Kenneth Rexroth's Versions of Li Ch'ing Chao

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In the introduction to his volume of poems titled *The Signature of All Things* (1949), Rexroth expresses his belief in personality and his preference for poems that can be sung. At age 44, nine years since the publication of his first volume of poems and nine years since the death of his first wife Andree, he contrasts them to those earlier, complex poems he'd written: to heroes and martyrs of social conflict in the language of "Philosophical elegy." These new poems, unlike those, are as simple, as personal, and as close to the integral experience of the integral man as he could make them:

> Perhaps the integral person is more revolutionary than any program, party, or social conflict.
> At least I have come to think so. And I have little doubt but that he – the irreducible man – is the great enemy of the fools and rascals who are destroying the world.[1]

A new version of his earlier "religious anarchism" – the point of view informing the Gospels, the sayings of Buddha, and poems of Lao Tze and Chuang Tze – thus underlies these *Signature* poems. Relatedly, his poetic kinship lies now with writers of "melodic and directly communicative" songs – folk songs from various nations, songs from the Middle Ages and from the English Renaissance that one can actually sing. It should not be surprising then that the *Signature* volume begins with a pair of poems written, as the subtitle notes, "To Jimmy Blanton's Music: 'Sophisticated Lady, Body and Soul.' " If poetry could not bring the world to its senses, it would have to provide a stay against those fools and rascals who attempt to utterly reduce personal relationships to commodity relationships. It would sing the irreducible man.

The power of sympathy may be sufficient to link the irreducible man

in 20th century America and the irreducible woman in 12th century China, and yet I feel the need in this discussion for an intermediary reference point – for another moment in another poetic tradition distinguished by its use of the lyric. Consequently, I propose to initially draw upon a collection of sixteenth-century English courtly poets. I do so, first, because I wish to locate the poetic resources Rexroth brought to his versions of some of Li's most complex and elegant poems; and, next, because I wish to propose an idea of the lyric that may enable us to better hold in a single view Li's achievement in her poems and Rexroth's achievement in making them accessible to the English-speaking world.

In the preface to his collection of poems by Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, Ralegh, and Davies, the editor, J. Bullit speaks of the modern reader's difficulty in approaching such texts. They incorporate a world that is for us as strange and exotic as the world of Kubla Khan, he notes, and so we need to make a special imaginative effort to become adequately appreciative readers of them.[2] I agree, and yet I think that when lyrical poetry is involved, the strenuousness of that effort is reduced whenever the full potentiality of the lyric is approached. That potentiality, I suggest, originates in the poet's combination of powers: to project the daydreaming world of the speaker, to incorporate a sense of the ordinary, given world out of which that daydreaming arises, and to make the distinction or opposition between the two seem to vanish. Whenever that fusion occurs, the poem becomes familiar and accessible to us even while a pleasing strangeness hangs on. And so it is, I submit, in the case of "The Seafarer" and of "Walsingham," two 16th century English, meditatively lyrical poems on the subject of love.

In "The Seafarer" we enter the world of a woman whose thoughts tend toward her lover gone off to sea and then return to her own altered situation at home:

In ship, freight with remembrance
  Of thoughts and pleasures past,
He sails that hath in governance
  My life while it may last.

. . . .

When other lovers in arms across
  Rejoice their chief delight,
Drowned in tears, to mourn my loss
  I stand the bitter night

In my window, where I may see
Before the winds how the clouds flee
Lo! What a mariner love hath made me!

These words elaborate a cry from the heart. It does not matter that the author was a male courtier, or that he was actually doing an English version of a poem by an Italian poet. The diction and the tone are resonant and affecting. Sympathetically drawn into the poem, we come to see through the lady's day dreaming eyes; and we come to feel the objects of her world merging into the wholeness of her darkened emotional life. She lives in a peculiarly lucid daydream and yet she seems indeed native to the bitter Northern coastal landscape she speaks out of. The strangness and ordinariness of her life seem fused, hence accessible.

Another, more elaborated version of the meditative love lyric from 16th century England, "Walsingham" begins by projecting the speaker's daydream in the language of romantic seeking. Meeting a traveler returning from a holy shrine in remote, western England, he inquires if that pilgrim has met his lady on his way:

She is neither white nor brown,
But as the heavens fair,
There is none hath a form so divine
In the earth or the air.

Hearing the traveler's reply that he did meet such a woman – her face, gait, and grace seemed that of a queen or a nymph – the speaker next reveals that perfect creature has deserted him. And he goes on to give the reason: "Love likes not the falling fruit from the withered tree." Here the daydream is momentarily but dramatically broken. Drawn from the world of limiting contingencies in which the speaker necessarily dwells, the commonplace image of the withered tree and its falling fruit projects an experienced truth: the decay of bright things, including love, in a life subject to time and change.

The world of personal reverie and the world of universal mutability thus clash here, and the latter seems triumphant in the continuing voice of the traveler whose sense of the irony of the situation prompts him to counsel a return to hard reality: "Know that Love is careless child, / And forgets promise past." But such counsel, drawn from a stock of wise platitudes, has not, finally, the power of compelling agreement. For,

acknowledging such limits as pertaining only to the fashionable idea of love, the original cry from the day-dreamer's heart is transformed into a closing declaration, voicing a passionately-held conviction. It is that, although love tied to the affections dissolves, true love – love preserved in memory and nourished in the mind – subsists as an intact possibility:

> But true love is a durable fire
> In the mind ever burning
> Never sick, never old, never dead,
> From itself never turning.

The self-realizing sensibility of the speaker-as-lover has undergone a refinement through suffering here, his love pared to its irreducible essentials. And that, perhaps, is the extraordinary potential of the lyric: to locate beneath the dross of limiting contingencies an irreducible quantum of brightness and to project that brightness in the form of a luminous, clarifying imagery.

The idea of the lyric which I have here extrapolated out of Rexroth's introduction and have found embodied in these two Renaissance love songs does seem to me to inform Rexroth's approach to the task of making Li's poems accessible to an English-speaking, Western audience. With a clear grasp of what had been accomplished in the western tradition of lyric poetry, I suggest that Rexroth brought, especially to Li's most sophisticated love poems, resources of language and of sensibility that made him more fully adequate to the task. But what of Rexroth's own best lyrics? Having advanced his idea of the simple, lyrical poem as an adequate vehicle for expressing the integral experience of the integral person, and having attempted to relate it to the kind of songs he felt close to, I want, before getting to his versions of Li, to now look at the title poem from *The Signature of All Things.*

The poem is composed of three, time-shifting sections, each of them embodying a lucid daydream; and read in sequence, they image the curve of a man's life in his dwelling place. The word "dwelling" seems appropriate because this poem is grounded in and around the speaker's summer cabin in the Sierra mountains; and more, because it celebrates Rexroth's idea of a vital dwelling place at the western edge of the American continent.

The trance-like sensation of vital wholeness that emerges in the first section originates in the speaker's sudden perception: of a correspondence

that links, on the one hand, his idle act of reading the mystical philosopher Boehme in the sunlight, and, on the other, the gold laurel leaves spinning down into the bottom of an adjacent crystal pool and creating a gold leaf floor. (Rexroth's "The evil of the world sinks [in] the electrolysis of love" summarizes this perception.) In section two Rexroth presents an imaginative tracing of the local life of this place – his imagination aided by the light of a full July moon. In its "cobbwebbed light" the speaker first makes out the hazy shapes of Holstein heiffers lying under a grove of oak trees, then perceives that the trees themselves are rooted in the graves of Indians who once lived in a village they had built here. In this hazily illuminated spot, "lit by a light not of this earth and at the same time of this earth," the speaker's soul has begun to merge into the wider morphology of this – not spare and isolate, but rich and interconnected – landscape.

In the last of this poem's sequence of lucid daydreams, the speaker's attentiveness – to objects rooted in his adopted place and to matters grounded in his daily life there – gets rewarded by a sustained moment of vision. The curve of his consciousness, as in the two preceding sections, inclines vertically toward the discovery of an interconnected network of things that are alive. In a simple and direct narrative style, reminiscent of "Walsingham," only more homely, he begins by recounting the act of dragging up a rotten log from the bottom of a pool. He let it lie in the sun for a month, chopped it into sections, then split them into kindling and spread the pieces out to dry. The very rhythms of his speaking evoke the daily rhythms of his life, and that life, deliberately and wisely lived, yields this reverberating moment of astonishment and illumination:

> When I dragged the rotten log
> From the bottom of the pool,
> It seemed heavy as stone.
> I let it lie in the sun
> For a month; and then chopped it
> Into sections, and split them
> For kindling, and spread them out
> To dry some more. Late that night,
> After reading for hours,
> While moths rattled at the lamp –
> The saints and the philosophers
> On the destiny of man –
> I went out on my cabin porch,

And looked up through the black forest
At the swaying islands of stars.
Suddenly I saw at my feet,
Spread on the floor of night, ingots
Of quivering phosphorescence,
And all about were scattered chips
Of pale cold light that was alive.[3]

What, elsewhere, Rexroth has a young mother say to her children about William Carlos Williams' Passaic River, we may perhaps say of Rexroth's daydreaming here in his own Sierra place:

[It] flows in our eyes,
And flows in time, and makes us
Part of it, and part of him.
That, children, is what is called
A sacramental relationship.

("A Letter to William Carlos Williams," p. 195.)

If Rexroth were to succeed in making Li's world familiar, that success would, in large measure, have to originate in such a resourceful capacity for discovering in his own ordinary world such extraordinary satisfaction as Li found in hers. But living wisely, as he might have put it, involved reading the saints and philosophers as well as chopping wood. Just so, I submit, Rexroth's attentiveness to his own vital dwelling place was linked to a comprehensive awareness of what had been achieved by men and women of articulate imagination in the history of civilized thought and feeling. Thus when he approached the most elegantly refined projections of Li's richly varied experience, I sense that he came to them aided by a firm grasp of what had been accomplished in the history of the Western lyric. Indeed, his diction and his phrasing frequently approximate the refinement of Renaissance English lyric poets.

Rexroth's version of "Spring Ends" recalls, in particular, the "Seafarer's" shadowed, elegiac landscape and the woman's burdened, self-critical sense of separation from her beloved husband. The poem begins by evoking images of falling and dying in the immediate landscape:

The gentle breeze has died down.
The perfumed dust has settled.
It is the end of the time
Of flowers. Evening falls . . .[4]

Evening falls around a woman so exhausted with grief that she has all day neglected to comb her hair ("He no longer exists. / All effort would be wasted.") But it is Rexroth's managing of the metaphor employed in the closing lines that makes this poem so reminiscent of that 16th century woman's identification with the overpowering strangeness of the world of the sea. Tears choke out the received news that the time of flowers persists at Two Rivers:

I had hoped to take a boat there,
But I know so fragile a vessel
Won't bear such a weight of sorrow.

The English-speaking reader has not often found language so witty and so finely elegiac, within the lyric mode, over recent centuries of literary history. In this occasion of translating Li, Rexroth makes it available again.

Among Li's most complex poems, those written out of occasions of separation from her husband during his travels to the mountains or his duty as magistrate in another town, seem most resistent to translation. Such poems project into the geographical landscape of Li's Shantung province the landscape of her own heart and mind. But that geographical landscape is itself noted through allusion more than through description. The technique she employs recalls Ralegh's assumption of the reader's familiarity with the identity of the holy shrine at Walsingham in remote Western England, with the tradition of Christian pilgrimages to such shrines, and even with the popular ballad Ralegh appropriated and elaborated. The sexual symbolism attached to her orchid boat and the conventional understanding of the ideograms the wild geese form in the sky – in Li's "Sorrow of Departure" (p. 27) – the Western reader may learn through research, and yet the responsibility of the translator for supplying language bearing an appropriately grave and complex tonality remains. And here again, I sense Rexroth's turning to the landscape of romantic idealism drawn from the English literary Renaissance more than from more recent traditions in English or American verse. Floating alone on the orchid boat, longing

to communicate with her absent husband, the woman's thoughts gather into the complaint that she cannot escape her longings by giving in to them as other natural objects can do:

花自飄零水自流，
一種相思，
兩處閒愁。

Flowers, after their kind, flutter
And scatter. Water after
Its nature, when spilt, at last
Gathers again in one place.
Creatures of the same species
Long for each other. But we
Are far apart and I have
Grown learned in sorrow.

Rexroth here manages to convey the full weight of the woman's unresolved longings by elaborating such natural correspondences and, further, by a witty, almost Petrarchan, physiology:

此情無計可消除，
才下眉頭，
却上心頭。

Nothing can make it dissolve
And go away. One moment
It is on my eyebrows.
The next, it weighs upon my heart.

The resonance of the verbs "dissolve" and "weighs," attached to the ideology of "eyebrows" and "heart" seems charmingly appropriated from the Kubla Khan world of the 16th century courtier poets. A like resourcefulness seems evident also in Rexroth's version of "Thoughts from the Women's Quarter" (p. 24). The emotional landscape of the woman separated from her husband is again projected into an outer landscape signified by allusions rather than by description. The allusions to Wu-ling Springs and to a Ch'in pavillion are meant to refer to the psychological distance between her husband travelling in the mountains and herself confined at home. Wu-ling

signifies both an imaginary utopia in the mountains via the allusion T'ao Ch'ien's fourth-century "Peach Blossom Spring" and an ancient geographical place name denoting South China; Ch'in signifies a far Northern place. Li's allusion to the famous song of departure, "The Sunlight in the Pass," referring to a distant pass into the Northern barbarian lands, enforces this personal sense of a vast, unbridgeable space. But again it remains for Rexroth to render that inner landscape in the closing lines' faintly archaic language of the weighted eyes:

雲鎖重樓。
記取樓前綠水，
應念我終日凝眸。
凝眸處，
從今更數幾段新愁。

Alone in my Ch'in pavillion,
Locked in by fog,
Only the green flowing water
In front of the pavillion
Knows my eyes that stare and stare,
Where new layers of sorrows pile up.

2

When Rexroth published his *Complete Poems of Li Ch'ing Chao* in his seventy-fourth year, many of the meditative topics that appeared in his gathering of her poems under the following titled sections must have been on his mind: "Youth," "Loneliness," "Exile," "His Death," "Politics," "Mysticism," and "Old Age." Such a gathering rehearses a whole life cycle – weighted toward a sense of the limits that follow the privileged condition of "Youth." It speaks to the courage of both Li and Rexroth in facing up to such difficulties. But courage, without a resourceful capacity for day-dreaming and for cultivating ordinary, available satisfactions, would only have resulted in static landscapes of the mind echoing a stunted heart. It is their common resourcefulness, therefore, their means of preserving their natural, self-realizing instincts that defines a fundamental kinship between Li as poet and Rexroth as mediator of her poems. That kinship gives strength to Rexroth's formidable task of rendering into English Li's most

simple and celebrative poems – formidable because if the simplicity were missed, the love of life that permeates them would be diminished. Our real subject thus becomes not the genius of an aged poet turning toward meditative topics, but a late blossoming of Rexroth's resourceful, life-long journeying in real and imagined, ideal landscapes: journeying to California in his youth, to Italy and Provence at mid-career, to Kyoto for three long stays in the mid-to-late career, and finally to Li's beloved Shantung homeland as projected in the poems of her central, formative years. Like Pound before him, our poet-translator had by age 74 cultivated the art of reverie in the still-vital gardens of the world, and I am proposing that Li Ch'ing Chao's poems embodied one of the last gardens Rexroth explored and fully enjoyed.

The very last was his own small garden behind his house in Santa Barbara. Thomas Sanchez recalls his two visits to Rexroth during Rexroth's last days when, partially paralyzed and confined to his wheelchair, he was unable to speak except for isolated words. The first visit involved this double image:

> In the silver-green glow of the small garden he reminded me of a Spanish California don. Above him, the lacy fingers of a sprawling pepper tree pawed through the failing sunlight . . . I remembered the first time I had seen Kenneth, at San Francisco State early in the 1960's . . . the untamed literary lion. Young poets flocked to this awesome legend, throwing out the delicious red meat of naive questions . . . then stepping back to watch him chomp and glower, in his element, in the arena of ideas and emerging language, the long gray mane of his hair swaying, stalking back and forth in his tweedy three piece London-tailored suit.[5]

The second visit Sanchez prefaces with a note on Rexroth's "mental vitality," his determination to grow younger with the years, and, by way of illustration, he refers to Rexroth's insistence on an elaborate marriage ceremony at a monastery atop a mountain above Santa Barbara. That ceremony – in celebration of his *fourth* marriage – strikes me as quintessentially characteristic of Rexroth's life-long seeking: to hold onto the vision of "the organic relations/ of stone and cloud and flower he experienced at age 16, during his first trip to the Pacific Northwest; and, to retrieve those feelings of awe he remembered from his childhood in the Midwest, awe of "prairies where / Lanterns move through the comfortable Dark . . . Home,"

("A Living Pearl," pp. 235-6). Accordingly, it is the image of a vital dreamer in a cavernous sea that Sanchez portrayed in a poem derived from that second, and final visit: of a whale turning over within a wave and changing direction, its "way to China / chartered in the stars."

You are aware of Li's happy childhood as one born into a stable and comfortable family household of learned and loving parents: who entertained literary friends from the Imperial Academy; who not only indulged Li's free-spiritedness but encouraged her interest in poetry. And you know of the extraordinary good fortune of the marriage her parents arranged for her to Chao Ming-Cheng, and later, of the idyllic married life they cultivated following her family's exile from the capital to their hometown in Shantung province – a life of blossoming mutual interests in collecting ancient objects and in writing poetry. But you may not know of Rexroth's childhood and first marriage, which, by virtue of their correspondence to Li's early life, points to the evident kinship underlying Rexroth's versions of Li's poems. I have already alluded to his childhood by way of Rexroth's own double flashback, via the Pacific landscape, to the image of the boy finding his way home at night through the midwest prairie. Home signified the stable and middleclass, pre-World War I Midwest world of Terre Haute, Indiana. There, Rexroth had learned and loving parents: his father was a merchant with intellectual interests that included a commitment to issues of social justice; his mother was a woman of considerable beauty and grace who possessed literary interests. Together, they created a lively household, encouraged Kenneth to read, and taught him that he belonged to an elite class whose privilege enjoined a responsibility for others less fortunate than he. Most prominently, though, it was the comfortable, uninhibited warmth of his life in that house – in "that other world before the other war" – that stuck in Rexroth's daydreaming memory at mid-career:

> The open work stockings,
> The lace evening gowns,
> The pink roses on the slippers;
> Debs eating roast chicken and drinking whiskey,
> On the front porch with grampa.
>
> . . .
>
> a small boy
> Curled in the hammock in the mumurous summer air,
> Gnawing his knuckles, reading.
>
> ("Bel di Vedremo," p. 158)

Rexroth's early adult life was also blessed by his first marriage to Andree, a woman of beauty and intelligence. They shared a mutual passion for painting and poetry. In the early twenties, following their marriage, they migrated from Chicago for the West Coast where they lived resourcefully and contendedly, near Los Angeles, as Rexroth later recalled:

> I came back to the cottage in
> Santa Monica Canyon where
> Andree and I were poor and
> Happy together. Sometimes we
> Were hungry and stole vegetables
> From the neighbors' gardens.
> Sometimes we went out and gathered
> Cigarette butts by flashlight.
> But we went swimming every day,
> All year round. . . .
> We had our first Joint art show, and they began
> To publish my poems in Paris.
> We worked under the low umbrella
> Of the acacia in the dooryard.
>
> ("Only Years," p. 222)

Subsequently they moved north to San Francisco and it was their arrival there, in 1932, that Elsa Gridlow rehearsed in her brief portrait of that memorably handsome, remarkably resourceful couple:

> With his first wife, Andree, he appeared one evening . . . at the flat on 150 Joice Street near Chinatown, where I lived with my friend, Violet ("Tommy") Anderson. Both of them impressed me favorably. Andree, I soon learned, was a very good artist. She had then a waiflike, haunted air, but also beauty not especially dependent on face or figure . . . He had the lean, sensitive face, tall, well-exercised body, that wear well into age. That he was a poet of course predisposed him in my favor. The pair had not been long in California, told us they had been camping on the Southern California beaches. They gave a slightly homeless impression, although resourceful and apparently well able to take care of themselves.[6]

Before Andree's early death in 1940, the two thus managed to carve

out a full and happy life for themselves – painting and writing, enjoying both the life of the city Rexroth would later celebrate for its "Mediterranean ease" and the wild natural landscapes of the coastal mountains and of the inland Sierra range, the latter becoming the scene of Rexroth's habitual wanderings in later years. After her death, Rexroth continued to carve out a place of satisfaction in the San Francisco area despite his pervading sense of personal loss, joined to an increasing feeling that history was going awry, that the world was headed not toward a realization of the dreamers of social justice but toward ruin. The life lived between 1940 and 1982 is too exhaustive a subject to undertake here, but it did include, as noted, a long period of intense literary and political involvement in the San Francisco scene, a journey to Provence in 1960 and three journeys to Kyoto between 1965 and 1975, a removal from San Francisco to Santa Barbara in the last years, and three more marriages. Over the years, his flat in Potrero Hill in San Francisco had become, as Gridlow observes, "a haven to the poets and artists who were migrating to San Francisco." The site of frequent poetry readings and the center of scandalously "spicy gossip," it became, as well, a place of carefully cultivated domestic satisfactions.

Preserving their innate capacity for lively and lucid daydreaming through a cultivation of ordinary, available pleasures – both sensual and intellectual – perhaps best defines the kinship of Rexroth to Li. They are wonderful *amateurs*. That such a cultivation of ordinary pleasures includes erotic pleasures, and that the latter define a core of radiant energy, seems evident: in Rexroth's own love poetry and in his versions of Li's. That such pleasures are not limited to sexuality in a narrow sense but extend to familiar, nearby, loved objects, Rexroth's "Signature of All Things" attests, as do his versions of Li's "flower poems." And here again, it seems necessary to somewhat complicate the following discussion of Rexroth's versions of both varieties of Li's love poems by first referring to his own work as poet and man of letters.

His version of Li's "Plum Blossoms: To the Tune 'The Honor of a Fisherman,' " which I think one of Rexroth's finest pieces, is the poem I want to get to. But, let me begin by noting Alan Watts' admiration for Ali Akbar Khan, the great master of Indian music: "he is at once holy and sensuous, a complete man. Wine and women go with his song."[7] That they had long gone with Rexroth's song, as well, is evident in the pair of songs titled "To Jimmy Blanton's Music" – and subtitled "Between Myself and Death" – which Rexroth placed at the very beginning of *The Signature*

volume. Written to Blanton's tune "Sophisticated Lady, Body and Soul," the first celebrated the fiery brightness that emanates from the presence of the speaker's wife in a room full of people:

> And suddenly pride lights your flesh –
> Lucid as diamond, wise as pearl
> . . .
> It is wonderful to watch you
> A living woman in a room
> Full of frantic, sterile people,
> And think of your arching buttocks
> Under your velvet evening dress
> And the beautiful fire spreading
> From your sex, burning flesh and bone.

In 1960 Rexroth would travel to Provence for a year's stay in order to heal himself and to recover his capacity for writing such directly communicative songs:

> I like to think of you naked.
> I put your naked body
> Between myself alone and death.
> (p. 175)

He would leave for Provence with his marriage to Marthe, his second wife, heading toward divorce, with the sense that he was becoming an exile in his own city, and with the fear that his political concerns had eroded his gift for lyric poetry. A year later, he would return to Northern California with a renewed sense of "the language of the dwellers / In the center of the earth." His sequence of seven love songs titled "Air and Angels" written under the influence of Provence and published in *Natural Numbers* (1964) – and notably "Coming" and "Pacific Beach" – would signify a retrieval of his self-realizing, fundamentally erotic, instincts. Love found again in middle age, despite adversity, would become the burden of Rexroth's new version of his old song and I submit that it would remain central to his work as a man of letters through his versions of Li in 1978.

Thus, the impulse behind the Provence journey, as summed up in the introduction to his edition of the long-out-of-print love poems of Ford

Madox Ford, seems to me essentially like the impulse behind his journeys to Kyoto between 1975 and 1978 as summed up in his *Li Ch'ing Chao: Complete Poems:*

> They are possibly the most remarkable love poems of middle-aged love in the language. Ford grown old, although he wasn't really all that old, in his *mas* on the hill in Provence, looking out over that old, worn out sea, with his young wife painting under the fig tree, is haunted by marriage come so late that it comes as a ghostly presence. . . . It is typical of Ford that when poets like Pound and Eliot were writing self-conscious philosophical reveries [he] should have sat himself down . . . and written . . . what was before his eyes and about himself.[8]

Between the integral person and the rascals bent on the world's ruin – between us and death – Rexroth finally put his radiant version of Li's "Plum Blossoms." He rendered the complete woman, sensuously and sacramentally alive, in easy harmony with her world. Her freshly bathed body he celebrated equally with the moon's splendid shining on her husband's "curving flesh" and with "thick green wine in gold cups" and with the "perfumed faces" of new plum blossoms fluttering against "glossy jasper branches." The poem, recreating that organic totality, deserves to be read entire:

雪里已知春信至，
寒梅點綴瓊枝膩。
香臉半開嬌旖旎，
當庭際
玉人浴出新粧洗。
造化可能偏有意，
故教明月玲瓏地。
共賞金尊沉綠蟻。
莫辭醉，
北花不與羣花比。

Already, out of the snow,
You bring news that Spring is here,
Cold plum blossoms, adorning
The glossy jasper branches,
Perfumed faces half showing,

Gracefully fluttering in the middle of the courtyard.
I come, my jade body fresh from the bath,
Newly powdered and rouged.
Even Heaven shares our joy,
Making the bright moon shine splendid on your curving flesh.
Let us celebrate with thick green wine in gold cups.
I will not refuse to get drunk
For this flower cannot be compared to other flowers.

(p. 9)

Rexroth's versions of Li's songs written in remembrance of lost love – following her exile from Shantung and the death of her husband – likewise retain a sensuous and luminous texture. Although it must suffice here to merely refer to Li's "To the Tune 'The Perfumed Garden' " (p. 47) and, correspondingly, to Rexroth's "Andree Rexroth" (pp. 190-92), I think the truth such gravely lyrical poems can tell is this: that for the self-realizing and resourceful person, memory can serve as an irreducible counter-force to necessity.

To turn, as I next mean to do, to what I have spoken of as the "flower poems," is to find further evidence of the personal kinship that underlies his versions of Li. Indeed, Rexroth's own earlier vision of gold laurel leaves spinning into the pool, thereby creating a gold-inlay pattern on its floor, seems recalled in his version of "Cassia Flowers":

揉破黃金萬點輕，
剪成碧玉葉層層。
風度精神如彥輔，

The twisted limbs break
Into the thousand flecks of gold,
On layer upon layer of carved jade leaves,
Fresh and bright as the grace of Yen Fu. (p. 8)

In the poem's closing lines, too, I find an echo of Rexroth's "Blues," another *Singnature* poem. Li complains –

熏透愁人千里夢，
卻無情。

Your perfume has broken into
My sorrowful dream of the one
A thousand miles away.
And left me drained of emotion.

and her complaint echoes Rexroth's own remarkably learned and richly sensuous variation on the American "blues" song:

The tops of the higher peaks
Of the Sierra Nevada
Of California are
Drenched in the perfume of
A flower which grows only there –
The blue *Polemonium*
Confertum eximium,
Soft, profound blue, like the eyes
Of impregnable innocence;
The perfume is heavy and
Clings thickly to the granite
Peaks, even in violent wind;
The leaves are clustered,
Fine, dull green, sticky, and musky.
I imagine that the scent
Of the body of Artemis
That put Endymion to sleep
Was like this and her eyes had the
Same inscrutable color. (p. 183)

Both songs, Li's "Cassia Flowers" and Rexroth's "Blues," project in a lucid sequence of images, a beautiful confounding of waking and dreaming consciousness.

That Li's several poems directly addressed to flowers could have been so successfully rendered by another American poet I doubt. We have other American poets who succeed at writing poems that originate in natural landscapes – Galway Kinnell comes foremost to mind – but none I think who possess Rexroth's capacity for making love poems out of nature poems. Perhaps only D. H. Lawrence (whose poems Rexroth edited in 1947) could have rendered these lines addressed to plum blossoms:

不知醞藉幾多香，
但見包藏無限意。

I don't know how long you have refined this perfume,
But I see it encloses and hides a limitless love.
("Red Plum Blossoms," p. 8)

Or these addressed to the fated-to-die "Peonies":

誰人可繼芳塵？
更好明光宮殿，
幾枝先近日邊勻。
金尊倒，

Who will succeed you when you have become perfumed dust?
The Palace of Brilliant Light was not more beautiful,
As the sun rises through the branches of your blossoms.
I pledge my love to you in a gold cup.
(p. 11)

In them lies the luminescence of pure daydreaming set off against the speaker's sad thoughts of "perfumed dust." And yet it is the glow of love, refined through suffering thoughts, that prevails . . . "True love is a durable fire in the mind ever burning." Love possesses its own irreducible essence.

3

We are grateful for Rexroth's ability to recreate the luminousness of Li's daydreaming songs and so to bring into our lives her bright, resourceful personality. It is like the gratitude the late James Wright expressed in his 1980 tribute to Rexroth. He had felt dreadful about American poetry – "It seemed to me then that I was dead, or else the world was dead, and that we might as well lie down in our graves and shut up" – and yet Rexroth's poems, essays, and translations had revived his belief in the survival of the "world of the learned and vital imagination" and so saved him as it has saved others, "from imaginative death." And it was Rexroth's love poetry, he declared, that most saved him: "He is a great love poet in the most loveless time imaginable."[9]

In Rexroth's *Poems of Li Chi'ng Chao* we have witnessed the affinity

of one great love poet for another, at times, it seems, almost a merging of those kindred personalities, and the pleasure we take in those poems is very likely intensified by our own dreadful sense of living in "the most loveless time imaginable." In that last modifying phrase Wright has beautifully touched on the elegiac strain, intertwined with the lyrical strain, even in his most luminous love poems, that gives Rexroth's poetry and translations a feeling of authenticity. We sense it in his insistence upon grounding his poems in real places, in his attentiveness to the cobwebbed landscape of light and shadow that so remarkably enrich the early *Signature* poems. And if we had time to go back to Rexroth's earlier poems we would find it there as well. "When We With Sappho," his most singularly erotic love poem, published in 1944, begins by evoking both the sun-drenched world of lovers and the ruinous orchard in which they lie:

> We lie here in the bee filled, ruinous
> Orchard of a decayed New England farm,
> Summer in our hair, and the smell
> Of summer in our twined mouths.
>
> (p. 139)

The lovers' inclination to drowsy slumber, projected as a sensation of falling, draws into their lives the sense of growing as old as the ancient Greek love poetess herself, turned now to "gleaming dust" in a distant sea, "stain [ing] the murex shell" on the sea's bottom. The poem becomes both a garden for daydreaming lovers and a decayed orchard in which they gain a deepened sense of their own transiency. As in the close of "Blues," that other version of Rexroth's garden or orchard, images of beauty and images of death tend to merge – so to create a whole, completed sense of life's bitter-sweetness, so to teach the need for courage in difficult moments alongside the need to cultivate ordinary, immediate occasions of pleasure:

> Lawrence was lit into death
> By the blue gentians of Kore.
> Vanzetti had in his cell
> A bowl of tall blue flowers
> From a New England garden.
> I hope that when I need it
> My mind can always call back

This flower to its hidden senses.

In Rexroth's later work that elegiac strain tends to be underlain by a deepened sense of urgency. Alongside his public sense that modern history is heading to ruin and his personal sense that his life is in decline, there is the feeling that the imaginative life of western nations is reaching an impasse. One picked up that current in "Golden Section," one of his most lovely lyrical poems published in 1952. Rexroth recreated his visit to the ruined temple of golden stone at Paestum, south of Naples, Italy, in the voice of an American who had felt himself adrift in a fragmented world:

Paestum of the twice blooming
Roses, the sea god's honey
Colored stone still strong against
The folly of the long decline
Of man.

He thus celebrated a momentary achievement of harmony between man's work and the natural site – "moved in order by love . . . the order of the spheres, / The curve of the unwinding fern, / And the purple shell in the sea." And yet he also perceived that what had been achieved there would never be achieved again:

Mankind has risen to this point
And can only fall away,
As we can only turn homeward
Up Italy, through France. (p. 218)

A modification of James Wright's tribute to Rexroth thus seems in order. I wish to suggest that Rexroth is a great poet of love and of home in the most loveless and homeless time imaginable. And I want to argue that the remarkable achievement of his versions of Li Ch'ing Chao originates in his ability to make accessible and familiar to the English-language reader a sense of the fortitude with which she suffered losses as well as the resourcefulness by which she found satisfactions; that he was impelled to recreate the wholeness of her world because he urgently felt the western world was losing such wholeness; and that his own life-long journeying as an original poet and as a responsible man of letters had prepared him for the task. I

began by suggesting that at age 74, Rexroth viewed Li's poems as a kind of garden or imaginary landscape in which he might recover the self-realizing resourcefulness of his youth; and I would like to close by suggesting that it also became an occasion for acknowledging a world-wide sense of homelessness. For, in an essay published one year before his Provence journey and six years before his journey to Kyoto, Rexroth had declared that "the fullest realization of the self comes in the acceptance of the limits of contingency."[10] And deprivation of a deep-rooted sense of being at home in the world, he saw, had become the major contingency that the integral man and integral woman in our century needed to acknowledge and to survive.

Out of his versions of some of the most memorable of Li's later poems, then, arises that more public and elegiac form of speaking W.R. Johnson has characterized as the "choral" mode of lyric utterance.[11] It appears most strongly in those poems written after her removal to Nanking from her beloved Shantung province, and after the loss of her beloved husband. Finding consolation in ordinary things had become for her an art of resourcefully projecting personal griefs and longings into a wider, shared landscape of the burdened heart and mind. And again, Rexroth as translator is adequate to the task. In "To the Tune 'The Bodhisattva's Headress'" (p. 37) personal longing expresses a comprehensive sense of the fate of a nation:

夾衫乍著必情好。
睡起，覺微寒，
梅花鬢上殘。
故鄉何處是？

In a new lined dress my heart was refreshed,
But when I rose from sleep I felt a chill.
I put plum blossoms in my hair.
Now they are withered.
Where is my homeland?

In "Banana Trees" (p. 39) the unfamiliar, heart-shaped leaves shadowing the courtyard of the southern place to which she has been forced to flee become reminders of her unforeseen homeless condition. They are both dreary shadows and too-vivid reminders of her own heartsickness, and the bitter rain that falls incessantly on them image the weight of her sorrow, her exile

from her northern home. The elegiac cadences of her song rise through tones of complaint to a tone of courageous acceptance. "Their shadows fall / . . . Their shadows fall / Leaves Like hearts, leaves like hearts/ That open and close with excess of love." " 陰滿中庭./ 陰滿中庭，/ 葉葉心心，/ 舒卷有餘情 ." Then

傷心枕上三更雨，
點滴霖霪。
點滴霖霪，
愁損北人，

Dien! Di! Dien! Di! Bitter cold, unceasing rain.
Drip! Drop! Drip! Drop! Bitter cold, unceasing rain.
Loneliness. Loneliness.
Sorrow corrodes this exile from the North.

Notes

1. "Introduction" to *The Signature of All Things: Poems, Songs, Elegies, Translations and Epigrams* (N. Y.: New Directions, 1949), pp. 9-10.
2. Gerald Bullett, ed. *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Dutton, 1947), pp. xiv-xv.
3. *The Collected Shorter Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 178-79. Henceforth references to Rexroth's poems will be from this volume.
4. Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung, trans. and ed. *Li Ch'ing Chao: Complete Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 48.
5. "Rexroth – a dreamer in a cavernous sea," *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (June 20, 1982), 6.
6. "Random Memories of a Many-Faceted Friend," in *For Rexroth. The Ark,* 14. ed. Geoffrey Gardner. (New York, 1980), pp. 38-40.
7. "The Sound of Rain" from *In My Own Way*, p. 387.
8. Robert Lowell and Kenneth Rexroth, eds. *Ford Madox Ford: Buckshee* (New York, 1964), p. 3.
9. "From a Letter" in *For Rexroth*, p. 95.
10. "The Hasidism of Martin Buber" from *Bird in the Bush* (New York: New Directions, 1959) as reprinted in Eric Mottram, ed. *The Rexroth Reader* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), pp. 149-72.
11. W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 176-82.