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Difficulties in the Translation of “Difficult” Poems

MR CHAIRMAN AND DELEGATES to this large and distinguished assembly of scholars and poets, teachers and students, it is a pleasure to be speaking to you today. We all share many interests together, from different points of view but occupying common ground. So far as active poets are concerned, I stand before you as one guilty of writing poems for fifty years without a break, and it's my privilege to enjoy friendship with several Chinese poets of the highest merit who are active and writing today. Among the scholars and teachers here I know that Professor Ou Hong of Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou and Vice-President Jiang Hong-xin of Hunan Normal University at Changsha were the first to plan the formation of the English Poetry-Study Society of China. Professor Ou has trained so many excellent younger scholars in the field of English and American poetry, and he was my student at Cambridge University while preparing for his doctorate. Professor Jiang is Professor Ou's close friend and an excellent scholar; he is also my most considerate host at Hunan Normal University while I am currently a visiting teacher on his campus. And of course I recognize all around me the many students and ex-students of EPSI (English Poetry-Studies Institute) who have enjoyed the benefit of Professor Ou's remarkable seminars. Nowadays it has become a small world with active and cordial relations all the way across the literary and academic fields of work, and this conference will further expand these valuable links.

I take as my general theme the translation of poetry, because I think that many of us here are concerned with reading and understanding poems as a second-language activity, and because interpreting and teaching foreign poems have many problems in common with the tasks of translation. As a poet and also a teacher I have the highest respect for translators and for those who thus struggle to extend the boundaries of

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cultural knowledge and enjoyment. I have no special training in this field myself, but I have made and collaborated with translations of poetry from and into French, German, Italian and certain other European languages; and I have been very closely involved with a current collective project to translate into Chinese a substantial selection of my own poems. The activity of composing a poem in the first place shares some features with translation-work: pausing to consider exactly which words and expressions to use, building up the form and sound of a poem as if it already exists in your mind and as if you are translating this idea or process of thought into words on the page.

This then is my general theme: the translation of poetry. But because the theme is large and the time somewhat limited I select a more specific topic on which to focus: the special difficulties of translating “difficult” poems. I shall try to give an outline of this topic, which is itself difficult, and I shall be speculative and general rather than giving detailed examples. It would be very interesting to examine and discuss some individual texts, but to do this would require close working knowledge of at least two languages and would take up much time: we should need a workshop format rather than a single-voice monologue. I am going to present to you some ideas not fully developed, based on my own experience and reflections; I do not have any fixed conclusions to offer, and I hope that many of you may feel encouraged to explore your own points of view.

First I want to say something about this word “difficult”. I think we all know that, in almost all the cultural traditions of world history, poetry is widely regarded as “difficult”, as more challenging to understand than other modes of writing.¹ I think we also know that, in modern times, some tendencies in poetry-writing have displayed even greater difficulty than the more old-fashioned general way of writing poems for the general reader.² This is the notoriously extreme difficulty of modern, advanced or experimental poetry, clearly recognised as a characteristic feature in English and American modernism, with parallel historical developments in for example France, Germany, Italy and Russia, and strongly influencing your own Modern Movement here in China.³

My use on the present occasion of the word “difficult” is set against this large background, but is much more specific. In difficult modernist poetry there can be obscure and complex aspects relating to thought and ideas, to imagery and structure, to condensed or broken linkages, and to embedded references to other texts or works. I do not intend to refer to any of these aspects directly, although such features can and must present the translator with severe problems.⁴ I want instead to refer to specific difficulties of language and language-use. This is the face of the original text that confronts the translator most directly, as he or she stares at the page of a foreign poetry book and starts to plan a campaign of entry into this unfamiliar territory, searching for some way to bring a translated poem, recognisably still a poem, out of this foreign-language original. In difficult poetry much of the immediate obstruction to fluent, easy and successful translation is linguistic; it’s this that also puzzles the attentive reader, and challenges the teacher who tries to clarify hard or difficult language to a student class.

It is worth pointing out that difficult ideas in poems are not always expressed in language that is also difficult; for example, William Blake in his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* draws on language of almost child-like simplicity and yet his thought is sometimes profound and obscure. Emily Dickinson’s language is also mostly not difficult. There are also cases the other way around, of simple ideas expressed in elaborately subtle language: sometimes Tennyson is like this. But often difficult language in poems accompanies difficult thought, so that the difficulty of language is part of the whole structure and activity of poetic composition. Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* are certainly of this kind; and I have to admit that many of my own poems are like this, with the result that I do not have a wide readership and translators of my work have to confront an extra-hard struggle.

Let’s consider some particular aspects of linguistic difficult from the point of view of the second-language reader and translator. Word by word in sequence through the text the problems are first of all lexical: we want to trace semantic equivalence, idiom and register, and the stylistic colouring of word-choice. If the vocabulary is rich in shades of

alternative meaning, sometimes bringing in difficult fields of specialised usage and also historical or textual allusion in several different directions, the reader/translator pauses to consider the choice to be made. Which of the many pathways to follow? Sometimes the alternatives may be mutually incompatible or contradictory, and sometimes one of the alternative pathways may, if taken, give a strong new direction to the development of the text and its whole tendency of meaning.⁵ In a poetic composition that is dense with this richness of semantic complexity these tasks of meaning-choice present one challenge after another, in close succession, and each choice when made will affect all the consequent such choices and thus the connective tendency of the text as a whole.⁶

The usual method for restricting this distracting variety and range of choice is context. Phrase-meaning and sentence-meaning work differently from lexical semantics, because within a cultural community the patterns of common discourse establish contextual priorities of usual sense as compared with more unfamiliar combinations. This is selective context-relevance, including for example grammatical constraints, idiomatic collocations and topic focus promoting cohesion: all features well-known to students of linguistics.⁷ It is these features that make prose discourse quick and relatively easy to read without too much semantic hesitation: we mostly know what to expect, from one sentence to the next.

Poems are mostly not like this, and in a developed literary culture “difficult” poems are very distinctly different. The level of predictable linkage between one text component and the next, often between one word and the next, is often so low as to provoke continuing strong surprise in the reader, and a rich uncertainty over many possibilities crowded together. Not only is poetry characteristically condensed, so that some semantic links may be cut off or completely absent, but also a diversity of apparently incompatible reference is often deliberate and a valued feature of complex poems.⁸ A reader can move slowly through dense compositions of this kind, and pauses at moments of choice can enrich the activity of reading; it’s not necessary all the time to make precise decisions, because uncertainty may be intrinsic to the text and its internal connections to

its method of thought. Dr Samuel Johnson found this violation of context-relation a severe fault in the practice of the English Metaphysical poets, in whose work “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together”.⁹ But in a later comment T.S. Eliot observed that the “telescoping of images and multiplied associations” are often a source of vitality, the disparate material “compelled into unity by the operation of the poet’s mind”.¹⁰

In prose, though not all prose, there is generally a quite closely defined channel or corridor of sense-making, following the sequence of phrases and sentences, with a serial progressive development which is not distracted by word-sounds or by excess of side-meanings—incidental or accidental semantic possibilities that lie outside the main channel.¹¹ But in certain types of “difficult” poetry this corridor of sense is much wider and more open, more like a network across the whole expanse of the text, with many loops and cross-links of semantic and referring activity which extend the boundaries of relevance, and of control by context, in many directions at once. If these many directions are developed so as to produce strong contradiction and self-dispute then the method may become a dialectic practice, in which poetic form and expression are brought into internal contest with themselves and with each other.

For the translator these aspects of difficult language in a foreign poem are much harder to deal with. The choice of links in sense and dividing pathways at which to pause will be differently positioned in the target-language, and often there will be a pressure to establish basic coherence of sense if the translation is not just to fall to pieces.¹² The sound-patterns and speech-prosody in the original will not match to similar features in any possible form of the target language and its native poetic conventions, or even to plausible innovations along these lines. Maybe some residual application of textual cohesion or relevance-preference will have to be brought into use.

However, there are two very interesting and significant obstacles to any solution of this kind. The first is the now well-understood prevalence of semantic ambiguity in poetic language as a deliberate violation of

normal cohesion requirements. The English scholar and critic William Empson, well-known in China, was the first to identify and explore fully the complex role played by ambiguity in poetic composition, so that it became not a fault of style but a subtle enlargement of meaning and its possibilities.¹³ In very summary form we may describe the effect like this. In strictly local context the surrounding sense may point strongly to one word-meaning rather than to another, different meaning of the same word. But in larger context within a poem a less “probable” meaning may also open a semantic possibility that can give the overall meaning a richer sense, even (or especially) by irony or contradiction, so that often a very wide range of different senses can be found to be active and having an effect, maybe on different levels or discoverable in different stages of the poem’s development.¹⁴

The second obstacle to the translator’s reliance on textual cohesion is this. What is probable and can be predicted by following normative links in meaning and structure, including the regular completeness of grammatically well-formed sentences and consistency of topic reference, is frequently split apart in poetic composition, so that disorder and anomaly crop up all the time. Poetry is surprising, and good difficult poems sometimes surprise us so much that we can hardly breathe. A translation cannot be successful if, in order to make a foreign poem understandable, it makes it ordinary and rather predictable in its use of words.¹⁵ Thus, the language used in the translation of a difficult and surprising poem must also be difficult and surprising.

This notion of surprise is worthy of some further thought. It was John Keats who in a letter to John Taylor said, “I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess”,¹⁶ and I think that the excess he had in mind was to run past the normal bounds and limits in making new combinations of words and thoughts that draw the reader into new kinds of pleasurable excitement. In a more technical way we can acknowledge that unfamiliarity plays an important part in pattern-recognition, and we can ask how this feature gains its effect. If two words are placed together that are not normally associated as from the same field of reference or meaning, a kind of semantic spark or jump may be created that is

intensely localised within the continuity of the text process: it may be a kind of “hot spot” that burns very bright but which the reader can quite quickly assimilate within the larger patterns of composition. Sometimes these sparks can follow in quick succession, many of them, producing disturbance patterns of their own, extended trains of unfamiliar words and phrases which break the rules for local sense. Even so, a reader can feel carried along by the energy of surprise and unresolved ambiguity, and the translator can recognise the challenge to translating skills even if good solutions are hard to find.

But what happens if the surprises produced by difficult and unfamiliar combinations of language seem so extreme and excessive that the underlying tendency becomes near-impossible to discover, making choices between alternative meanings seem arbitrary and obscure? In such cases the effect is not a rewarding surprise but an experience close to bafflement: we lose confidence in the text or in our ability to deal with it adequately. Here, extended passages of densely difficult language seem like insurmountable obstacles, because access to meaning seems blocked. Does this then mean that the skills of the careful reader and the practised translator are defeated, possibly by features of damaging incoherence within the original text itself? That may sometimes be the case.

However, in drawing these very general thoughts towards a conclusion, I want to present the matter of difficulty in poetic language from an alternative point of view. In the writing of modern and modernist poetry in which various kinds of difficulty have been prominent features, that difficulty itself has been developed as a method and a structure of discourse. When links in text-cohesion are violated or cut off, when extreme ambiguity displaces recognisable topic-focus, when discourse levels and fields of reference are switched abruptly and without sign-posts, these features may begin to comprise a second-order strategy of pattern-making in a new way. Indeed, the use of rhyme-forms in traditional English and also Chinese poetry may work like this, by setting up delayed parallels of sound-effect that cross the boundaries of sentence form and phrasal intactness.¹⁷ In more modernist procedures, threads of sound-relation and resemblance may likewise open links that

can jump across semantic space, activating the reader's auditory memory as a carrier of text-pattern.

For example, a switch of semantic field may seem locally disruptive in the most extreme manner; but then the reader may observe some later recurrence of the switched field that sets up a trace or thread, sometimes obliquely or many lines later. This may be not meaning determining its pattern of expression, so much as pattern and pattern-violation generating their own tendencies of meaning—or perhaps we should call this “meaning”, in some second-order sense. I don't think this is equivalent to post-modernist playfulness, where meaning is allowed to skim across a surface in a deliberately arbitrary way, because the use of difficulty as a method of poetic thought is different both in intention and effect from difficulty as a playground or a funfair.

In the close encounter with such features, discovered in the writing-practice of difficult poets and different kinds of difficult poem, we may be close to the inner dynamics of poetic thought. The relations of thought to meaning and argument to enquiry lie somewhere within the experience of language structures, but often not along the regular lines of normal sense. So that if a reader or translator can enter the text-space of language used in these intensely non-normal ways, a poem may reveal some of its internal energy, or poetic thought itself. It is often said that “poetry is what gets lost in translation”: on the contrary, I believe it may at least sometimes be true that “poetry is what can be discovered in translation”. What at first may resist understanding may after deep study in fact promote understanding and enrich it.

Here is one of the significant differences between the translator and the teacher. If a class of students has some problems in understanding a difficult poem, a teacher will often be under pressure to explain it: such explanation may make the immediate task of comprehension easier, but explanation can often be the enemy of poetry. On the other hand, a translator is not in the business of providing explanations, and this may be an important advantage in translating-work.

If some aspects of difficulty in modernist poems and the language of their composition may in fact work in these ways, what are the implications for translation of poems composed like this? By a paradox, this account of difficulty may actually be encouraging. When a translator meets a case of difficult language, perhaps of the very extreme variety, then the difficulty may be not an obstacle to translation but an integral and active part of what is to be translated. The translator examines the kinds and methods of difficulty in the original text, and the surprise or bafflement which it produces, and then seeks for equivalent (or near-equivalent) ways to contrive active, energy-promoting difficulty in the translation itself. For example, if there are strong ambiguities in the original poem, there's no need to select only one possible sense and then translate that: instead, translate one ambiguity by another! Don't try to solve the problem: translate it!¹⁸

Well, I realise that I have taken up quite enough time giving even a general outline of a new idea for an approach to the problem of translating difficult poems, in particular modern and modernist ones. The test of whether such an approach could work and produce good solutions must be practical and depend upon experiment. Especially now in China there is a large body of European and American modernist poetry, produced in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, which is waiting for brave new translators to make brave new experiments. I hope that these few words here today may suggest some directions and give some encouragement.

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NOTES

1 It is useful to distinguish “difficult” from “obscure”. When poetry is *obscure* this is chiefly because information necessary for comprehension is not part of the reader’s knowledge. The missing information may be specific (a personal name, say, or some tacit allusion), or general (an aspect of religious belief, say); and finding out this information may dispel much of the obscurity. When poetry is *difficult* this is more likely because the language and structure of its presentation are unusually cross-linked or fragmented, or dense with ideas and response-patterns that challenge the reader’s powers of recognition. In such cases, extra information may not give much help. Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1728–43) is now obscure but not especially difficult; Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” or “Sunday Morning” (both published in his *Harmonium*, 1917) are difficult but mostly not obscure; Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), or in long retrospect the *wuti* (“no title”) poems of Li Shang-yin (c.813–58), are hard for readers because they are obscure and also difficult; indeed, their difficulties are deliberate and integral to poetic method; compare also the later case of Bada Shanren (1626–1707): Joseph Chang and Qianshen Bai with Stephen D. Allee (eds), *In Pursuit of Heavenly Harmony; Paintings and Calligraphy by Bada Shanren* (Washington: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, in association with Orchid Press, 2003), p. 145. In a later case there is pastiche obscurity as a quasi-parody of eclectic learning: compare Liu E (1857–1909), *Lao can youji* (1907), trans. Harold Shadick as Liu T’ieh Yün, *The Travels of Lao Ts’an* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1952 [1966]), see Chap. 9, pp. 267–71. In such combinations, each type of hardship for the reader makes the other type harder (and, it may be, more rewarding) to deal with and to understand.

2 On Wallace Stevens see e.g. Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry; The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), Chap. 6: “Wallace Stevens and ‘The Illegible Meanings of Sounds’” (pp. 133–48 and esp. n. 15 on “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”, pp. 147–8); Jonathan Kertzer, *Poetic Argument; Studies in Modern Poetry* (Kingston Ont.: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988 [1989]), Chap. 6: “Wallace Stevens” (pp. 147–71). On cross-links and disparate experience in *The Waste Land* see e.g. Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley, *Reading “The Waste Land”; Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), Chap. 4: “Amalgamating Disparate Experience; Myth and Gender in ‘A Game of Chess’” (pp. 94–120); for discussion of constituent disorder and fragmentation in the poem, see Ronald Bush, *T.S. Eliot; A Study in Character and Style* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), Chap. 5: “‘Unknown Terror and Mystery’: *The Waste Land*” (pp. 53–78), Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism; A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908–1922* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), Chap. 9: “*The Waste Land*” (pp. 165–212), and more generally Gerald R. Bruns, “The Obscurity of Modern Poetry Revisited: An Essay on Intimate Realism”, *Renascence*, 53 (2001), 173–90. On “obscurity” in Li Shang-yin, see James Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin; Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), Chap. 4: “Problems of Translation” (pp. 34–47), followed by English translations with notes and commentaries; Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism; Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century, with Translations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 188–96; and Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics; Omen of the World* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 44–53, and Chap. 2: “Transparencies; Reading the

Chinese lyric" (pp. 54–77). In a discussion dating from 1981, "Misty Poetry: An Interview", the poet Gu Cheng (1956–93) was asked what he thought about the alleged "difficulty in understanding" of *menglongshi* (= "misty poetry"); for his reply [in English translation] see Gu Cheng, *Sea of Dreams: The Selected Writings of Gu Cheng*, trans. Joseph R. Allen (New York: New Directions, 2005), pp. 181–5 (pp. 182–4), also p. 1x; a somewhat different and shorter (English) version of this interview is included in Sean Golden and Chu Chiyu (eds), *Selected Poems by Gu Cheng* (Hong Kong: Renditions, 1990), pp. 168–71; and see also [Li Zhi-min], *New Chinese Poetry under the Influence of Western Poetics: The Origins, Development and Sense of Nativeness* (Guangzhou: English Poetry Studies Institute, Sun Yat-sen University, 2005), Chap. Six (pp. 89–105).

3 For discontinuous text construction in European and American early modernist poetry see Andrew M. Clearfield, *These Fragments I Have Shored: Collage and Montage in Early Modernist Poetry* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research, 1984), esp. Chap. 3: "The Anglo-American Background" (pp. 39–56), and Chap. 4: "Discontinuous and A syntactic Poetry on the Continent, 1905–1915" (pp. 57–82); regarding the oriental precedents for montage and image-linkage see Sergei Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot" (1929; also translated elsewhere as "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" and "Off-Frame"), in S.M. Eisenstein, *Selected Works*, 1: *Writings, 1922–34*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London: BFI, 1988), pp. 138–50, see also pp. 13–15; and further, Eisenstein's "The Music of Landscape and the Fate of Montage", in his *Nonindifferent Nature; Film and the Structure of Things*, trans. Herbert Marshall (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), pp. 216–383; and then further (with reservation), Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism; Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005). On Chinese literary modernism and the problems of modernity see Zhang Zao, "Development and Continuity of Modernism in Chinese Poetry Since 1917", in Wendy Larson and Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg (eds), *Inside Out; Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), pp. 38–59; [Li Zhi-min], *New Chinese Poetry*, Chap. Seven (pp. 106–21); Jiayan Mi, *Self-Fashioning and Reflexive Modernity in Modern Chinese Poetry, 1919–1949* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), Introduction (pp. 1–13) and *passim*; on the dialectic aspect of Chinese "modernity" and its origins, see e.g. pp. 233–7, 247–52; on alleged obscurity in modern Chinese poetry see Michelle Yeh, "'Light a Lamp in a Rock': Experimental Poetry in Contemporary China", *Modern China*, 18 (1992), 379–409 [with full bibliography, if now 15 years old]. For literary modernity and modernism in a Middle-Eastern context see Adūnis [Ali Ahmed Said], *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, trans. by Catherine Cobham (1st French ed. 1985, this trans. from the Arabic, London: Saqi Books, 2003), Chap. 4: "Poetics and Modernity" (pp. 75–102): "I find no paradox in declaring that it was recent Western modernity which led me to discover my own, older modernity outside our 'modern' politico-cultural system established on a Western model" (p. 81); see also Alain Badiou, "A Poetic Dialectic: Labid ben Rabi'a and Mallarmé", in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2005), Chap. 5 (pp. 46–56).

4 For some landmark Chinese studies (in English translation) see Tak-Hung Leo Chan, *Twentieth-Century Chinese Translation Theory; Modes, Issues and Debates* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004), also available in electronic form via ebrary (Paolo Alto, 2004), see esp. Part II Section F: "The untranslatability of poetry", pp. 201–22; and see also Hai An (Lee Dingjun) (ed.), *Zhong xi shi ge fan yi bai nian lun*

ji [= *A Centennial Anthology of Sino-Occidental Poetry Translation*, main texts in Chinese] (Shanghai: Shanghai wai yu jiao yu chu ban she, 2007); further see Michelle Yeh “On English Translation of Modern Chinese Poetry”, in Eugene Eoyang and Lin Yao-fu (eds), *Translating Chinese Literature* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 275–91, and Liu Zhongde, *Wen xue fan yi shi jiang / Ten Lectures on Literary Translation* (Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corp., 1991), Lect. 9: “Problems of Translating Poems” (pp. 128–60) and Lect. 10: “Translation of English Poetry into Chinese” (pp. 161–76).

5 It is possible to recognise here two aspects of reader practice which can be regarded separately, as alternative or complementary: tracing the operational development of meaning-frames so as to accomplish understanding; or construing the grammatical and logical formats of sentence and discourse structure so as to identify procedures of semantic coding; both aspects may converge upon a shared target, of ‘making sense’, but by following quite different routes. Broadly, the first approach is that of the literary critical tradition, and the second that of the tradition of analytical linguistics. A translator, especially of “difficult” poems, may need to take insights from both of these traditions; see further (e.g.) W.K. Wimsatt, Jr and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism; A Short History* (reprinted, 2 vols, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), and Lyn Frazier and Charles Clifton, Jr, *Construal* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

6 Here may be introduced the notion of meaning-threads or thematic linkage. Sometimes in working on a “difficult” poem a translator may hesitate over how to deal with a word or expression which seems to have many possible meanings. The translator notices that one of the possible meanings seems to have a connection with other words and meanings within the poem, coming before and after the problem word or expression. Maybe this link is an accident, but maybe it is part of the poem’s underlying argument, or one of its meaning-threads; in which case the translator can seemingly with some confidence select the translation of the problem word or expression which fits in best with this line of development. Following this course would help to give the translated poem a certain coherence of connected meaning. But sometimes appearances are deceptive. In noticing what looks like a prominent link, the translator may overlook a more latent or dispersed alternative, or indeed several of them. Furthermore, within a poem a word or expression may precisely *not* fit at all, maybe even hinting at a connection which it is too discrepant in alternative signification to accommodate neatly. Or, indeed, problem words and expressions may include several of these different possible kinds of connection, all at once. If the original poem is full of alternative meaning-links and threads which do not overtly correspond to a central and single line of development, the translator must resist the temptation to make the behaviour of the original poem more orderly, and must respect possible word-meanings that do not fit in just as much (almost as much) as those that do. The translator has to be very sensitive to meaning, but not over-respectful towards its demands!

7 Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance; Communication and Cognition* (2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); John Lyon, *Linguistic Semantics; An Introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995; basic discussion); Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance; Cognition and Context* (2nd ed., Manchester: St. Jerome, 2000); David Hunter, “Contextualism, Skepticism and Objectivity”, in Robert J. Stainton and Christopher Viger (eds), *Compositionality, Context and Semantic Values; Essays in Honour of Ernie Lepore* (London: Springer, 2008), pp. 105–28 (technical). Overview of coherence/cohesion features in B. Hatim and I. Mason,

Discourse and the Translator (London: Longman, 1990), Chap. 10: "Discourse Texture" (pp. 192–222); fuller discussion in James Allen, *Natural Language Understanding* (2nd enl. ed., Redwood City, Cal.: Benjamin/Cummings, 1995, plus downloadable software), Chap. 15: "Using World Knowledge", (pp. 463–99). Most of these linguistic-based treatments are, though instructive, too elementary to achieve nuanced analysis of poetic discourse.

8 A complicating feature in the discussion of uncertainty and indeterminateness in poetic texts and their interpretation is the notorious perception that in Chinese traditional poetry the kinds of inherent ambiguity at all levels, in meaning and grammatical structure, have always been consistently high and also very distinctive as features of how such poetry gains its effects and sets special tasks for the sophisticated reader. These aspects confront the translator in the reverse direction, from Chinese into English, with a different set of linguistic and generic problems, distinctive to the Chinese language and specifically to Chinese poetry. The perceived absence of Western-style sentence morphology, including subject-predicate determination and inflectional governance constructions, is commonly held to constitute Chinese lyrical poems as fundamentally more indeterminate and ambiguous than any of their non-oriental counterparts. But of course such conventionally nuanced features are, in native context, expressive of interpretation-choices much more than they are obstacles to comprehension: ambiguity as poised indecision in construal and the multiple possibilities of only part-resolved implicature, especially in such aspects as number and tense structures and person-forms in verb systems, are or were a way of life for such text-practice and its adept readers. Consult in this regard David Hawkes, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), e.g. pp. 82–3, 107; David Hinton (sel. and trans.), *The Selected Poems of Tu Fu* (New York: New Directions, [1988]), pp. x–xv; Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism*, pp. 7–12, 153–4, etc.; A.C. Graham (sel. and trans.), *Poems of the Late Tang* (Harmondsworth, Mddx: Penguin, 1965, enl. and reprinted, 1977), pp. 21–5 and ff. For salutary reconsideration of the "Chinese ambiguity" argument in philosophical/logical context see Robert Wardy, *Aristotle in China* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 6–10, 21–5, and *passim*; and compare also Arthur Cooper (sel. and trans.), *Li Po and Tu Fu: Poems Selected and Translated, with an Introduction and Notes* (Harmondsworth, Mddx: Penguin, 1973), pp. 52–5; Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry*, pp. 121–7, 138–42; Joseph R. Allen (sel. and trans.), *Sea of Dreams*, pp. xii–xv.

9 Samuel Johnson, "Cowley" (1779), in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on their Works* (1779–81), ed. Roger Lonsdale (3 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), Vol. 1, pp. 200, 326–8.

10 T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), orig. anon. *TLS* review of Grierson (ed.), *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1921); reprinted in *Selected Essays* (3rd enl. ed., London: Faber, 1951), p. 283; for Eliot on "difficulty", see e.g. p. 289. A powerful account of reader-experienced difficulty of apprehension is given by Malcolm Bowie: "Mallarmé is incomparably sensitive to those moments in human experience when familiar meanings dissolve and vacancy, or a dizzying blur of potential meanings, takes their place. His most compelling imaginative strokes often portray disruptions and discontinuities within the operations of mind. Many of his poems could as usefully be examined for their gaps, elisions, discrepancies and unannounced shifts of register as for the interplay between their units of sustained sense. Refusing to be peremptory in his search for coherence, he may suspend an idea while it is still half-formed in order to explore its

constituent parts or to give cognate or opposed ideas their say in the matter" (Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* [Cambridge: CUP, 1978], Chap. 1: "Difficulty" [pp. 3–18] [p. 5, compare p. 83]). Compare Eliot's comment on the *Anabasis* of Saint John Perse: "Any obscurity of the poem, on first reading, is due to the suppression of 'links in the chain', of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of the cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilisation. The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced. Such selection of a sequence of images and ideas has nothing chaotic about it. There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts" (Preface to Saint John Perse, *Anabase* [= *Anabasis*], bilingual French-English text with trans. by T.S. Eliot, 1930; reprinted in *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode [London: Faber, 1975, reprinted 1987/88], p. 77). This comment advances a rather banal justification, since the method of dissonance and sequence-breakage does not require to be worked specifically by manipulation of images (implicitly visual), nor as impressionistic résumé of some overall state of historical culture. But for his readers at the time this justification may have helped to ease their bafflement; similar weak "justifications" were also produced for *The Waste Land*, perhaps for similar reasons; compare Grover Smith, *The Waste Land* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), Chap. 3: "*The Waste Land* in the making" (pp. 35–83, and esp. 48–64); and more generally, Robert von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 212.

11 Compare e.g. Eugene Charniak, *Statistical Language Learning* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), Chap. 10: "Word Senses and Their Disambiguation" (pp. 147–62), and Nicholas Asher and Alex Lascarides, "Lexical Disambiguation in a Discourse Context", in James Pustejovsky and Branimir Boguraev (eds), *Lexical Semantics; The Problem of Polysemy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 69–108.

12 Basic coherence of sense is frequently also given shape by the closure or terminal completeness of literary form, even when fragmentary or unresolved structure comprises part of conscious method. Poetic closure functions very differently in successive literary eras and also in Western practice as compared with Chinese counterparts: see e.g. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure; A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), esp. Chap. 2.1v: "Associative and Dialectic Structures" (pp. 139–58), and Chap. 5.111: "Closure and Anti-Closure in Modern Poetry" (pp. 234–60); Yang Ye, *Chinese Poetic Closure* (New York: P. Lang, 1996), esp. pp. 14–16 & Chap. 6: "An Open Ending: Towards the Western Horizon" (pp. 116–40); and also Shuen-fu Lin, *The Transformation of the Chinese Lyric Tradition; Chiang Kuei and Southern Sung "Tz'u" Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), Chap. Two: "The Process of Feeling" (pp. 94–141) and esp. "Self-Containment and the Unitary Form" (pp. 98–106).

13 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; 3rd rev. ed., London: Chatto & Windus, 1953; unaltered reprint, London: Pimlico, 2004). Empson's "method" has been criticised, e.g. "the method tends to atomistic, in-depth analyses of lexical and semantic complexity without the restraint imposed by the consideration of the mind's involvement with the ligatures of thought" (Stanley Fish, "*Is There a Text in this Class?*"; *The Authority of Interpretative Communities* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980], pp. 57–8); which for Empson was probably a major point of the "method". Compare also

John Haffenden, *William Empson: Against the Christians* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 204, 282; and see also Antonio García Berrio, *A Theory of the Literary Text*, trans. from the Spanish by Kenneth A. Horn (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992), 2.3.4: "Artistic Ambiguity as a Poetic Property", pp. 294–300, and compare pp. 170–9. Empson took as an example of his poetic ambiguity of the first type a translation by Arthur Waley of a couplet by T'ao Ch'ien (T'ao Yüan-ming), cited (without reference) from Waley's *One Hundred & Seventy Chinese Poems* (London: Constable, 1918, new ed., 1962), p. 60; see Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, pp. 23–5. Waley presented his text as an isolated 8-line lyric, whereas in fact it is part of a connected sequence; see A.R. Davis (ed. and trans.), *T'ao Yüan-ming (AD 365–427); His Works and their Meaning* (2 vols, Cambridge: CUP, 1983), Vol. I, pp. 14–16, Vol. II (Chinese text and additional commentary), pp. [2]–4, and also James Robert Hightower (trans.), *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 16–19; John Reichert, *Making Sense of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 69–72. See in addition Eugene Eoyang's translation in Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo (eds), *Sunflower Splendor; Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1975), pp. 50–1; Eugene Eoyang has discussed Empson's "limited" understanding of Waley's somewhat misleading translation, and Empson's nonetheless rather brilliantly fitting insight, in "T'ao Ch'ien's 'The Seasons Come and Go: Four Poems'—A Meditation", *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, 20 (1998), 1–9.

14 For review of the post-Empson debate concerning poetic ambiguity see Soon Peng Su, *Lexical Ambiguity in Poetry* (London: Longman, 1994), Chap. 4: "The Role of Context in Ambiguity" (pp. 61–90; for nonlinear text sequencing see esp. pp. 80–4). On textual ambiguity and undecidability see Gerald Bruns, *Inventions; Writing, Textuality and Understanding in Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), Chap. 4: "Systems versus Tongues; or, the New Rhetoric versus the Old" (pp. 88–107). On probability-context recognition see again James Allen, *Natural Language Understanding*, Chap. 7: "Ambiguity Resolution: Statistical Methods" (pp. 189–222); further on ambiguity resolution see Chap. 10 (pp. 295–323), also pp. 327–45 on grammatical constraints. In modern linguistic research, indeterminacy and ambiguity are major themes in logical description and machine translation methods. See e.g. Chao-Huang Chang and Gilbert K. Krulee, "Resolution of Ambiguity in Chinese and its Application to Machine Translation", *Machine Translation*, 6 (1991), 279–315; Yufen Hsieh *et al.*, "Limited Syntactic Parallelism in Chinese Ambiguity Resolution", *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 24 (2009), 1227–1264. The theme of context in linguistic construal is itself undecidable, across a spectrum from syntax rules, discourse world-implication and indeed real-world frame setting, all the way by indivisible steps back to singular lexical items, before any dictionary has provided first-scan context by citations of usage. "Knowing a language" is for a speaker/reader (more especially when literate) an inevitable contextualism, not easily quantifiable.

15 I.A. Richards, the Cambridge teacher of William Empson, sometimes thought and wrote as if ambiguity in literature and especially poetry was a central and even deliberate feature in complex and dense writing practice, but that it thereby presented to the reader a challenging task, of decoding and resolving an ambiguous text in search of clarity in its internal meanings: "The truth is that very much of the best poetry is necessarily ambiguous in its immediate effect. Even the most careful and responsive reader must reread and do hard work before the poem forms itself clearly and unambiguously in his mind" (I.A.

Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2nd ed., 1926], p. 291). This approach esteemed the value of textual complexity but comprised a kind of ultimately reductive (“scientific”) motive, and not one shared by Empson.

16 John Keats, letter to John Taylor of 27 February 1818; *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (2 vols, Cambridge: CUP, 1958), Vol. 1, p. 238; compare Chiang K’uei (Jiang Kui, c.1155–c.1221), “If the text’s ending (*pi’en chung*) can take people by surprise, or reverse the meaning of the whole text, it is wonderful” (*Pai-shih Tao-jen shi-shuo / White Stone Taoist’s Remarks on Poetry*, cit. in Yang Ye, *Chinese Poetic Closure*, p. 101). Compare Chiang K’uei’s fuller account:

There are four kinds of high subtlety in poetry. The first is the high subtlety of principle. The second is the high subtlety of idea. The third is the high subtlety of imagination. The fourth is the high subtlety of spontaneity. When a poem is seemingly obstructed but is in fact continuous, this is called the high subtlety of principle. To set forth an event which takes the reader by surprise is called the high subtlety of idea. To write out secrecy and delicacy, like showing the bottom of a transparent pool, is called the high subtlety of imagination. When a poem is neither marvellous nor strange, stripped of all verbal ornamentation, and is something which one knows to be superb without knowing why, this is called the high subtlety of spontaneity.

Chiang K’uei (Jiang Kui), cit. Shuen-fu Lin, “Chiang K’uei’s Treatises on Poetry and Calligraphy”, in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 293–314 (p. 303). On calligraphy see also Chang Ch’ung-ho and Hans H. Frankel (ed. and trans.), *Two Chinese Treatises on Calligraphy*: Jiang Kui, “Sequel to the ‘Treatise on Calligraphy’” (*Xu shu pu*) (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 17–29, [101]–121, 122–4.

17 On rhyme: e.g., Michael McKie, “The Origins and Early Development of Rhyme in English Verse”, *Modern Language Review*, 92 (1997), 817–31; Richard Bradford, *Silence and Sound; Theories of Poetics from the Eighteenth Century* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992), Chap. 6: “Rhyme” (pp. 133–58); Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult*, pp. 66–89; James Longenbach, *The Art of the Poetic Line* (Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf, 2008); W.A.C.H. Dobson, “The Origin and Development of Prosody in Early Chinese Poetry”, *T’oung Pao*, 54 (1968), 231–50; Arthur Waley, “Notes on Chinese Prosody”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (April 1918, no volume number), 249–61; Benjamin Elman, “From Value to Fact: the Emergence of Phonology as a Precise Discipline in Late Imperial China”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 102 (1982), 493–500 (“Renewed interest in phonology grew out of the rigorous rhyming requirements in Chinese poetics” [p. 496]); Heming Yong and Jing Peng, *Chinese Lexicography; A History from 1046 BC to AD 1911* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), e.g. pp. 171–5, 212–3, 238–55; Chap. 19 (pp. 347–64).

18 Compare also Joseph Allen, *Sea of Dreams*: “Yet on another level it is clear that Gu Cheng’s later poems exploit the particularities of Chinese language to create conspicuous ambiguity—that is, an ambiguity that needs to be translated” (p. xv).

[Notes and references added, Jan–March 2009]

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