

STEPHEN OWEN

“One of These More or Less”

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be one of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

WALT WHITMAN HAS JUST DELIVERED one of his breathless catalogues of American types—canal boy, conductor, baptized child, pedlar, bride, and more. Here, as so often in Whitman’s poetry, there is an uneasy relation between the poet’s sense of self and the existence of others—inevitably he will conclude either that those many are to become one in Walt, or that Walt is himself, in fact, already many. But behind the mask of a simple political model—the poetic “representative” who speaks for all the people—something dark and personal suddenly shows itself. He claims to be their democratic spokesman; he wants to be their elected representative in the Congress of Poets; this is to be an American poetry. But finally there is a twist in the words, a pressure from the recognition of how questionable, perhaps impossible a project it is: to be the voice for another person. He cautiously leaves the issue undecided: “And such as it is to be one of these more or less I am.”

When we read Whitman, we are not deceived. Whenever he issues his loud democratic “I am,” he is never disassembling the essential Walt into a multiplicity of voices. His false claim of diversity is America’s old centripetal imperialism: ingesting others, melting, fusing; voices from older worlds are permitted to be only raw material for the new and tolerantly uniform man. Walt remains Walt: the ingested others have lost their names and become mere roles and professions—canal boy, conductor, baptized child, pedlar, bride. His plural America is a plurality of function, and the individual other sacrifices his or her voice, disappearing into a Walt-role.

Suppose there would be a defiant voice that refused to be a Walt-role. Who could she say she was?

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there’s a pair of us?
Don’t tell! they’d advertise—you know!

Something subversive is happening here. Like Odysseus, Dickinson can escape the voracious cyclops by assuming a name that refuses a name: *outis*, nobody.

A century older now, we may try to be a century wiser. How to be "many together" is still our national problem, poetically and culturally—neither to be swallowed into a unity nor to be left mere solitaries, names cautiously withheld, occupants of adjacent spaces.

In Whitman, of course, the declaimed intention is not the truth that emerges from the voice itself; it is merely the desire spoken by that voice. If what his voice claimed were true or if it were the only voice we heard, he would be insufferable. His voice begs an alternative. By refusing to play a Walt-role, Dickinson makes Whitman succeed poetically even as she subverts his imperially democratic intentions. She unwittingly answers him, makes him only one voice and not the container of all voices. Let's try another version of the sequence. First, Walt:

What am I after all but a child, pleas'd with the
 sound of my own name? repeating it over and over,
 I stand apart to hear—it never tires me.

To you your name also!
 Did you think there was nothing but two or three
 pronunciations in the sound of your name?
 —"What Am I After All"

And, again, Emily Dickinson:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
 Are you—Nobody—Too?
 Then there's a pair of us?
 Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!
 How dreary—to be—Somebody!
 How public—like a Frog—
 To tell one's name—the livelong June—
 To an admiring Bog!

Poetry, in order to be poetry, needs such a family of intimate and very different voices. They need not be on good terms with one another, and they need never have met in the flesh or even poetically. However, when we let them meet, not only can they exist together, they become bound together in mutual response. We would scarcely have noticed "What Am I After All" in the surrounding foliage; but plucked and dried as a straw man for Emily Dickinson's stronger "I'm Nobody," it suddenly reveals Walt Whitman's identity: what it says becomes true: he *is* a child repeating the sound of his own name. The response strips him of his poetic authority, but it also makes him human.

We should learn at least one lesson a century, and we have a difficult century-lesson here, which may happen to be also a lesson in translation: how to include others among us without absorbing them as merely a new disguise of our own voice. And we are given guidance in how to practice this lesson from the grand failures of our poetic ancestors: Whitman's failure to be everyone and Dickinson's dazzling failure to be Nobody. Placed in a relation, they speak to one another, and in doing so, gift one another with limited identity and difference. Side by side each becomes "someone."

Now let Chinese poetry enter this peculiar American drama. It is an alluring and autonomous Other that we would like to welcome among us. However, our folkways of welcome have historically been rather dangerous. There is a newcomer from far places: either we protect his identity by setting him apart in the role of resident "exotic" (in the ghetto); or we absorb him and transform him into ourselves (the Walt who says complacently: "I am this too"). This was the translator's choice offered by Schleiermacher in "On the Different Methods in Translation," and later by James J.Y. Liu in his distinction between "naturalization" versus "barbarization." Such folkways make Chinese poetry's many voices become either a unitary voice of "Chinese poetry" (Walt Whitman's America of professions, roles, and types), or they disappear altogether into our own private and voracious American voices.

To "translate," to make Chinese poetry an American poetry, is a problematic act that touches our national myths deeply and calls on us to confront our century-lesson. Somehow we must find a way to let these poems be themselves "together with" our other poetries.

Quite apart from the obvious problems of culture, history, and language, there are unique problems in the case of Chinese poetry's immigration to America. Poets from other European and American locales have learned to inscribe in their poems some version of regional or national identity together with their individual identity. For the past several centuries, strong gestures of literary ethnicity have become an important part of poetry, and such gestures are remarkably durable in translation (perhaps some secret aspiration to be an international poet makes poets anticipate being translated as they write, thus finding ways to mark their ethnicity in ways other than language). Lorca not only writes in Spanish, he writes self-consciously as a Spanish poet; Rilke writes as a German poet; Akhmatova writes as a Russian poet; and Whitman writes as an American poet.

Classical Chinese poetry does not make such a self-conscious declaration of its ethnicity or national identity. Unlike poetry in the European vernaculars or even Latin (classic Greek is another matter altogether), Chinese poetry never realized that it was "Chinese poetry": it did not recognize any "other" poetry against which it could discover and assert

its collective identity. Thus the unmistakable "Chineseness" of a Chinese poem in translation is something discovered entirely from the perspective of its non-Chinese readers; it is not something from within the poem that asks for our recognition. The subtle poetic gestures to national or cultural solidarity are missing here: its legitimate differences are purely internal, between one poet and another.

As is the case with classical Greek poetry, which also does not declare its ethnicity (i.e., not an awareness of being a Hellene, but being a "Greek poet" as opposed to some other kind of poet), there is a strange intimacy in Chinese poetry despite great distance—an elusive intimacy. This poetry is decidedly not part of our present world; but since these poets were never self-conscious of their ethnic or national identity, they can touch us closely. Too closely perhaps—there is an impulse to place them on our world map of ethnic differences, to protect ourselves from the intrusion of such intimacy that calls into question our comfortable divisions between "us" and "them."

To give Chinese poetry an authentic voice in English, one must give it back its internal and individual differences. There are no genuine signatures of ethnic identity. Tu Fu or Po Chu-yi or Su Tung-p'o must enter our poetry not as "Chinese poets," but as themselves—even though, as we discover, they tend to pay attention to unexpected things and make strange references.

These poets can become themselves in English only by talking to one another, or perhaps even talking to our other poets. This is the new and difficult demand that should be placed on the translator: that he or she not simply make a "good" translation, but rather become a speculative community, many different personalities, each with his or her own version of good poetry. These voices love, compete, mock, and play with one another. In doing so each makes the gift to the other of being merely "someone."

One model of such lyric multiplicity might be the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa's notion of "heteronymy," in which the lyric poet approaches the dramatist—not inventing others, but discovering versions of others within himself. By building a community or a family of different voices that can speak to one another, the translator can return voice to the poems.

Perhaps the most destructive modern commonplace about lyric poetry is the claim that the individual poem is essentially autonomous and self-sufficient. The poem is given to us as if it were a framed "thing," and its value as a poem must come entirely from within itself, independent of any external relations. We can understand easily how such a commonplace appeared: no lyric poem has a single determinate context that is necessary to make sense of it. But to acknowledge that a lyric poem has no fixed context is not to say that a lyric can work without any con-

text whatsoever. Novels and plays are extensive enough to create their own context; the miracle of the lyric is that it can change yet remain itself through varying contexts.

We might even say that, although it can survive in many communities, loneliness is the real danger that besets any lyric poem. And it is a particular danger for poems that emigrate. Around 300 A.D. Lu Chi described the problem of poetic loneliness well, but understood it simply as a problem of amplitude:

Suppose you put your words in too short a rhyme;
they face the end of their tracks, a solitary
stirring.
They look down into a dismal stillness, lacking any
companion,
and look up into the vast space and continue nothing.
Compare it to a string of limited range, strung
alone—
Within it lies clear song, but nothing responds.

—“Poetic Exposition on Literature”
(11.157-162)

Lu Chi would have resolved the problem by a composition long enough to provide internal response. A few centuries after Lu Chi wrote these lines, the problem of the short poem was resolved, but the concern Lu Chi had in these lines remains valid: all texts need a place in a lively structure of relations so that there can be *response*. Otherwise in poetry there is a sterile and lonely solitude.

To save the poem from loneliness—and many anthologies attest to the fact that there can be loneliness even in a crowd—the translator must make families of poems that allow for moments of surprising response. This is not impossible in translating the work of a single poet, or even a historical anthology; but both forms are too often constructed like empty containers in which masses of poems can be deposited, each expected to stand alone.

There is a simple truth here. Every time we read a poem we have come from somewhere else—come from some other poem or from some other moment in that world that somehow manages to keep existing outside poetry. We all know how much our reading of a poem depends on the particular itinerary by which, at that moment, we came to it. We like to tell pleasant lies about the self-contained integrity and enclosure of the poem, but these are only to strengthen the poem’s difference from its antecedent moments, not really to deny the connection that cannot be denied—response.

To set each poem in an interesting itinerary of poems or other texts can intensify response and ease the single poem’s loneliness. The reader, of

course, retains the liberty to reject our itinerary, but we can make it so appealing that it becomes hard to deny. There is a kind of anthology that kills poems, in which all individual voices become lost in a vast sameness. One of the greatest sins that a translator of lyric poetry can commit is to make different voices or different poems sound alike, to issue a book of translations that melts babble or banter or argument into bland harmony. And if a poet is to forcibly removed from his native language and made to speak in English, he deserves our efforts to provide him with friends with whom he can converse.

I am not suggesting that the translator reinvent the entire history of Chinese poetry in English—although this would be perhaps the ultimate act of translation—and slightly mad, even in the proposal. Rather the translator should be at the same time the ingenious anthologist, making sequences and juxtapositions that would animate each translation (and at the same time would clarify and guide the act of translation).

There are two ways to proceed here. One way is to maintain the historical family, to limit the sequencing and juxtaposition to Chinese texts, in whose relations the English reader can begin to see how the tradition worked together. Following such a path these poems can join our poetry without entirely leaving behind their historical family. But there is another, more anarchic possibility, one that may more perfectly fulfill our century-lesson. This would be to take our whole literary museum—neatly arranged in its genres, nationalities, and periods—and dump the contents onto the floor, arranging them in pleasing patterns that not only cannot be justified historically, but mock the entire project of "justification": for in the assemblages we make they might become so lovely and interesting that justification no longer matters.

Two secret and opposed forces, one a fear and the other a desire, have always shaped the translator's work; and both forces are so powerful that they have consumed all energies in the endeavor. Some translators try to assuage the fear at the expense of renouncing the desire; others pursue the desire and bluff their way past the fear. The fear is that of the young person in the classroom, always anxious lest he or she make an error and be shamed by the vigilant teacher. The desire, on the other hand, is, quite simply, to write an exceptional poem. Both are roles chosen by the heart: we cannot abolish them simply by naming them. Both remain essential to act of translation. But translation is a larger and greater art in which these double forces must find their limited places.

The translator is asked to create the conditions by which a poem, taken from its home language, its world and its age, can be read now as a poem, a poem that can adapt to a new world without forgetting its past. The poem is an immigrant, and we must create a new society of poems in which it can be at home again—neither quite its old self nor something altogether different. Great poems are durable; they have survived many

upheavals and will probably survive this one. What is called for is something more than an art of choosing, rearranging, and substituting words; it is an "art" in the full sense, the creation of a durable and animate order of words.

There is no simple rule concerning how this is to be done. One way is by using the essay as a prose frame; the other is by anthology-making, sequencing poems as an art. Perhaps the finest form of translation would be a combination of the two.¹

Like all acts of translation, there is something self-effacing here: however much approved, this art will always seem secondary in value as it is later in time. Yet even more than the individual act of translation itself, the creation of a full context in which the poem can be active is an art; the individual poem comes with instructions of what we may and may not do in transposing it; however, in the art of framing and sequencing there is a sweet liberty and room to play.

Translators tend to waste their sets; they put a group of poems together haphazardly, trusting each individual, in its isolation, to justify the community—or hoping that at least one individual in the group will do so. The poems whisper across the pages, "I'm Nobody—Who are you?" But when a body of poems is conceived as a community, the individual poem changes: it is both autonomous and a relation to other poems. The translator, for whom every word negotiates an uncomfortably double demand—scrutiny of the teacher (or colleague) and the desire to make poetry—finds a new constraint: each choice of word and phrasing now must respond to other poems.

The translator who accepts this new constraint may be surprised: the translation may come more easily, more naturally, and more perfectly. When we understand two texts in relation to each other, we suddenly know how to take the words of each one. It does not matter if the poems are by the same poet, or from the same period or language, or separated by continents and millennia. To juxtapose a Chinese classical poem with a modern American poem will no more assimilate the Chinese poem to a blandly "universal" version of poetry than juxtaposing Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson creates a comfortably unified sense of nineteenth-century American poetry: we note, in fact, that it does very much the opposite. The two texts create a tentative ground of coherence on which

¹The differences between the prose of the essay and poetry are not blurred here, but rather become more interesting and productive. The rigidly maintained and commonplace distinction—that a certain amount of prose scattered around the poems makes the work a critical work rather than poetry—exists for the mere convenience of book dealers, publishers, and librarians: they must know the category under which to list it and the shelf to put it on. While not despising their commitment to an order in which everything has its proper "place," it is our task to subvert their boundaries and produce new forms that tax their ingenuity.

each shows itself willing to talk to others but defiant of any assimilation.

The translator who still fears the censorious teacher may retain the historical model and confine himself to poems that clearly did or might have met one another. But that can be only a mask: no one can write the relation of poems that really was, only a story of how it might have been. The drama we create in these juxtapositions is truly an art, acting in place of the now lost possibilities of poetic history.

The individual poem retains its power to require us to translate it one way and not another. But within a sequence the individual moments of a poem can take on significance in relation to moments in other poems.² The poem is "put in a position" in which its words, scarcely noticed in isolation, are forced to assert themselves more boldly. This is the translator's true liberty, to arrange confrontations that elicit the poem to speak for itself, to force it to confront other voices, and to find its own voice in the confrontation.

We can arrange games here: two translators choosing pairs of poets and poems that seem to go together, then exchanging versions of their translations and making revisions until the versions of each poem is constituted in relation to its mate. Chinese poetry was a sociable art, and its sociability, as much as anything, should be translated.

Our goal is to disrupt the commonplace antithesis that governs the modern encounter with all art: the autonomous art-work set against the order of history in which each work finds its "proper," exemplary place. This antithesis recurs in the conventional opposition between poet or artist and scholar (and in the desire and fear mentioned above). This antithesis has no place in Chinese poetry; and when we seek to translate the sociability of such poetry, we may liberate ourselves from this modern trap of roles rigidly defined and maintained one against the other.

Should we want to preserve history, there are alternatives to the neatly sorted categories of period and literary group, into which literary history is commonly divided. There is a history that does not involve sorting into the enclosed cubicles of the historicist museum. Let me describe one possible anthology of Chinese poetry, an anthology that would be an undergraduate teacher's worst nightmare. It might begin conventionally enough with a poem from the *Book of Songs*, but then would include some traditional commentaries and later critical comments on the *Song*, perhaps followed by some passages from early history, translated or retold, which could make the traditional Mao interpretation seem a credible alternative to the folkloristic interpretations of modern times. We might

²One might draw an analogy here with the Chinese genre known as *chi-chii*, rearranging the couplets of earlier poetry to produce a new poem. When Wen T'ien-hsiang was in Khublai Khan's prison in Peking, refusing to submit to the new dynasty, he wrote his own situation in poems built out of Tu fu's couplets.

wander off on associative trails, to some later poem that alludes to the *Song* we have just translated, then to a traditional critic discussing the qualities of the poet or period from which the later poem came. We would cheerfully put a later vernacular song beside a classical poem on a similar topic in order to show how different they sounded. References made in poems would come out of the footnotes and become stories within the main text of the anthology. And if it was a good story, there would be no harm in playing a while with other poems and songs that touched on it.

Yang Chu is supposed to have wept when he came to a fork in the road; such an anthology would leave him permanently in tears. At every moment there are a hundred directions we might take. Yet at every moment the reader would know that it is a true itinerary rather than a dump for lonely poems or a museum, in which temporal relations between art-works are reduced to a series of spatial containers. Such an anthology would oppose both the literary translator's desire to frame the single poem and the teacher's or scholar's insistence on a lucid historical or categorical map, in which every poem is nailed to its "place." We cannot give every path, but there is no need to do so: we can travel on only one path at a time—it need only be a lovely and alluring one. The path may double back and intersect a spot passed through before; but that does not matter, since the spot is changed by coming to it from a new direction.

Of course, readers will feel uncomfortable with such a trip (I suspect many of them prefer understanding the literary historical frame for poems to reading the poems themselves); and the translator who would undertake such a work should be forewarned that most publishers would be less than eager to publish it. Perhaps this suggestion has been offered only to ask us to reflect on precisely *why* such an anthology would be so difficult to accept, the unspoken rules that we follow that demonstrate what has become second nature to us. We have only these two legitimate forms for coming to poetry: the autonomous "work of art," in its splendid isolation, and the historical frame, in which all individual works are quietly reduced to mere examples of their category.

This secretly brings us back to the American problem with which we began: Dickinson and Whitman, the complete enclosure of the individual or the individual's reduction to a function in a totality. The two possibilities support one another in their very antithesis. And our century-lesson, in translation and all things, may be the wit and courage to say "neither . . . nor," and to do something else altogether.