Ars Poetica and the Poetic Experience in East-West Poetry

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It has been a constant effort of philosophers and critics to try to define poetry. Early dialogues argue that poetry is basically contradictory to scientific knowledge. Socrates, drunk in a symposium, forced both the tragic poet Agathon and the comic poet Aristophanes to admit that poetry is a unified art, and therefore, should reveal both the tragic and comic talent of the poets. In China, the earliest discourse on poetry took place in dialogues between Confucius and his disciples. While the Greeks took Homer as their classic model, the Chinese took the *Book of Songs*, a collection of ancient ballads, as a classical example for discussion. Divergence of literary theory still exists between the discourses of Eastern and Western philosophers. To Socrates and Plato, the ultimate idea is Truth, a kind of ultimate knowledge. Poetry is an imitation of that idea or that knowledge. Although poetry is imperfect, it still embodies a personal knowledge of the ultimate idea. However, in the ideal state of Plato, poets with an imperfect knowledge are banished. Theoretically, poetry as an imitative art is expelled by the Republic. To Confucius, poetry as an expression of human sentiment is a form of personal knowledge working towards a higher order of the state or the universe. Poetry, idea, and the social form are, for Confucius, inseparable. A poet starts with his personal knowledge, including his own moral order, and works towards the ideal world. Consequently, Confucius thought the ideal state could be achieved with a form of knowledge articulated in such poetic devices as satire, eulogy, and didactic poetry. Plato believed poetry should educate youth. For Confucius, moral instruction in poetry is an endless process, not limited to the young. It can nourish one's mind inwardly and improve one's character outwardly. It can improve the moral

order of the state or the morality of emperors.

Horace wrote the first *Ars Poetica,* setting forth his precepts for the art of poetry. However, later poems of the same kind indicate the poets' desires to blend their creative experience with their theories in the art of poetry. Such blending of poetry and poetics can be found particularly in modern poems of Archibald MacLeish, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Amiri Baraka and so forth. In China, a similar tradition exists, going back to the third century A.D. to Ts'ao P'i (曹丕), the Emperor of Wen of the Wei Dynasty, who wrote "A Discussion About Literature" (典論論文), Lu Chi's (陸機) "On Literature" (文賦) and Liu Hsieh's (劉勰思) full length literary study, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (文心雕龍) in the sixth century. Poems similar to those of modern Western poets are to be found much later in the Sung Dynasty of the thirteenth century, poems in which the Sung poets are more interested in rational approaches to poetry with critical perspectives.

Despite the disparity between the ancient and the modern, or rather, the Western and the Eastern, the results of a modern Western poet coming across the ancient poetics of the East are impressive and astounding. Archibald MacLeish, for instance, wrote the following account of his response to Lu Chi's "Wen Fu" (On Literature):

> My own guide for some ten years past has been a Chinese poet and general who was executed in the year 303 of our era for the mistake of losing a battle, but who found time, prior to that definitive event, to write a Fu, a sort of extended prose poem, on literature and specially on the poet's art.[1]

MacLeish went on to praise Lu Chi, who, far more than either Aristotle or Horace, speaks "to our condition as contemporary men. Observations which appear at first glance to be no more than cliches of Chinese rhetoric turn out on reflection to convey timely bits of intelligence from beyond the mountains which the pursuit of poetry must cross."[2] MacLeish's attitude is understandable when we consider these lines in his poem "Ars Poetica":

> A poem should be equal to:
> Not true.

And

> A poem, should not mean
> But be.[3]

Rather than viewing the "not true" or "but be" as anti-Platonic, we should look at these lines as expressing MacLeish's main concern—to know how a poet's mind works or how a poem gets itself written. In the beginning passage of Lu Chi's poem, the poet relates his creative experience in the following lines:

> Taking his position at the hub of things (the poet) contemplates the mystery of the universe;
> He feeds his emotions and his mind on the great works of the past.
> Moving along with the four seasons, he sighs at the passing of time;
> Gazing at the myriad objects, he thinks of the complexity of the world.
> He sorrows over the falling leaves in virile autumn;
> He takes joy in the delicate bud of fragrant spring. With awe at heart he experiences chill;
> His spirit solemn, he turns his gaze to the clouds. He declaims the superb works of his predecessors;
> He croons the clean fragrance of past worthies. He roams in the forest of literature, and praises the symmetry of great art. Moved, he pushes his books away and takes the writing brush, that he may express himself in letters.[4]
>
> 佇中區以玄覽，頤情志於典墳；遵四時以歎逝，
> 瞻萬物而思紛；悲落葉於勁秋，喜柔條於芳春；
> 心懍懍以懷霜，志眇眇而臨雲；詠世德之駿烈，
> 誦先人之清芬；遊文章之林府，嘉麗藻之彬彬；
> 慨投篇而援筆，聊宣之乎斯文。

A poet taking his position at the hub of things puts himself in contact with an immediate outer reality, a universal order of balance necessary for the poet to create a harmonious co-existence between the self and the environment. This notion contradicts the modern Western concept of the artist as awaiting "some symbol rising unaided from the depths of his unconscious."[5] In the Western tradition, the artist turns inward, eventually losing himself in himself. Wordsworth, for example, after showing his contempt for those who claimed to be poets of the classical school, advocates the natural growth of the self in the following lines of his sonnet "A *Poet*! He Hath Put His Heart to School":

> How does the Meadow-flower its bloom unfold?
> Because the lovely little flower is free
> Down to its roots, and, in that freedom, bold;
> And so the grandeur of the Forest-tree
> Comes not by casting in a formal mould,
> But from its own divine vitality.[6]

The natural growth of a poet, according to Wordsworth, comes from his individual will, like Aphrodite emerging of her own motion from the sea, leaving no space in between for the individual and his world. Like the space in oriental paintings, the space maintained by the poet taking his position at the hub of things is an open field from which he can project his feelings and intuitions on the universe. Only when he finds such a space will he place himself at the turning center of his turning experiences. The writing of a poem, therefore, is an effort to create a space, to form a kinetic center, making the poem an energy-construct and an energy-discharge. The poet places himself in the center of receptivity, perceiving the real from the unreal:

> All external vision and sound are suspended,
> Perpetual thought itself gropes in time and space;
> Then, the spirit at full gallop reaches the eight limits of the cosmos,
> And the mind, self-buoyant, will ever soar to new insurmountable heights.[7]
> 其始也，皆收視反聽，耽思傍訊，精騖八極，
> 心遊萬仞。

This is the time, in Wallace Stevens's terms, when the supreme fiction is created by fixing the balances of the real and ideal realms. Moving in the space of history, the spirit, or imagination, gallops in full strength from one end to the other. According to Stevens,

> The poem refreshes life so that we share,
> For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
> Belief in an immaculate beginning
>
> And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
> To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
> From that ever-early candor to its late plural.[8]

Therefore, the origin of poetry is in our concrete past and present. Since the culture is stable, what appear to be later truths are just derivations of the ever-early ones. Poets are mimics because

> The first idea was not our own. Adam
> In Eden was the father of Descartes
> And Eve made air the mirror of herself,

Of her sons and her daughters. They found themselves
In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;
And in the earth itself they found a green—

The inhabitants of a very varnished green.
But the first idea was not to shape the clouds
In imitation. The clouds preceded us

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.[9]

The muddy center obviously develops into a stable tradition of human civilization, and what the poets try to narrate as poetic experiences are only repetitions of what is known. With Lu Chi, the origin of poetry lies in the perfect balance of the void and the substance, the known and the unknown. The task of the poet, instead of repeating these past experiences, (Lu even declared that when his originality was threatened by what the ancients had already written, he would sacrifice all the warp and woof of his own heart's tissue and give away all the gem-lines he most cherished,) is to create a being by tasking the Great Void, and to knock upon the sound of silence. Although the poetic "I" takes a central position among other objects, it is a "negative capability," a self-identity and self-consciousness. In Archibald MacLeish's words: "The poet's labor is to struggle with the meaninglessness and silence of the world until he can force it to mean: until he can make the silence answer and the non-Being *be*."[10] The Chinese poet believes in the mystic reality of the universe just as the Western poet believes all the historical evidences of the world.

In the poetic world of Stevens, however, we do find evidences showing the interaction of dependent opposites as follows:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another , as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.[11]

The Chinese poet, since the opposites are very much in the nature of the substance and the void, has a tendency to transcend or reconcile these opposites. Consequently, he apprehends poetic reality intuitively, and beyond rational interference. Yang Wan-li (楊萬里), a Sung poet, discusses

poetry with his friend with the following poem:

Writing poetry needs a thorough mind,
And lines picked up at random are unique.
No tradition can be handed down forever,
Whether a hill or a feather it demands equal care.
Sometimes as natural as a pond with spring grass;
Other words suggest dust-clouded eyes.
How delicious is the taste of poetry?
A chilled crab, slightly wine-cured.[12]
學詩須透睨，信手自孤高
衣鉢無千古，邱山只一毛
句中池有草，字外目俱嵩
可口端何似？霜螯略帶糟。

Thoroughness literally means "penetrating" and "evading," implying the freedom of spirit, or imagination, that shuttles back and forth from the opposites. Yang makes no attempt to refute a poet's attachment to his tradition (Lu Chi again says, "But the accomplished piece of imitation must be so perfected / That it is in the ancient tradition, yet remains nonpareil,) but he states at the same time that no tradition can dominate the poetic creativity of the poet. The same attitude is found in Stevens's poem "Of Modern Poetry" in which the poet realizes:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene is set; it repeated what
Was in the script.
Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.[13]

On the other hand the poet must evade or free himself from the traditional influence:

And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one.[14]

Since no tradition can be handed down forever, and the theatre was changed to something else, the poet must on a new stage put on a new act. Using the metaphor of the theatre, Stevens designs a deliberate acting process in which the poet, or the actor, transforms the content of his mind into an imaginative reality. To Yang Wan-li, however, the uniqueness of a poem comes not from deliberate acting, but from the natural casualness–an effortless mind engaged in the creative process. To Stevens, the mind finds that which will justify the poet's feeling, and words are the "wiry strings" of an instrument that give sounds to the delicatest ear of the mind. Such emphasis of verbal dramaticality contradicts the demand for casualness, and in fact, most Chinese poets consider language as detrimental because it hinders the poetic import beyond its surface meaning. Lu Yu (陸游), another late Sung poet, has an *ars poetica* written to his son in which Lu confesses to trapping himself in poetic diction in his early years. He says,

> When I first learn how to write poetry
> I only tried to turn out elegant phrases.
> In midyear I began to have some understanding;
> Gradually I felt as if I had peeped into something great.[15]
> 我初學詩日，但欲工藻繪，
> 中年始少悟，漸若窺宏大。

Later on, he realizes that

> Poetry . . .
> . . . is more than a game of playing with words.
> If you really want to master this art:
> Excellence lies in something beyond poetry.[16]
> 詩爲六藝一，豈用資狡獪，
> 汝果欲學詩，工夫在詩外。

Words, therefore, are only means to the meaning, and the excellence of poetry, Lu Yu seems to say, lies somewhere beyond the meaning of words.

If excellence of this sort can be referred to as "taste," a term generally interpreted as a special faculty of the mind that spontaneously and instinctively responds to aesthetic objects, then how would the poet relate his poetic experience to the pursuit of such aesthetic appreciation? For Yang Wan-li, the experience is put in a simple, sensuous, palatable manner:

How delicious is the taste of poetry?
A chilled crab, slightly wine-cured.

To compare the writing of poetry to the eating of crabs is no different from William Carlos Williams's eating of plums in "This is Just to Say":

I have eaten
the plums
that were in the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold.[17]

Like Lu Yu's insistence that the excellence of the art of poetry lies somewhere beyond poetry itself, both Yang and Williams align poetry with something that can be felt spontaneously and intuitively. In the Williams poem, the juicy chilled plums in the refrigerator immediately evoke our personal experience of eating plums. Taste in the art of poetry, therefore, is a simple fact of life, hidden in the most casual way of action or expression, like eating crabs or plums. And these casual disparate experiences of life can be, in Stevens's terms, "a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman combing," [18] or they can be T.S. Eliot's view of the chaotic, irregular, fragmentary experiences of an ordinary man falling in love, or reading Spinoza, listening to the noise of the typewriter or smelling the aroma of cooking.[19] The excellence of poetry lies in the mind of the poet consistently forming these experiences into new wholes. A taste is then created after the completion of these amalgated experiences. Yang Wan-li, in his *Poetic Discourse of Ch'eng-chai* (誠齋詩話) has a few lines like this:

> It was recorded in the *Technique of the Golden Needle* that the writing of the eight-lined regulated verse has to rush and roll forward like rocks tumbling down the mountain with no trace of returning. I do not agree. I think the lines of a poem have to come to a stop before the taste of it

thickens. This is the best of everything.[20]
金針法云：八句律詩，落句要如高山轉石，一去無回，
予以爲不然，詩已盡而味方永，乃善之善也。

When the lines come to stop, it is time for the language to exhaust its denotational meaning. Once the known elements are exhausted, the unknown begins to generate a taste inherent to the meaning of the poem. The earlier the poem stops at its surface meaning, the more tangy will be the taste created because of the aesthetic distance between the object and its intended audience.

Ars poetica represents a unique way of explaining poetry by being poetry itself. At the same time, by discussing their poetic experiences, both Eastern and Western poets lead us to the understanding of poetry through intuition and emotion trained along aesthetic lines. If poetry is an indirect way of expressing reality, is it also true that *ars poetica* expresses the concept of poetry indirectly? If poetry is to be felt rather than read, is it more proper to place taste as a criterion for the appreciation of art rather than working by reason and intellect trained along scientific lines? Through the study of *ars peotica* and the convergent as well as divergent poetic experiences in East-West poetry, we finally establish a new rhetoric in the art of poetry—to write poems to explain poetry.

Notes:

1. Archibald MacLeish, *Poetry and Experience* (Boston, 1960), p.4.
2. Ibid., p.4.
3. "Ars Poetica" by Archibald MacLeish in *New and Collected Poems 1917-1976* (Boston, 1976), p.106.
4. See Lu Chi's "Wen Fu" in *Lu Shih-heng wen-chi* (陸士衡文集) (*SPTK* ed., Taipei: Shang-wu, 1965). I have quoted the passage here from Achilles Fang's translation, which was obtained by MacLeish when he was colleague of Fang at Harvard. See *Poetry and Experience*, pp.4-5.
5. *Poetry and Experience*, p.5.
6. "A Poet! –He Hath Put His Heart to School" by William Wordsworth in *Poems of Wordsworth*, chosen and ed. Matthew Arnold (London, 1891), p.234.
7. See "Wen Fu." I have quoted the poem hereafter from Ch'en Shih-hsiang's translation in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, v.1, ed. Cyril Birch (New York, 1965), p.205.

8. "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" by Wallace Stevens in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1968), p.392.
9. Ibid., p.384.
10. *Poetry and Experience*, p.9.
11. "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," p.392.
12. "Replying to a Poem by Li T'ien-lin" (和李天麟) by Yang Wan-li. I have taken the poem, with my modifications, from a translation in *Sunflower Splendor*, co-ed. Wu-chi Liu & Irving Y. Lo (New York, 1975), p.372.
13. "Of Modern Poetry" by Wallace Stevens in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p.239.
14. Ibid., p.239.
15. "Shown to My Son Yu" by Lu Yu in *Sunflower Splendor*, p.381.
16. Ibid., p.381.
17. "This Is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams in *Collected Earlier Poems* (New York, 1951), p.354.
18. "Of Modern Poetry," *Stevens*, p.239.
19. "The Metaphysical Poets," by T.S. Eliot in *Selected Essays* (New York, 1950), p.247.
20. From *Ch'eng-chai shih-hua* (誠齋詩話) by Yang Wan-li in *Hsu Li-tai shih-hua* (續歷代詩話), ed. Ting Chung-ku (丁仲祜) (Taipei, rpt. n.d.), n.p.