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ESSAY

THE *FU:* CHINA AND THE ORIGINS OF THE PROSE POEM

There is a popular notion among prose poets and literati from Europe and the Americas that the prose poem originated in the early nineteenth century with Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la Nuit,* and that Baudelaire continued its development in *Le Spleen de Paris (Paris Spleen).* Then Rimbaud followed with *Les Illuminations,* and a half-dozen other poets, almost all French, brought the form into the twentieth century.

In reality, the prose poem started in China during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), where it was known as *fu,* or rhymed prose. Essentially *the fu* was a court entertainment written for the emperor or for other nobles' amusement to accompany ceremonies, rituals and informal gatherings. Many times barbed with satiric political innuendoes, the *fu* usually consisted of a flamboyant and lengthy description of an object or natural phenomenon in rhymed verse that was introduced and sometimes intermittently interrupted by prose. The prose provided the necessary exposition for a piece, and the verse its rhapsodic language. Typical titles are "The Wind" and "The Owl," although such titles as "Climbing The Tower," "On Partings," and "On The Desolate City" provide a more accurate sense of the variety of subjects and approaches *fu* encompassed. A representative selection of early *fu,* with an excellent introduction, is Burton Watson's *Chinese Rhymed Prose* (Columbia University Press, 1971). The following excerpt from Watson's translation of "The Wind" conveys the early *fu's* dominant features:

> King Hsiang of Ch'u was taking his ease in the palace of the Orchid Terrace, with his courtiers Sung Yu and Ching Ch'a attending him, when a sudden gust of wind came sweeping in. The king, opening wide the collar of his robe and facing into it, said, "How delightful this wind is! And I and the common people may share it together, may we not?"
>
> But Sung Yu replied, "This wind is for your majesty alone. How could the common people have a share in it?"
>
> "The wind," said the king, "is the breath of heaven and earth. Into every corner it unfolds and reaches; without choosing between high or low, exalted or humble, it touches everywhere. What do you mean when you say that this wind is for me alone?"

Sung Yu replied, "I have heard my teacher say that the twisted branches of the lemon tree invite the birds to nest, and hollows and cracks summon the wind. But the breath of the wind differs with the place which it seeks out."

"Tell me, " said the king, "where does the wind come from?"

Sung Yu answered:

"The wind is born from the land
And springs up in the tips of the green duckweed.
It insinuates itself into the valleys
And rages in the canyon mouth,
Skirts the corners of Mount T'ai
And dances beneath the pines and cedars.
Swiftly it flies, whistling and wailing;
Fiercely it splutters its anger.
It crashes with a voice like thunder,
Whirls and tumbles in confusion,
Shaking rocks, striking trees,
Blasting the tangled forest.
Then, when its force is almost spent,
It wavers and disperses,
Thrusting into crevices and rattling door latches.
Clean and clear,
It scatters and rolls away.
Thus it is that this cool, fresh hero wind,
Leaping and bounding up and down,
Climbs over the high wall
And enters deep into palace halls ...

The poem goes on to exalt the "noble" aspects of the wind, fully revealing its socio-political attitude with striking clarity at the poem's conclusion:

"How well you have described it!" exclaimed the king, "but now may I hear about the wind of the common people?" And Sung Yu replied:

"The wind of the common people
Comes whirling from the lanes and alleys,
Poking in the rubbish, stirring up the dust,
Fretting and worrying its way along.
It creeps into holes and knocks on doors,
Scatters sand, blows ashes about,
Muddles in dirt and tosses up bits of filth.
It sidles through hovel windows
And slips into cottage rooms.

When this wind blows on a man,
At once he feels confused and downcast.
Pounded by heat, smothered in dampness,
His heart grows sick and heavy,
And he falls ill and breaks out in fever.
Where it brushes his lips, sores appear;
It strikes his eyes with blindness.
He stammers and cries out,
Not knowing if he is dead or alive.
This is what is called the lowly wind of the common people."

By the Sung (Song) Dynasty (960 — 1279 A.D.), the *fu* had developed into the form Western writers have come to recognize as the prose poem. It was completely written in prose, was far-reaching in subject and approach, and had few formal restrictions. To distinguish it from earlier forms of *fu*, it was called *wen fu*, and its greatest practitioner was also one of China's greatest poets, Su Shih (Su Shi)*, also known as Su Tung-p'o (Su Dong-po), who lived from 1037 to 1101. Su wrote many *fu*, his most famous the two *wenfu* on Red Cliff, which are available in most anthologies of classical Chinese poetry in translation, as well as in Burton Watson's *The Selected Poetry of Su Tung-p'o* (Copper Canyon, 1994). Here is Watson's rendering of the eerie beginning of the first Red Cliff piece, which, characteristically for Su, suggests entrance into a spirit realm, the world of the immortals—an alternate reality he thought could intersect with ours at any moment, and which bears a striking resemblance to the dream landscapes of modern Western prose poetry:

> In a little while, the moon rose from the eastern hills and wandered across the sky between the Archer and the Goat. White dew settled over the river, and its shining surface reached to the sky. Letting the boat go where it pleased, we drifted over the immeasurable fields of water. I felt a boundless exhilaration, as though I were sailing on the void or riding the wind and didn't know where to stop. I was filled with a lightness, as though I had left the world and were standing alone, or had sprouted wings and were flying up to join the immortals.

The poem is mostly a dialogue between the speaker and his friend whose "flute made a wailing sound __Long notes trailed through the night like endless threads of silk, a sound to make dragons dance in hidden caves, or to set the widow weeping in her lonely boat." The

flute player grieves "that life is so short" and envies "the long river that never stops." The speaker's answer, which I give in part, is one of the most famous passages in Chinese poetry:

> . . . Do you know how it is with the water and the moon? "The water flows on and on like this,' but somehow it never flows away. The moon waxes and wanes, and yet in the end it's the same moon. If we look at things through the eyes of change, then there's not an instance of stillness in all creation. But if we observe the changelessness of things, then we and all beings alike have no end. What is there to be envious about?

The relationship between our world, the spirit world, and the unconscious (one of the main concerns of modern Western prose poetry) is again apparent in the last section of Su's second Red *Cliff fit*.

> I went back to my friends and got into the boat, and we turned it loose to drift with the current, content to let it stop wherever it chose. The night was half over and all around was deserted and still, when a lone crane appeared, cutting across the river from the east. Its wings looked like cart wheels, and it wore a black robe and a coat of white silk. With a long, grating cry, it swooped over our boat and went off to the west.
>
> Soon afterwards, I left my friends and went to bed. I dreamed I saw a Taoist immortal in a feather robe come bouncing down the road past the foot of Lin-Kao. He bowed to me and said, "Did you enjoy your outing to the Red Cliff?" I asked him his name, but he looked down and didn't answer.
>
> "Ah, wait—of course—now I know! Last evening, flying over our boat and crying—that was you, wasn't it?"
>
> He turned his head and laughed, and I woke up with a start. I opened the door and peered out, but I could see no sign of him.

Su's teacher, Ou-yang Hsui (Ou-yang Xiu), was also a well-known poet and/w writer. A translation by A.C. Graham of his famous "The Sound Of Autumn" can be found in Cyril Birch's *Anthology of Chinese Literature,* Volume I (Grove Press, 1965). I present it here almost in its entirety because it was the piece that "liberated" the *fu* from most of its formal restrictions, employing prose "sentences" of different lengths throughout, instead of prose and poetry combined. But it still used rhyme to punctuate passages and enhance recitation, and generally followed *the fit's* original practice of lengthy description comprised of numerous details. In this connection, note at the beginning of the

poem that Ou-yang's enumeration of the possible meanings of the sound he hears harkens back to the cataloguing methods of early *fu*, especially the previously quoted "The Wind."

> One night when I was reading I heard a sound coming from the southwest. I listened in alarm and said:
> "Strange! At first it was a patter of drops, a rustle in the air; all at once it is hooves stampeding, breakers on a shore; it is as though huge waves were rising startled in the night, in a sudden downpour of wind and rain. When it collides with something it clatters and clangs, gold and iron ring together; and then it is as though soldiers were advancing against an enemy, running swiftly with the gag between their teeth, and you hear no voiced command, only the tramping of men and horses."
> I said to the boy, "What is this sound, go out and look."
> The boy returned and told me:
> "The moon and stars gleam white and pure, the bright river is in the sky, nowhere is there any sound of man; the sound is over among the trees."
> "Alas, how sad!" I answered. "This is the sound of autumn, why has it come? If you wish to know the signs which distinguish autumn, its colours are pale and mournful, mists dissolve and the clouds are gathered away; its face is clear and bright, with the sky high overhead and die sun of crystal; its breath is harsh and raw, and pierces our flesh and bones; its mood is dreary and dismal, and the mountains and rivers lie desolate. Therefore the sound which distinguishes it is keen and chill, and bursts out in shrieks and screams. The rich, close grass teems vivid green, the thriving verdure of splendid trees delights us; then autumn sweeps the grass and its colour changes, touches the trees and their leaves drop. The power by which it lays waste and scatters far and wide is the unexpended fury of the breath of heaven and earth....
> "Alas! The plants and trees feel nothing, whirling and scattering when their time comes; but mankind has consciousness, the noblest of all intelligences. A hundred cares move his heart, a myriad tasks weary his body; the least motion within him is sure to make his spirit waver, and how much more when he thinks of that which is beyond the reach of his endeavour, worries over that which his wisdom is powerless to alter! It is natural that his glossy crimson changes to withered wood, that his ebony black is soon flecked with stars! What use is it for man, who is not of the substance of metal and stone, to wish to vie for glory with the grass and trees? But remembering who it is who commits this

> violence against us, why should we complain against the sound of autumn?"
>
> The boy did not answer, had dropped his head and fallen asleep. I heard only the sound of the insects chirping from the four walls, as though to make a chorus for my sighs.

After the Sung, the *fit* declined in use among poets, although its importance can be clearly estimated by the publication in 1706 of the *Li-tai fu-hui, Collected Fu From The Centuries,* a collection of more than 3500 extant *fu* written from antiquity to 1644 (the end of the Ming Dynasty). Watson thinks the decline of the *fu*'s popularity was caused by the development of fiction in China, specifically the novel, at a time when, I would add, the vast number of out-of-work scholars sought employment anywhere they could find it, which included writing popular fiction and plays, both considered beneath the literary undertakings and social status of the established literati.

This does not mean that the *fu* disappeared from Chinese literature. As late as 1927, Lu Hsun (Lu Xun), China's most famous twentieth century writer, published *Wild Grass,* a book *of wen fu* which shows the form's continued vitality. A selection from the book can be found in Howard Goldblatt and Joseph S. M. Lau's important *Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1995). From that collection, here are the last four paragraphs of Lu's "Autumn Night" to show the characteristic twists and turns of the mind he uses throughout the book, and to point out the similarities and differences in subject and theme between Lu and Ou-yang's pieces, which may have been written 900 years apart but point to the continuity of Chinese thought and art through the ages. The date tree and the pink flower were previously contemplated in the poem. The translation is by Ng Mau-sang.

> I suddenly hear a slight tittering in the middle of the night, so soft that it seems not to want to awaken those who are asleep, though the titter echoes across the surrounding air. In the dead of night, there is no one about. I instantly recognize that this laughter is coming from my own mouth. Put to flight by the sound, I go back into my room and immediately raise the wick of my lamp.
>
> The glass pane of the back window rattles; many insects are still blindly battering against it. Shortly afterwards, a few squeeze in, probably through the holes in the paper covering. Once inside they knock against the glass lampshade, making yet more

rattling sounds. One plunges in from above, and runs into the flame. It is a real flame, I think. But two or three rest panting on the paper lampshade. The lampshade was replaced only last night, its snow-white paper folded in a wavelike pattern, with a sprig of scarlet jasmine painted in one corner.

When the scarlet jasmine blossoms, the date tree will again dream the dream of the tiny pink flower; it will grow lushly and bend in an arc. I hear again the midnight laughter, and immediately cut the train of my thought. I look at these little insects still resting on the snow-white paper—their heads big and tails small, like sunflower seeds, only half the size of a grain of wheat. How lovely and pitiable they are in their emerald hue.

I yawn, and light a cigarette, puffing out the smoke. I stare at the lamp and pay silent tribute to these dainty heroes in emerald green.

In the same collection, the half dozen prose poems by Chu Tzu-ch'ing (Zhu Ziqing) and Chou Tso-jen (Zhou Zuoren) prove that the *fu* is as viable as ever in Chinese literature. Once again the thought process is the focus of both men. Here is Chu's complete "Haste," translated by Howard Goldblatt.

The swallows may go, but they will return another day; the willows may wither, but they will turn green again; the peach blossoms may fade and fall, but they will bloom again. You who are wiser than I, tell me, then: why is it that the days, once gone, never again return? Are they stolen by someone? Then, by whom? And where are they hidden? Or do they run away by themselves? Then, where are they now?

I do not know how many days I've been given, yet slowly but surely my supply is diminishing. Counting silently to myself, I can see that more than 8,000 of them have already slipped through my fingers, each like a drop of water on the head of a pin, falling into the ocean. My days are disappearing into the stream of time, noiselessly and without a trace; uncontrollably, my sweat and tears stream down.

What's gone is gone, and what is coming cannot be halted. From what is gone to what is yet to come, why must time pass so quickly? In the morning when I get up there are two or three rays of sunlight slanting into my small room. The sun, does it have feet? Stealthily it moves along, as I, too, unknowingly follow its progress. Then as I wash up the day passes through my washbasin, and a breakfast through my rice bowl. When I am standing still and quiet my eyes carefully follow its progress past

> me. I can sense that it is hurrying along, and when I stretch out my hands to cover and hold it, it soon emerges from under my hands and moves along. At night, as I lie on my bed, agilely it strides across my body and flies past my feet. And when I open my eyes to greet the sun again, another day has slipped by. I bury my face in my hands and heave a sigh. But the shadow of the new day begins darting by, even in the midst of my sighing.
>
> During these fleeting days what can I, only one among so many, accomplish? Nothing more than to pace irresolutely, nothing more than to hurry along. In these more than 8,000 days of hurrying what have I to show but some irresolute wanderings? The days that are gone are like smoke that has been dissipated by a breeze, like thin mists that have been burned off under the onslaught of the morning sun. What mark will I leave behind? Will the trace I leave behind be so much as a gossamer thread? Naked I came into this world, and in a twinkling still naked I will leave it. But what I cannot accept is: why should I make this journey in vain?
>
> You who are wiser than I, please tell me why it is that once gone, our days never return.

"Haste" is described as an "essay" in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature,* as are Lu Hsun's pieces from *Wild Grass.* But C.T. Hsia, in *A History Of Modern Chinese Fiction,* identifies *Wild Grass* several times as a book of prose poems. The difference between certain kinds of essays and prose poems is many times not made clear by Chinese scholars working in English. Even Su's two pieces on Red Cliff, though identified as prose poems by Watson, are called "essays" and "prose poems" in the same sentence in Birch and "poetic expositions" by Stephen Owen in his monumental *An Anthology Of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (Norton, 1996).

This is an all too sketchy introduction, but it should be clear that the Chinese prose poem tradition antedates the Western by almost two millenniums. I think its early rise stems from the concision of the Chinese language, and to the development of the stringently condensed yet highly evocative anecdotes which became a Chinese literary staple early on, and which, to mention two works chosen at random, make up such diverse texts as the historical chronicles of the *Tso chuan (Zou zhuan)* and the philosophical tales of the *Chuang Tzu (Zhuang-zi),* both written during the Chou (Zhou) Dynasty (1122—221 B.C.), and available from Columbia University Press, again in translations by Burton Watson, who must be considered the foremost English language trans-

lator-scholar of Chinese literature for the last fifty years.

The irony in all this is that it is of little consequence whether the Western prose poet recognizes the true origin of the prose poem, since the prose poem tradition in the West is informed at every point by the milieu and sensibilities of Bertrand and Baudelaire, and most Western writers have adopted those attitudes and approaches as the prose poem's essential elements. I'm talking about the notions of the Romantic movement, under whose spell both men wrote. Their sense of a palpable supernatural world, a reality comprised of the angelic and demonic, have come into the twentieth century as surrealist imagery and depictions of dream landscapes of highly symbolic, mythic, and/or clinically psychological natures, not to mention the most identifiable aspect of the modern Western prose poem, and one which unites it with its Chinese ancestor—its following of the spontaneous twists and turns of the mind at work. There is very little in Western prose poetry of the realism that is the essence of Western fiction.

So what, then, is this little essay about? It is, I hope, a way to adjust our vision—to see from a broadened perspective where we are coming from, and with the new millennium opening before us, to point toward unexplored avenues down which we can go.

* There are two ways of writing Chinese characters in English. I have used the old, more familiar Wade-Giles method in the main text, followed by the newer Pinyin transliteration in parentheses.

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