a vertically hanging river.
It darts and plunges down
Three thousand feet—
Do we happen to have
The Milky Way
Pouring down
From the Ninth Heaven?

But the boldness of expression is more than matched in a poem which begins with:

To wash away the sorrow of eternity,
Let us permit ourselves
A hundred flasks of wine,

且逢黃帝遊赤山，
涯遇終古無歸，
望遠百鈞飲，

and contains these lines:

Having had enough to drink,
We lie down on this
Deserted hill:
Heaven and earth
Are our bedclothes.
醉來臥空山，
天地即雲帳。

Our poet's best known exaggeration is perhaps contained in this

popular poem:

Thirty hundred feet of white hair!
Thirty hundred feet in length—
Because my grief is so long.
Looking into the mirror
I ask.

Where comes this autumn frost?

白髮三千丈，
緣何似霜長。

不知明鏡裡，
何處得秋霜？

Length reminds me of a comparison the poet consciously invites us to make:

Pray ask the river
That eastward flows.

Is it any longer
Then my parting sorrows?

結庐在枕上，
時事異之理棼棼。

And how long does the best of scent linger on?

When the fair one was here,
Flowers filled the hall.

現是黃粱夢，
時醜日短，

Now that the fair one is gone,
Nothing is left but
An empty bed.

The embroidered bedclothes
Are neatly rolled up —
Never to be used again.

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46. "Ch'i-ù-p'u ko shih-ch'i shou, ch'i shih-wu" 秋漁什九首·卷五 (The fifteenth of the seventeen songs of Ch'i-ù-p'u) , ch. 8, p. 3b.
47. "Chin-ling chiu-szu liu shieh" 金陵驟露留別 (At a pub in Chin-ling, being asked to stay before my departure), ch. 15, pp. 12b-13.
concluding this discussion. The word is aksa, meaning, literally, 'to kill'. Li Po uses it, usually adverbially, to suggest intensity or extremity. Often he uses it in combination with the word ch'ou, 'sorrow'. Ch'ou-aksi, 'extreme sorrow', 'sorrow that kills', etc., occur in a large number of poems. Now if we consult one of the standard dictionaries of Chinese poetic diction, we will easily discover that it is relatively rare for T'ang poets to employ this expression of extravagance, that Sung poets writing in the t'ao-ku genre use it sometimes even for purposes of padding. This is no important discovery. But we are confirmed in our impression that first, Li Po does differ from his contemporaries in his occasional turgidity and, secondly, often in unrecognised particular ways, he is a harbinger of later poets.

In the preceding paragraphs, in discussing Li Po's extravagant, sometimes almost hallucinatory, statements, I have permitted myself to use the word 'image' where, strictly speaking, the professional critic would not have allowed the use of the word. But there are, in Li Po's poetry, innumerable examples of audacious, almost 'metaphysically' impossible images and vivid pictorial descriptions. These I propose to call out and discuss, not only for their ability to surprise, but also for their almost inevitable aptness. Li Po is good at conveying the sense of speed. There is a well-known quatrain which, without containing any conscious image, is itself an image of speed:

In the morning we leave
Cloud-veiled City of the White Emperor.
Chiang-ting is a thousand li away.

Similarly,

We get there and
Return.
On the same day.
Our skiff has passed
A thousand ranges of mountains,
Before the gibbons have done
With their wailing.

The rapids whirr,
The traveller's skiff
Onward darts:
Fragrant flowers of the hills,
Brush my face.

The verb jiu 楠 suggests so vividly not only how close to the bank the skiff sails, but also with what speed the skiff 'onward darts'. Another short poem includes these lines:

The verb jiu 楠 suggests so vividly not only how close to the bank the skiff sails, but also with what speed the skiff 'onward darts'. Another short poem includes these lines:

51 For example, 'La-shui ch'ü' 江水 (Song of La-shui), ch. 6, p. 10; 'Meng hu huaing', 猫虎 (The fierce tiger: A song), ch. 6, p. 16; 'Heng-chiang ts'u liu shou', op. cit., ch. 7, pp. 17-18; 'T'ai-hou shuang ts'ou hsiang-sheng Kao Chen 稀相雙賦詩唐賀晨 (To Kao Chen, a nephew; written after drinking.), ch. 10, pp. 18-16.

Chang Hsiang 蕭翔 Shih ts'u ch'ü yī ts'ou t'ai shih 少年遇真仙 (Words and phrases in Shih, Ts'ou and Ch'ü poetry: a selection accompanied by their definitions; Hong Kong, 1962).
River Pa speeds on
Like an arrow;
Boats sail on
At flying speed.
巴水急如箭，
巴船去若箭。 55

In yet another poem,
Skeled boats fly,
Like whales.
殞船若飛鯨。 56

Some of Li Po's more static descriptions are equally bold and vivid.
The best known example is probably the two lines which, in Pound's translation, read:
The walls rise in a man's face,
Clouds grow out of the hill
at his horse's bridle. 57

As a picture of a rider on a steep, rugged hill viewed from a lower level, these lines are unsurprisingly accurate, the accuracy deriving from the poet's sharp observation and his audacity in the use of language. Almost as evocative

55 'Pa-nü t'zu' 朴奴歌曲 (The maidens of Pa: a song), ch. 25, p. 25.
56 'Yü-chang hsing' 于昌行 (Song of Yü-chang), ch. 6, p. 8b.
58 'Sung yu-jen ju Shu' 宋与人入蜀 (Seeing a friend off to Shu), ch. 18, p. 3.

of a specific scene are these lines:
Here armoured Chinese soldiers once
Fought with barbarians,
Then did dust and sand
Darken the sea of clouds.
Trees and grasses trembled
At the man-slaughter;
The stars
Lost their lustrous glow,
Bleached bones piled up
Into mounds—
What crimes did these
Blue mountains commit
That they had to be
Punished thus?

Another vivid scene, achieved through the use of similar techniques of personification, is this:

59 Ching luan li hou t'ien-en liu Yeh-lang i chiu yu shu huai tseng Chiang-hsia Wei Tai-shou liang-tsaí 僧侶飲水懷思來者為詩以書蓄意與未離相遇 （To prefer Wei of Chiang-hsia: written on my banishment to Yeh-lang at the end of the war, with recollections of old friends and deep thoughts to express), ch. II, p. 7b. (The passage quoted is on p. 9.)
High above
Birds have flown by,
One solitary cloud
Moves on at leisure,
Mount Ch'ing-ting and I
Remain alone
And eye
Each other with much pleasure.

Mount Ch'ing-ting is animated in a manner which reminds one of Byron's
The mountains look on Marathon —
And Marathon looks on the sea
in 'The Isles of Greece.' But Mount Ch'ing-ting comes alive even more than the Greek mountains in that it dominates the entire poem and is not reduced to being the object of a poet's musing. Li Po's extraordinary imagination is sometimes capable of even more astonishing creative effects:

One night I made my sojourn
At a monastery
On the peak.
There as I lifted my arm
I touched the stars.

60. T'ai-tso Ch'ing-ting shan' (Sitting alone on Mount Ch'ing-ting), ch. 23, p. 10.

We dared not raise our voices —
Fearing of disturbing
The peace of the inhabitants of heaven.

The happiness of an unexpected reunion is expressed in lines which I would describe as highly characteristic of Li Po in their easy rhythmic movement. The sadness of separation is recorded in a short, pregnant poem, not so
characteristic of Li Po in rhythmic movement, but characteristic of him in inventiveness of imagination.

Here is the heart-rending spot on earth.
Here is the Lao-lao Pavilion.
Where, travellers being seen off,
Must say farewell.
The spring breeze knows full well
The pains of separation,
And refuses to let
The willow branches grow green.

It was customary in China to break a willow branch and give it to the friend one was seeing off. By investing the spring breeze with an understanding of human emotions as well as a will, the poet does more than personify the breeze; he magnifies the pains of separation into something universally known and understood. The same kind of fancy or fantasy that is allowed free play in the next poem produces similar effects:

The white horse, the bride of gold
Are now in Lao-hat in the far east.

The embroidered bedclothes
Are mud with the spring breeze.

The descending moon
Come down to the level
Of the balcony, and peers
At the burnt out candle.

A flower flies into the room,
And laughs at the empty bed.

The dramatic situation is clear. Some lonely woman stays up all night, thinking of the "white horse and the bride of gold," metaphorically for her husband or lover who is far away. It is the unsympathetic parts that the personified moon and flower are made to play—the way that the moon intrudes into her personal sorrow by peering in, the way that the flower mocks at her grief—that intensify the pathos of her situation and underline her utter loneliness. The general purport of my discussion of Li Po's poetry in terms of his peculiar characteristics and techniques has so far been to focus on his extravagance and the bold fantastic leanings of his imagination. It is not easy to distinguish which qualities are unconscious characteristics and which are signs of conscious craftsmanship. I began by repeating the common belief that Li Po's poetry was often written under the effect of drink, often written at considerable speed. What I have said so far cannot—and has not been intended to—dispel that popular belief. I can only hope that I have produced enough specific examples to confirm with a degree of objectivity what is widely held and often said without sufficient articulateness or analysis of the nature of Li Po's art.

63 Near modern Nanking.
64 "Lao-lao t'ing" (The Lao-lao Pavilion), ch. 25, p. 300.
65 "Ch' un yean" (Melancholy thoughts in spring), ch. 25, pp. 148-15.
IV. 'Form' in Li Po's Poetry

TRADITIONAL CRITICS who have paid tribute to Li Po's verse have repeatedly acclaimed it for its 'strangeness', for its nonconformity with accepted rules. The pages of the thirty-second to thirty-fourth chapter of the Complete Works are dappled with expressions of marvel at the freedom with which Li Po manipulates verse forms. A few quotations from these critics should suffice to confirm my point. 'When the brush comes to be exercised by Li Po, the genius at work is of such a magnitude that the realized verbal form is always surprising' [Ch'ien Ch'i, Ch'in Wei, and T'ao P'ei]. And when Li Po writes, clouds and smoke come into existence; then there are innumerable mountains too steep and rugged to scale' [Ch'en Ch'i, Ch'in Wei, and T'ao P'ei].

Another critic, aware of the fact that it is generally agreed that Li Po's verse obeys no recognized rules, expresses himself rather more cautiously: 'it is not true that in Li Po's verse there are no rules; rather one should say that in verse, Li Po moves at ease amongst the rules' [Ch'en Ch'i, Ch'in Wei, and T'ao P'ei]. There are two impressions that one cannot escape. The first is that Li Po often deliberately challenges the established conventions of versification. The second is that in turn, his finished poems defy traditional methods of criticism, leaving the critics in a state of awe-struck bewilderment. We have therefore to try other avenues and see if it is indeed impossible to explore the variety and subtleties of Li Po's versification.

One historical fact has to be noted first. In Li Po's extant oeuvre of more than one thousand poems, relatively few are in the 'regulated' 8-4 shih form. There are about seven-character ones, and between seventy and eighty of five-character lines. If we consult the collected poems of some ten of Li Po's contemporaries, and also take into account the works of his one peer in poetry, Tu Fu, we soon come to realize that Li Po wrote at a time when the 8-4 shih with its many restrictions was in its ascendency. It was when enjoying great popularity among ambitious poets who took pride in mastering and overcoming its genuine technical difficulties, and also among less able poets who would have been content to prove that they had acquired this new-fangled medium. In a way it would be impossible to say which of the two media, the 8-4 shih or the ku-t'ie-shih, the 'old' style was, after all has been said, the more 'difficult' one to handle. The rules of the 8-4 shih are, of course, almost tyrannical, but the writing of Tu Fu is a shining example of how the way these harsh rules can be turned into advantages, an example of how, even accepting these rules, one could move with complete freedom. On the other hand, writing in the 'old' style, which has no meretricious ornamentations of any kind, one can become totally monotonous, lacking even the easy elegance that 'form' confers. What I am suggesting is that, while it is equally difficult to triumph in either medium, failure in the 'old' style is much more obviously recognizable. And I suggest this in order to argue that, where Li Po succeeds, he should be given due credit for his success and to counter the accusation we sometimes hear, that Li Po was too undisciplined a poet to have opted for the more exacting medium.

But when we get down to examining particular instances of Li Po's art of versification, we shall see that his preference for the 'old' style has a unique greater significance still. Of the two media, it is, in fact, the 'old' style that lends itself more readily to experimentation. The rules for a poem in the 'regulated' verse form are all there for one to follow and make the best of. The 'old' style, whether of the ku-t'ie-shih or of the yeh-hsii 耶氏 type, can be employed in ways that allow for much greater variety, and it is precisely this potential for variety that Li Po so often successfully capitalizes on.
Lest I should seem to be contradicting myself, I must point out that what I go on to say about Li Po's achievements only applies to certain poems. I still contend that Li Po is not usually a 'conscious artist,' to use that pompous expression once again. He achieves miraculous ingenuity in a limited number of poems. But the fact that a poet sometimes writes badly or carelessly should not be used to negate, or even diminish the importance of the great things he is capable of.

The infinite formal variety of Li Po's verse forces itself on our attention as we wend our slow way through his Complete Works. The large number of swift-moving quatrains, poems which Dryden would have described as 'the fairy way of writing,' are amongst Li Po's most celebrated achievements: they are unsurpassed in grace and beauty throughout all Chinese poetry, and I shall have more to say about them. In contrast to these, there are also poems of great length, poems that extend on and on with ease and smoothness. Two of them I have already had occasion to refer to. The poem addressed to Wei T'ai-shhou liang-ts'ai, written when the poet is in exile, is made up of one hundred and sixty-six five-character lines. This is probably the longest poem in the Works, and the fact that all lines are of the same consistent length is significant in that it contributes towards the tone of unrelieved remorse of the poem. Another fairly long poem is the one addressed to Yuen Ts'an-chên. The sixty-two lines are mostly seven-character in length, with an admixture of three-character and five-character lines. The poem presents a number of different moods and the occasional departure from the prevalent seven-character unit is for that reason appropriate. It would not be difficult to discuss a few more poems to strengthen

my argument. We might, for instance, ask why, in one primarily septasyllabic poem, the two opening lines should be eleven syllables long. There can be a number of answers. But the two lines:

The yesterday that deserted me is a day I cannot call back,
The today that is with me confounds me with woes and worries.

應該去尋昨日之不可留, 
(should go back to the past)

do carry the burden gradually unfolded by the rest of the poem. But I think I have said enough about a characteristic of Li Po's poetry which should be obvious — that the varying length of the poems and the varying length of lines serve specific purposes in Li Po's poetry, and should not, on the whole, be dismissed as incidental. There are times when Li Po adopts particular established styles. For instance, we find him employing the ch'ü-ta'su style with great aplomb:

The poem is referred to note 29.

You come not yet. 
Board my sorrow, sing alone.

Scent lingering here on bed-clothes,
Drowsy night here pains my heart...
The ch'"u-t's"u style permits 'irregular' line lengths. Li Po's poem does not remind us of any particular piece in the ch'"u-t's"u, in other words it is not a mechanical imitation, but the insertion of the 'carrier-sound' in such a way that are invariably the right places of his lines is evidence enough of his perfect familiarity with the style, evidence of his being able to 'play by ear' as it were.

When in the mood to do so, Li Po also experiments with fairly rigid patterns and comes off triumphantly. Consider his poem entitled 'In three-, five-, seven-character lines':

秋風清,秋月明;
落葉逐流水,鳴梟嘯長空.
捐思捐憂知何日?此時此夜難為情.

Autumn wind,
Autumn moon;
Fallen leaves adrift,
The crow, roosting, starts.
When are we to meet again?
Right is such a cruel time.

My translation does scant justice to the original: apart from retaining the syllable lengths of the original lines and suggesting a very inadequate contour of the prose sense of the poem, it has nothing: none of the neat parallelism of the original, none of its musicality, none of its complete spontaneity. Li Po, when he chooses to, can impose a form of great asperity on himself and then moves with complete freedom in the form.

74 See David Hawkes, Songs of the South (Oxford University Press, 1959).
75 Hawkes' invented descriptive label.
76 San wu chi yen 三五七 (in three, five, seven character lines), ch. 25, p. 10b.
77 'Han ch'"e"ng nan' 韓城南 (Fighting south of the city), ch. 3, p. 12.
78 'Pei feng hsing' 北風行 (Song of the north wind), ch. 3, p. 30b.
79 'Chiu pieh li' 久別離 (Long separation), ch. 4, p. 12.
seem justifiable in the respective poems, largely because of the sense they convey; also far from being obtrusive, they seem to emphasize what deserves emphasis in each context.

I would like to conclude this discussion on Li Po's versification and prosodic effects with a formal analysis of one of his best-known poems, 'A dream visit to Mount T'ien-mu: A poem composed at my departure from my friends of eastern Lu' (Meng yu T'ien-mu yin liu piéh).

The poem begins with four neatly organized lines, of which line 1 runs parallel to line 3 and line 2 to line 4.

1. Travellers speak of Ying-chou.
2. Lost in billow and sea mists it's hard to find.
3. The men of Teh talk about T'ien-mu.
4. In the glimmer of clouds and rainbow the mountain can at times be seen.

The four lines constitute a single unit of formal organization which is made up of two contrasting statements. The actual existence of Mount T'ien-mu is affirmed against the make-belief existence of the fairy island Ying-chou. The contrast deserves to be noted: throughout the poem dream and reality jostle with each other, and reality and wish are seen to clash.

Lines 5 to 10 (six lines) make up the next unit. The lines are uniformly seven-character long. They describe the stupendous height and steepness of

T'ien-mu, ending with an announcement of the poet's wish for dream-travel in the 'provinces' of Wu and Teh.

Then we get two transitional lines, both five-character long, standing out against the preceding six lines and what follows.

The next two lines are again in seven-characters, so that we are back from narrative to description:

11. The moon and the lake brighten my shadow.
12. And I am delivered to Ion Ch'i.

The place where Baishh Ling-yin spent his nights are still here:
13. The place is Leih Ling-yin, light and clear is the gibbon's call.
Separated by the shorter lines 11 and 12, the descriptive thirteenth and fourteenth lines belong to the dream world. Time is telescoped and memories of Hsieh Ling-yin, poet of the Liu Sung Period, remembered for his enthusiasm for mountaineering, are conjured up. The fantastic element becomes more dominant.

The next four lines are in five characters again: the quickened tempo hurriedly takes us through the poet's dizzy experience:

15. Wearing clogs of Hsieh's invention,
16. I climb the Clear Cloud Ladder Mountain.
17. Half way up I see the sun in the sea;
18. In the air I hear the roars of the fabled Cook.

Hsieh's clogs had removable heels which were fixed to the front part of the clogs for descent, to the back part for ascent. But of course the poet need not necessarily be actually wearing them. The allusion has the effect of unifying past and present. The fabled Cook was placed on top of a gigantic tree in the South-east by legend and charged with the responsibility of crowing before any mundane cock crowed at sun-rise. The four lines are a fusion of temporal and spatial distance into a single vision of here-and-now.

Then comes another four seven-characters lines: this is formally necessary for the xenadushic description of a scene more unrestrained in imagination than anything we have been presented with so far:

19. Cliffs, precipices everywhere, twirling, whirling,
I'm lost in the maze.
20. Rugged rocks, a confusion of flowers, suddenly darken.
21. Beasts roar, dragons moan, the mountain stream gurgles.
22. Peak upon startling peak, and the forest trembles.

The scene changes, becomes tame and subdued and the new scene is revealed in two lines each of five characters plus the 'carrier sound' hat, the occurrence of which we have been prepared for by its earlier occurrence in line 22, (where it functions in a different way, and where it is not conspicuous because of the regularity of the group of four lines of uniform length):

23. The clouds are blue, yet it seems about to rain.
24. The water everywhere shimmers, emanating a haze.

Something earth-shaking happens, and it is described in a series of four four-character lines:

25. A flash of lighting in the sky, a thunderbolt.
26. The mountain ranges are shattered.
27. The stone portals of heaven
28. Are thrown open with a deafening noise.

And what is seen in the heavens? We get a series of five seven-character lines (the predominant line-length of the poem) with one nine-character line interpolated:
THE GENIUS OF LI-PO

33. The pleasures of the world are not unlike my dream.
34. From time immemorial all that's happened has gone by like water that flows into the eastern sea.
35. And now that I am leaving, who knows when I'll return?
36. I'll seek out the famous mountains; I must now mount my horse.

But the 'moral' is not finished yet. There is something else, far weightier it seems, that the poet wishes to declare. And the declaration is made in the two concluding lines of unequal length: the nine syllable penultimate line is defiant in spirit as well as in form, the final line, of seven characters, returns us to the basic rhythm of the poem:

若能揮毫折腰事權貴，
使我不得開心顰。

41. How can they make me lower my brow and bow to serve the rich, the influential?
42. What means have they to make me miserable?

My formal analysis of the poem, chiefly in terms of line length and how it is related to the structure of the poem, should have led us to a number of conclusions. The first is that the poem, like many others by Li Po, is not as artless as we are often asked to believe. Form is closely related to content, and there is in the poem what we have to call conscious art. The second conclusion is that the conscious art is not at all obtrusive and, for that reason, is of the highest order. I would like to quote what an American critic has to say on the subject: 'The truest and finest art is disarmingly its seeming simplicity. It makes its observers aware of the result. Technical display is not art.' 1 Li Po's, I think we should now have been convinced, is 'the truest and finest art'.

1 Charlotte J. Lee, Oral Interpretation (Boston, 1952), p. 3.
V. The Musicality of Li Po's Verse

Li Po's style, it has often been suggested, has the impress of earlier popular poetry on it. With this view I concur. But as the subject has already been dealt with, I have no intention of rehearsing what is available in print. There are, however, qualities in Li Po's poetry which are related to the subject that I would like to discuss. Li Po's poetry possesses a fluency and musicality which are reminiscent of the best of the yeh-fu poetry of the Han Period and of the Six Dynasties. Very often it is this fluency and musicality that make Li Po's poetry popular in both senses of the word.

The techniques employed that contribute towards the particular kind of smoothness in style can be singled out for examination. The use of internal echoes (within a line or within a poem), of controlled repetitions and reduplications, is everywhere evident in Li Po's poems.

There is a good example of how these techniques work in the poem 'Sitting up at Night: a Song':

1. 夜夜寒燈夜長，
   深思往事心茫茫。
2. 冰合井泉月入園，
   金紅青碧照悲哀。
3. 雨花濛濛生花蔓，
   鮮滿滿。
4. 風從急，
   水鴨流。
5. 御寒歌

The poem has that faint suggestion of a dramatized situation ("That word of disagreement," etc.) which many other poems by Li Po share, a suggestion that arouses curiosity and interest. But it is not this quality that one admires most. It is the uninterrupted flow, the neat structure, both results of the employment of techniques I have referred to that account for the pleasure the poem gives: some of the devices engaged I have discussed in connection with other poems. The poem is made up of four seven-character, fast-moving lines, one five-character line and one seven-character concluding line. But there are other devices. The character yeh 夜 for 'night' occurs three times in...

82 For example see Wang T'ung-t'ai, "Han Wei liu-ch'ao yeh-fu tui Li Po ti ying-hsin!" 漢魏六朝樂府詩考 (The influence of Yeh-fu poetry of the Han, Wei and Six Dynasties period on Li Po), in Li Po Shih lun- ts'ung (Collected essays on Li Po's poetry; Hong Kong, 1972), p. 80.

83 Yeh tao yin 夜歌吟 (Sitting up of night: a song), ch. 3, p. 21b.
line 1. The character 蹲 for 'sitting' occurs twice in line 2. The word 'chin-kang' 金鈔 for 'lantern' in poetic diction begins both line 5 and line 6. Line 5 is, of course, the beginning of the run of short lines. That it should begin with the same word of two characters as its preceding line gives the poem extra cohesion; this is further reinforced by the fact that 蹲, 'tears', comes in both line 5 and line 6, so that lines 5 and 6 function almost as variations on a theme, the theme being in line 4. The word 顏, 'song' ends line 8 and begins line 9; the word 恕, 'love', ends line 10 and begins line 11. This employment of a word or any linguistic unit to link up two consecutive lines is discoverable in Chinese poetry as early as Ta-mo Chih's 曹植 (192-232). In the hands of Li Po, particular modes of versification are often handled in ways that lead to unexpectedly pleasing effects.

But let us consider another poem as supporting evidence of what I claim for Li Po's poetry. The poem is addressed to a friend on the occasion of the latter's retirement to a hermit's life. Again, the poem is specifically called 'a song'—'The White Cloud Song':

1. 白雲是長隱君;
2. 長隱君;
3. 入雲山裡，
4. 雲中隱居渡湘水——
5. 湘水上，
6. 白雲騎錦鶴

In translation, the poem interests us largely because of the poet's transformation of the white clouds into a rival of the poet's in the claim they make on his affections. The technical ingenuity is hardly felt. That this is so is partly a result of the limitation of the translator's abilities, but it should also be understood in terms of one of the many differences between the genius of the Chinese language and that of English. Song-like effects can be achieved relatively easily by repetition in Chinese. In English, however, repetition sometimes gives rise to a sense of cumbersome monotony, except, perhaps, in the hands of Tennyson. The mellifluous of Li Po's poem is, in fact, Tennysonian, Tennysonian, however, only in effect, not in the way in which the effect is achieved.

How then, do we explain the dulcet lyricism of the poem? For a start the two words 背影 白雲 (white clouds) are used three times in what, after all, is a relatively short poem; they are also placed in strategically important positions: at the end of the first line, at the beginning of the second and, finally, in the concluding line. The poem is, as a result, forged into a closely organized artefact, a Gestalt. There are other repetitions in the poem. The three words 湘江水 湘江 (always follow you) occur at the end of line 2 and become a complete unit in line 3. 湘江水 湘江 (River Hsiang) similarly link up lines 5 and 6. We have yet another repetition, in the words Ch'iu shan 象山 (The Ch'iu mountains), in lines 8.

8 'Lai-yen ko sung yu-jen' 來禽歌送友人 (Song of the white clouds: A valedictory poem for a friend), ch. 18, p. 1b.
and 3. It is miraculous that when so many repetitions are posited in so short a poem the poem does not become Edward Learish, but flows on, from line to line, with graceful and charming fluency.

Of course the repetitions are not the only factor that contributes towards the sweet lyricism of the poem. The simplicity of language, for instance, is another obvious factor. But I am, for the present anyway, interested in Li Po's use of repetitions. Instead of discussing other points of stylistic interest in the poem, I think it should be useful to get our perspective right once more and see the historical significance of Li Po's artistic triumph. What I would like to stress is that, in this poem, Li Po, in his eschewal of the fashionable id-shih form, inherits the yulan-fu tradition of the Han Period and of the Six Dynasties, keeps it alive in the T'ang Period, and, unwittingly perhaps, opens the door of Chinese poetry for the admission of the ta'fu genre — soon to become an undeniably important mode of poetic expression: the similarity between the poem I have been examining and so many ta'fu poems of the Sung Period does not, in my opinion, have to be entered into in detail.

All that was by way of parenthesis. Let us get back to the main thesis of this section and consider a few more examples. Take the poem 'On Seeing Azaleas in Hsuan Ch'eng':

1. "攄聞雪閣子規鳥，
2. 亀城還見牡丹花，
3. 一叫一閘一斷，
4. 三春三月春三色．"

1. There was a time when, in Shu, the song of the cuckoo was heard.
2. Today in Hsuan Ch'eng Azaleas are still to be seen.
3. Every note I hear, every echo, rends my heart once again.
4. In the third month of Spring, the third month of the year, one recalls the three Pa prefectures.

A couple of necessary explanatory notes first, before we go back to critical analysis. The bird 'cuckoo' and the flower 'azalea', have various appellations in Chinese, and t'u-ch'ên is one that is equally applicable to the flower and the bird — after all, the blossoming of azaleas was supposed to be connected with the cuckoo's song. In line 3 of the poem, t' — 'one', each, every, is used three times, although, in translation, I had to say 'once again' after using the word 'every' twice. In line 4, the word sâm — 'three' or 'third' is used three times. The 'three Pa prefectures' refers to the creation of three prefectures by Liu Chang 呂箅 at the end of the Han Period, the prefectures of Pa-tung 紫土, Pa-hsii 巴西 and Pa-ch'ên 巴黔.

The critical comments I have to make are relatively few. The sentiments conveyed by the poem are fairly conventional — the appreciation of the permanence of nature and the transcendence of human endeavours and successes. The main reason why this poem is of interest in the present discussion is the extreme boldness of stroke in the poet's use of one word three times in line 3, of another, again, three times, in line 4, when both words are numeral and could have produced the effect of complete lifelessness. The actual effect is far from lifelessness: it is one of strong, regular rhythms, of incredible inventiveness and originality.

Li Po also uses what may conveniently be called 'reduplications' fairly frequently and effectively.

Consider these two lines from a love poem:

枝枝相纏結，
葉葉相聯連，
Branches intertwined,
But their leaves are blown away.

The reduplications chih-chih 織織 'branches' and yeh yeh 榕榕 'leaves' in the original carry with them a suggestion of generality and vaguely hint at the

85 'Huian-ch'eng chien t'ur-ch'ên hua' "Azaleas in Hsuan Ch'eng", ch. 25, p. 10.

86 "Ku i" (Age-old feelings), ch. 8, p. 18.
lover's fear that the love relationship is threatened by unavoidable separation.

The same sense is not evident in the translation, and probably can hardly be made to be: 'branches' does not call to mind as many branches as chih-chih, nor does the word carry the connotation of 'each and every'. And the same can be said of 'leaves' when compared with yeh yeh, no matter what epithets you might choose to suggest multiplicity.

One of the seventeen 'Songs of Lake Ch'iu-p'u' is made up of six lines, the first four of which begin with reduplications:

干干古檳樹
萬萬女夷林
山山白晝陽
潤潤白猿吟
星星向秋蒲
獺獺碎邁心

Thousands upon thousands of cedar trees
A whole forest of privets.
From hill to hill egrets thong.
Mountain torrents here, mountain torrents there.
Their gurgle mix with the gibbons' cry.
Let's not come near Lake Ch'iu-p'u:
The gibbons' cry breaks the stranger's heart.

The reduplications so freely used seem, on the surface, to serve no more than descriptive purposes. But on closer inspection, they turn out to be responsible for suggesting the sense of unbearable loneliness the stranger away from home has to put up with. They represent a tense of impatience, of fret: there are too many cedars and privets, too many hills and mountain torrents. The scene depicted, though impressive for its grandeur, is not enjoyed by the poet, but instead is oppressive to him— that much we gather from the last two lines.

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87 'Ch'iu-p'u ko shih-ch'i-shihou, ch'i-shih' (The tenth of the seventeen songs of Ch'iu-p'u), ch. 8, p. 2b.
88 Kung chung hsiau-lu t'su pa shou, ch'i i (The first of eight poems entitled 'Palace Pleasures'), ch. 5, p. 13b.
89 Chao-ming wen-hsun (Taiwan reprint of the Su K'e-chia edition), ch. 29, p. 1.
VI. Li Po’s Simplest Poems

Some of Li Po’s best poetry is to be found in his simplest poems. I shall now attempt to characterize a few of these poems, to account for their almost impenetrable beauty and charm.

Let us begin with a poem every schoolboy knows:

床前明月光，
疑是地上霜。

举头望明月，
低头思故乡。

The moon shines bright on my bed.
I wonder if it isn’t frost formed on the floor.
To gaze at the moon I raise my head
My head droops as I recall what my home town was like before.

91 ‘Ching yeh zzu’ (Thoughts on a quiet night), ch. 6, p. 10.

The linguistic simplicity of the poem has always been noted and is, indeed, one of the important features of the poem, a feature which, up to a point, gives the poem a sense of immediacy and an impression that the poet is being totally informal and friendly with his reader. But there is more to the poem than its easy diction. In four lines we have been presented with a self-contained, complete experience. The range of moods is considerable. By chance the poet notices the moonlight. Then, in his child-like association of ideas, he vividly describes how bright the moon is with a striking metaphor in the second line; the word 皎 'wonder' is extremely forceful in an unobtrusive way, for it not only informs us of the poet’s reaction, but also quietly introduces the poet to us as a person of innocence, capable of a child’s imaginings. The third and fourth lines are parallel in grammatical construction, which makes the contrast between them particularly tangible.

The unexpected excitement and simple happiness aroused by the moon are dashed by the moon itself, and the poet finds himself being reminded of his absence from home. The word 思 'think of', 'recall', etc. is not, on its own, an exceptionally evocative word; preceded by 之 on 'the head', 'droops' it acquires a strong sense of nostalgia and sadness.

Another well-known poem is ‘A Reply to a Vulgar Person: Written in the Hills’:

問君何能爾？
笑而不答心自聞。

獨有歲寒，始知松柏後凋。

You ask me why
I choose my abode
In these green hills.

92 Shan chung wen ta (山中問答, also known as 'Shan chung ta su jen wen')
山中答客問, ch. 19, p. 2b.
I have no reply
Other than a smile
And the contentment
Of my heart.

See how the streams carry
The peacock blossoms away
In mystery.

Other heavens, other earths,
This is not the mundane world
Of ordinary
Mom.

Conforming as this poem does to the requirements for a seven-character quatrains, it is completely free of any self-conscious manner or mannerism of poetic expression. With a few extra words superadded to it the poem could read very well as prose. The pellucidity derives, then, from the poet's adherence to the expectations of ordinary speech, which, if we bear in mind what the poem is 'about'; makes of the poem an example of 'form' serving the needs of 'content'. But the poem does not verge on prose. It possesses that compactness which distinguishes the best of poetry from prose. In other words, the poem is, again, complete and self-contained. Having said that he is not going to answer the 'vulgar person's' query, the poet in fact does offer a full reply — an irony which easily escapes the casual reader, an irony which is part and parcel of the tone and spirit of superiority that prevail in the poem: the 'smile' referred to, the 'contentment', the single, almost symbolical, description in line 3, and the provocative declaration in the final line. As in 'Night Thoughts' 夜思, the personality of the poet and the mood he happens to be in are communicated effortlessly, perhaps unconsciously as well. This, at least to some extent enhances the 'artistic' merits of the poem we have discovered.

The next poem I will consider is 'Drinking with a Person of Purity in the Mountains':

这首诗《饮酒与山人》作为《饮酒与山人》中的代表作

The admirable spontaneity we saw in the last poem is here too. But there is one interesting difference between the two poems. 'The Reply' is, in diction and in sentiment much more exalted and graceful than 'Drinking in the Mountains'. The first line of the latter poem is a fairly matter-of-fact statement. The second line comes perilously close to spoken speech. The third line, too, is conversational. It takes the fourth line to elevate the poem to the 'poetic'
The second is the third of the five songs about the 'Maidens of Yeh'.

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In another connection I have commented on the last two lines of 'To Wang Lun'. But that poem and the third one on 'The Maidens of Yeh' share certain qualities which should be considered pertinent to my present discussion. The basic question is in what way are so many of Li Po's simple short poems effective. The two poems we have just read are both dramatic in nature, the latter poem being more so than the former. By 'dramatic' I mean they capture the events and situation of a moment. But the two poems work in different ways. The 'action' of the Yeh maidens are described vividly and in detail. And the poet even finds room for commenting on their behaviour in the two words 8e56j50t 'fencing shyness' in so limited a space. The authorial presence in the poem helps us to see the little drama more closely - as if we were also there. In 'To Wang Lun', the drama is largely contained in the first two lines, and there is not much detailed description of what goes on. What makes the poem 'dramatic', as distinguished from 'narrative' is, in actual


95 'Yeh-nu ts' u wu shou, ch'i san', ch. 25, p. 23b.
fact, the single word は "suddenly" at the beginning of the second line. So much for the difference between the two poems. A number of shared qualities, as I said, could be detected in both poems. One of them is the completeness and vividness of the vision captured. Another is the sense of participation that the reader is almost compelled to feel. Yet another is the clarity and flow of language. And there we are back to what was said at the beginning of this section.

Even the simplest of Li Po's poems are not always "artless"; perhaps even they can be usefully analysed and described in objective and precise critical language.
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