What Did Liuzhi Hear? The "Yan Terrace Poems" and the Culture of Romance

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Yan Terrace Poems: Spring 燕臺詩四首：春

The bright weather moves gradually
along the east-west paths,
for how many days has the charming soul
sought but not found?
The honeycomb's winged visitor
is like the loving heart,
seductive leaves, courtesan twigs
recognize him everywhere.
Warm and hazy the glow moves slowly
west of the peach tress,
her high chignon stands at the level of
the chignon of the peach tree.
Male dragon, hen phoenix,
where, faint in the distance?
in floss in tangles, the strands profuse,
even Heaven loses the way.
Rising drunk, the faint sunlight
is like first dawnlight,
it shines on the curtains, the dream breaks off,
the fading words are heard.
In sorrow taking an iron net
to draw in coral,
the sea is vast, the heavens broad,
nowhere to be found.
The gown's sash lacks all feeling,
it may be loose or tight;

spring mists are naturally sapphire,
the autumn frosts are white.

Grind cinnabar, split stone—
Heaven does not know—

would that Heaven's Jail
lock up the wronged soul!

The lined clothes are cast off in the chest,
the unlined silks brought out,

her fragrant flesh, chill, placed between,
the tinkling pendants.

This day the east wind
cannot bear it,

it turns into a hidden light
entering the Western Sea

風光冉冉東西陌，幾日嬌魂尋不得．
蜜房羽客類芳心，冶葉倡條遍相識．
暖靄輝遲桃樹西，高鬟立共桃鬟齊．
雄龍雌鳳杳何須，絮亂絲繁天亦迷．
醉起微陽苦初曙，映簾夢斷聞殘語．
愁將鐵網罥珊瑚，海闊天寬迷處所．
衣帶無情有寬窄，春煙自碧秋霜白．
研丹擘石天不知，願得天牢鎖冤魄．
夾衣委篋單綃起，香肌冷襯琤琤珮．
今日東風自不勝，化作幽光入西海．

What are we to make of a poem like "Spring," the first of the "Yan Terrace Poems," here given with a bare text and translation, without notes or commentary? As always, and more so in this particular case, translation hides obvious semantic determinations, primarily lexical, that are obvious in the Chinese; for example in the first line "[breeze and] bright weather," *fengguang* 風光 (literally "wind-light"), is such a fixed attribute of spring that it virtually means "spring weather." If, however, one were to translate the com-

pound simply as "spring weather," one could lose the element of moving and changing light, essential to understanding the poem. And there is no way English can handle the return of this same compound in the final couplet, where the constituent "wind" and "light" are divided and placed in parallel positions. As English translation sacrifices lexical determinations, it is simultaneously forced to add new determinations that are absent in the Chinese, determinations primarily of agency and syntax; for example, in the second line the Chinese is ambiguous as to whether the "charming soul" is the seeker or the object sought. In general, however, the Chinese text and the English translation here are comparable in the degree, if not in the precise nature, of their obscurity.

Faced with such obscurity, we always turn to the rich Chinese commentarial tradition. There were supposed to have been two Song commentators on Li Shangyin, but their work is no longer extant. There is a small handful of annotations and interpretations of particular works in anthologies and critical writings before the Qing—though no commentary for the "Yan Terrace Poems." The earliest partially extant commentaries to Li Shangyin's poetry come from the Ming-Qing transition period: those of the monk Daoyuan 道源 and Qian Longti 錢龍惕, the latter with a preface dated to 1648.[1] In 1659 followed the better and more thorough commentary of Zhu Heling 朱鶴齡 (1606-83), which is still in use. The 1762 commentary of Feng Hao 馮浩 (1719-1801) remains the most widely used of classical commentaries. After Zhu Heling, however, new commentaries and critical interpretations have appeared with some regularity up to the present day.[2]

[1] Daoyuan's and Qian Longti's commentaries have been partially preserved in subsequent Qing commentaries, especially in Zhu Heling.

[2] The following Chinese commentaries to Li Shangyin's poetry will be used. Liu Xuekai 劉學鍇 and Yu Shucheng 徐恕誠, eds., *Li Shangyin shige jijie* 李商隱詩歌集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988) (hereafter jj). This gathers all the major Qing and early modern commentaries, with the evaluative judgments of Liu and Yu. Ye Congqi 葉蔥奇, *Li Shangyin shiji shuzhu* 李商隱詩集疏注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1985) (hereafter Ye). Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫, *Li Shangyin xuanji* 李商隱選集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986) (hereafter Zhou). Reference will also

These commentators deployed immense erudition, and their work properly remains the foundation of all current scholarship on Li Shangyin. But the dates are, nevertheless, significant. We do not have a continuous tradition of exegetical work on Li Shangyin's poetry: the earliest extant commentaries do not appear until eight centuries after Li Shangyin wrote. As erudite as the Qing commentators were, their understanding of Tang literature was, to a large degree, ahistorical; that is, they assumed that the nature of learning, the presumptions of poetic "meaning," and especially the context of poetic composition and circulation were essentially the same eight centuries earlier in the Tang as they were in the Qing.

We will return to the particular interpretations of "Spring" made by Qing and modern Chinese critics, but one assumption that most share is that this and the other "Yan Terrace Poems" are about something in the poet's life. Whether the referent is assumed to be indirect (some political situation) or direct (a romantic liaison), they assume actual prior events and concealed intentions in making reference to those events that govern the choice and positioning of the words of the poem. From the words, in turn, they create biographical scenarios and then use the scenario as a context for interpreting the poem.[3]

Since the poems draw on conventional associations of images used in erotic and other types of poetry, there is little doubt regarding many of the core "moments" around which such scenarios are constructed. Less persuasive are the attempts to reconcile all the discontinuous particulars of the poem to a coherent unity that can be mapped upon a biographical narrative. But this leaves open the question whether such poems do indeed have a hidden scenario to

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be made to James J.Y. Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) (hereafter Liu).

[3] One exception is the Qing commentator Cheng Mengxing 程夢星, who says: "the poem has no deep import; it's just a sensual song" 詩無深意，但豔曲耳 (jj, 93). Driven by the evidence, the modern commentator Zhou Zhenfu concludes that Li Shangyin is not writing about his own experiences in the "Yan Terrace Poems," but he does not surrender the historical ground of interpretation, deciding instead that this is about someone else's personal experience (Zhou, 83).

which they refer and, further, whether such a scenario refers to something in the poet's life.

In a major article the modern scholar and critic Ye Jiaying 葉嘉瑩 used the "Yan Terrace Poems" to offer a critique of traditional criticism and a new approach to classical poetry.[4] Although Ye rejects the possibility that the poems are purely a "romantic figment of the poet's imagination" on the grounds of their passionate intensity, she also rejects the search for a particular biographical referent. In contrast to the traditional critic's procedure of explaining poetic usages by citing the earliest usage of phrases, Professor Ye uses her rich knowledge of poetry to contextualize couplets by similar passages from Tang poetry and Song song lyric. Her aim is something like a "New Critical" reading of the poems, setting biographical issues aside as much as possible.

Ye Jiaying prefaces her discussion of the poems with the citation of Li Shangyin's preface to a set of quatrains dedicated to Liuzhi, the daughter of a Luoyang merchant, to whom Li Shangyin's cousin recited the "Yan Terrace Poems." In place of biographical scenarios, Ye Jiaying suggests that the preface helps us "understand the kind of effect Li Shang-yin was trying for in his poetry, particularly what he imagined the ideal reader of the Yen-t'ai poems to be" (YJY, 47). My discussion here, of more modest scope than Ye Jiaying's, accepts the Liuzhi preface as the proper context in which to read the "Yan Terrace Poems"; but I will try to pose the question of understanding in a somewhat different way. The first question I will ask concerns the cultural context in which such obscure and ostensibly impassioned poems are put into public circulation. Then I will come back to the text to ask the question that is the title of this paper, "What did Liuzhi hear?" That is, we will try to consider the process by which meaning is formed and disrupted in the first of the "Yan Terrace Poems," "Spring."

[4] "Jiushi xinyan" 舊詩新演, rpt. in Ye Jiaying, *Jialing lunshi conggao* 迦陵論詩叢稿 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 147-209. Translation by James Robert Hightower, "Li Shang-yin's 'Four Yen-t'ai poems,' " *Renditions* 21-22 (1984), 41-92 (hereafter YJY).

Context

Flirtations, passions, and love affairs were certainly nothing new in the ninth century. But even though we have some accounts of these, there was nothing earlier to compare with the discursive culture of romance that appeared early in the ninth century—in poems (sometimes with prefaces), in tales, and in anecdotes. Such written works make frequent reference to another important component of the culture of romance, public gossip.[5] In this period the demimonde achieved an unprecedented level of publicity.[6]

The "Yan Terrace Poems" circulated within a community that shared an interest in texts and stories that touched on the themes of romance and the closely allied stories of men or women unfortunate in love. Hearings such stories or reading poems, others would often

[5] In this context we need not be concerned with the difference between non-fictional and "fictional" materials. Our interests are not in the historical truth of romantic encounters and liaisons, but in their plausibility, that such stories could be taken as true.

[6] My use of the term "demimonde" here requires some explanation. I would suggest that concubinage, real, or prospective, was central to the culture of romance; that is, the relationships involved a limited period of sexual partnership that was supposed to be sexually exclusive on the part of the woman. The women were usually of entertainer background, though there are anecdotes and tales in which the women are of merchant background, as was the case with Liuzhi. The men are members of the elite. Although concubines as permanent secondary wives within the household existed at a high social level, among the lower level gentry these relationships were more fluid. In some cases concubines seem to have been bonded servants, who could be exchanged like chattel; however, in most cases the woman seems to have had freedom of choice both in beginning and continuing the relationship. In a majority of cases we hear of men sending away concubines; but in a significant minority of cases, as in the events of the Li He title in the following paragraph, the woman could leave the man. Concubinage could be compelled by social authority or wealth, but the discourse of romance is, of course, concerned with those cases in which there was some reciprocity of feeling on the part of the woman—either of affection or a sense of personal obligation. The woman's sexual relations either before or after a term as a concubine were not usually an issue, but fidelity was generally assumed while the woman was a concubine. Infidelities of concubines and expression of interest in other men's concubines could be represented; the same was not true of legitimate wives of the elite.

contribute their own verses. Such a moment is beautifully captured in the least succinct of Li He's poem titles (20763-766): "Degree Nominee Xie Had a Concubine Named Gaolian Who Left Him For Someone Else; and Though He Tried to Hold Her Back, He Was Unable; Afterward She Was Moved to Think Back on Him Fondly; Everyone At the Party Composed a Poem Reviling Her, and I, Li He, Added Four Additional Verses."[7] It is a communal activity: a story is told, judgment is passed, and members of the group contribute their responses and opinions. Such an interested community of judgment is also often represented in Tang tales of romance. In "Yingying zhuan" 鶯鶯傳, Zhang's friends tell the story, evaluate his behavior, and write poems on his affair with Cui Yingying. A verse by Li Shen 李紳 (25683) and fragments of his long ballad (referred to in the story), along with verse by Yuan Zhen himself, survive independent of the tale, testifying to the story's general circulation. In "Huo Xiaoyu zhuan" 霍小玉傳 we have the young men of the city who gossip and take Huo Xiaoyu's part against Li Yi. And tales of romance often conclude with scenes of telling and retelling the story; the "texts" of such tales may be by a particular writer, but texts are only one mode by which "stories" circulate.

Closely allied to such stories of love affairs were popular images of unhappy women, suffering various kinds of loss or degradation. At a banquet Li Ao 李翱 witnessed the performance of a melancholy dancer who turned out to be the daughter of a Vice Censor-in-Chief and his favorite concubine; after her father's death the daughter had been forced by circumstances to the degraded status of a performer. Upon examination she was found to have "the manners of an official family," *guangai fengyi* 冠蓋風儀, and was given in marriage to a man of the gentry. As interesting as the story itself is its circulation; Shu Yuanyu 舒元輿 heard of the story in the capital and sent a quatrain commenting on the event back to Li Ao (25935). The version we have, from *Tangshi jishi*, comes with a preface retelling the story as a context for the quatrain. The preface would probably not have been sent to Li Ao; rather it testifies to Shu Yuanyu's public circula-

[7] Numbers in parenthesis refer to Hiraoka Takeo, et al., *Tōdai no shihen* 唐代之詩篇 (Kyoto: Institute of Humanistic Studies, 1964-65).

tion of the story along with his quatrain. Bai Juyi and Zhang Zhongsu wrote of Zhang Yin's loyal concubine Panpan 盼盼, desirable in her chaste "widowhood" in the "Mansion of the Swallows" 燕子樓 (22597-599, 19414-416).[8] A similar, though less overtly erotic attraction, can be seen in the "Song of the Pipa" 琵琶行, when Bai Juyi encounters an aging courtesan, married to an absent merchant, on the river. From Du Mu we have long poems for Du Qiuniang 杜秋娘詩 and Zhang Haohao 張好好詩. Growing out of the older tradition of boudoir poetry, fragmentary images of lonely abandonment were also part of the commerce between the sexes, as was probably the case in Wen Tingyun's lyrics.

Poetic representations of romance involved a conventional set of situations and images, and the level of figuration was generally higher than in the social poetry treating purely male society. Some pieces, such as Li He's "She Drives Me Crazy" (20751), are remarkably obscure; and such an association between poetic obscurity and desire shaped the style of the "Yan Terrace Poems."

Another variation in the culture of romance was the general image of male rakishness, presented by Du Mu in his poetry and attributed to him and to Wen Tingyun by others.[9] Scattered through poem collections of the ninth century are verses of erotic invitation and of longing real or fictive. While such poetry may well have been used in real situations, it is, in no sense, private: it is shared with a larger audience that appreciates and enjoys images of pleasure and desire.

Even if Li Shangyin were representing personal experience in the "Yan Terrace Poems" (which seems unlikely), he would have been representing it *for* a community of readers (and auditors) consisting of both men and women. Desire, sex, and particular attachments to one man or one woman have been with the species always;

[8] In romance literature Guan Panpan has always been taken to have been the loyal concubine of the powerful Zhang Jianfeng 張建封, but she was in fact the concubine of his son Yin 愔. See Zhu Jincheng 朱金城, ed., *Bai Juyi ji jianjiao* 白居易 集箋校 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 927-28.

[9] For Wen Tingyun, see especially the set of teasing poems by Duan Chengshi (32226-232).

but the experience of "romance" involves stories and texts that embody codes of behavior, norms of response, and images of desire. It would be foolishly austere to deny that such codes, norms, and images did not shape the behavior and experience of real people; but the real site of romance is in the circulation of its representations.

In the case of the "Yan Terrace Poems" we are fortunate to have the unique piece of evidence mentioned earlier, a piece of evidence from Li Shangyin's own hand on the circulation and reception of such densely obscure love poetry. In contrast to the attempt to reconstruct Li Shangyin's poetic intentions, which we find eight centuries later, this text speaks of the "Yan Terrace Poems" in terms of their contemporary effect. The text is the preface to a group of quatrains dedicated to Liuzhi, "Willow Branch."

> Liuzhi was a girl of Luoyang who lived in the same ward as I.[10] Her father had been a quite successful merchant, who died in a storm on the lakes. Her mother had no care for her sons, but gave all her attention to Liuzhi. At seventeen when making herself up and coiling her hair, she would never complete her toilette, but would instead get up and go off. She would blow shrill notes on leaves, [her sweet breath as if] chewing the stamens of flowers; she would ply the zither strings and finger the pipes, making melodies of wind and billows on the sea, notes of hidden remembrance and intense grievance. Those living close around her, on familiar terms with her family and frequenting the household, heard that after ten years she was still consorting [with men], and it seemed to them that she was a dreamer in a drunken sleep, and they broke connections with her and made no offers of marriage.
>
> My cousin Rangshan lived right next to Liuzhi. On a previous day in spring's thick shade Rangshan dismounted beneath Liuzhi's southern willow tree and intoned my "Yan Terrace Poems." Liuzhi was amazed and asked, "Who could feel this? Who wrote it?" Rangshan replied, "He is a young cousin of mine."

[10] The precise sense of *liniang* 里娘 is unclear; I have taken it in the sense of *lifu* 里婦, "a woman of the same village/city ward."

With her hand Liuzhi tore her long sash and arranged for Rangshan to give it to his cousin and ask for a poem.[11]

The next day I went on horseback with him to her street. Liuzhi finished getting made up and had her hair done in a forked coil; arms folded, she stood by the door, hiding her face with a sleeve. She said to me directly, "Are you the cousin? Three days from now we in the neighborhood are due to go to the riverside to wet our skirts [in a lustration ceremony]; I'll meet you there, waiting with a *boshan* incense burner." I agreed.

It happened at the time that I was to go with a friend to the capital, and as a practical joke he had stolen my bedding and gone on ahead, so I couldn't stay. It was snowing when Rangshan came and said, "An eastern grandee has taken her."

The next year Rangshan was returning east. We parted by the Xi, whereupon I entrusted these poems to him to write on her former dwelling. (jj, 99)

The historical truth of this account—whether all the events really occurred and all the details of Liuzhi's background and behavior were accurate—is less significant than the fact that Li Shangyin could circulate such an account under the presumption of its plausibility. Liuzhi 柳枝, "Willow Branch," was a generic term for a demimondaine, though here we have some rather unusual details in a picture of the urban culture of romance. Liuzhi is the daughter of a merchant family; the death of her father and the indulgence of her mother encourage the development of a dreamy and passionate sensibility, along with unconventional and willful behavior. The image of Liuzhi is, in no small degree, the construct of romantic fantasy; but it is impossible to know whether this is a male fantasy or her own theatrical "self-fashioning."[12] In either case, an important part

[11] The use of *jie* 結 here is problematic. Both Hightower and James Liu have Liuzhi tying a [love] knot in the piece of the sash. This is tempting, but cannot work grammatically unless one assumes that some characters have fallen out of the text. Zhou Zhenfu takes it as "form an acquaintance," but that also does not work well.

[12] Ye Jiaying takes Liuzhi as Li Shangyin's image of his ideal reader. I would not disagree with this, but I would stress the role of Rangshan's account and probably the behavior of a real, historical Liuzhi in creating this image. That is, all three—Li Shangyin, Rangshan, and Liuzhi—share the culture of romance.

of her desirable image is that she is under the spell of the images of a culture of romance, in her insouciance regarding her toilette and her musical performances "making melodies of wind and billows on the sea, notes of hidden remembrance and intense grievance." "Hidden remembrance and intense grievance," *youyi yuanduan* 幽憶怨斷 suggests the intensely erotic image of the woman consumed by the passion of a broken love affair. And yet explicitly in this part of her life she is not attached to anyone in particular. There is, as yet, no object for "remembrance" or "grievance"; she performs a romantic role but without the empirical experience to provide a referent. The poetically induced passion for Li Shangyin offers her the possibility to live out the role she has played.[13]

The elliptical nature of the account leaves much room for uncertainty, but she apparently chooses to "consort," *xiangyu* 相與 (the degree of sexual intimacy is unclear) rather than change her conduct and show herself ready for a marriage.[14] The reason that she gets no offers of marriage is, remarkably, not the fact that she "consorts" but that she continues to do so. The matchmakers in the neighborhood hope she will "wake up," but she is still in a drunken dream. The "drunken dream," of course, is a powerful erotic image itself and it plays a prominent part in "Spring" of the "Yan Terrace Poems."

The first case of poetic circulation comes from Li Shangyin's cousin Rangshan. We should first note that Rangshan apparently knows Li Shangyin's obscure "Yan Terrace Poems" by heart.[15] The precise situation is unclear, but Rangshan seems to recite them in the open air for Liuzhi outside her house. Perhaps such easy informality with members of the opposite sex is what the preface means by "consorting." It does not seem that Rangshan is using these intensely pas-

[13] It is, of course, possible that her "remembrance" and "grievance" are for the loss of her father, but that does not quite fit the image created.

[14] Both James Liu and Hightower, in his translation of the passage for Ye's article, gloss over the *xiangyu*, having her simply continue to play her music and act in a willful fashion. *Xiangyu* is commonly "to go around with others." Zhou Zhenfu suggests these are male friends, which, in the context, seems very likely.

[15] It is possible that Rangshan is reciting them from manuscript, but that is not mentioned in the text.

sionate poems to court or seduce his neighbor Liuzhi. He was impressed enough by the poems to commit them to memory, and he evidently anticipates that Liuzhi will be interested in them as well. Indeed, the "Yan Terrace Poems" embody in words those dreamy, passionate images of romance that Liuzhi was supposed to have expressed in her music. We should keep in mind that what Li Shangyin tells us about Liuzhi was probably learned from Rangshan. But in this story of Rangshan's recitation of the "Yan Terrace Poems" we see the circulation of texts among individuals who share common interests in such matters.

Our large question is, however: what did Liuzhi hear? The "Yan Terrace Poems" are dense, fragmentary, and elusive. Liuzhi was the daughter of a merchant household. She must have been literate because she asked Rangshan to have Li Shangyin write a poem for her (perhaps, as Zhou Zhenfu suggests, on the torn piece of her sash). If the poem she hoped to receive was to be anything like the "Yan Terrace Poems," she must have been quite literate (though not necessarily well educated in ancient texts). We have a comparable case in Li He's "Song for Lord Xu's Miss Zheng" (20859), in which the mistress of a prominent Luoyang lord requests a song in her praise when the poet is visiting her establishment.[16] But in this first encounter with Li Shangyin's poetry, Liuzhi did not read the poems; she heard them.

Li Shangyin can imagine her responding to the "Yan Terrace Poems" aurally. For us the "Yan Terrace Poems" are barely comprehensible, even written out in characters with full commentary ("Spring" is, by far, the easiest poem in the set). The listener would have had an advantage in catching puns; for example, Liuzhi would certainly have heard "the immortal of the bedchamber" 密房羽客 behind the "winged visitor of the honeycomb," *mifang yuke* 蜜房羽客. In circulating her response to the poems in this preface, Li Shangyin tacitly acknowledges that the poems may legitimately be taken erotically.

[16] Note that this poem, like the "Yan Terrace Poems" and many poems in the culture of romance, also uses unregulated quatrain stanzas in the seven character line.

Measuring this moment as represented in Li Shangyin's own preface against later interpretations, some interesting questions arise. We might ask if she would have understood the poems as referring to Li Shangyin's personal experience. That is, would she have taken them as evidence of the poet's passionate devotion to another woman? This is less clear in "Spring," which, as we will see below, can reasonably be read as describing a woman's longing; but, if she were reading biographically, this would have been the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from lines in the set as a whole. The passionate obsession of a line like "Singing lips, for a whole lifetime watched, biting back tears [rain]" 歌唇一世銜雨看 (though the writer is still a very young man), if taken biographically, would hardly encourage Liuzhi's attempts to form a liaison with the poet. Or would she have understood the images of love and longing in the "Yan Terrace poems" as detached from particular reference, like her own musical expression of "hidden remembrance and intense grievance"?

Perhaps "what Liuzhi heard" was, as Ye Jiaying suggests, what the young Li Shangyin had anticipated in composing the "Yan Terrace Poems." Perhaps such an audience and mode of circulation, poems recited from memory or passed around in manuscript, was foremost in his mind. He could not have imagined my edition with three and a half centuries of commentary, argument, and speculation on the part of aging and erudite scholars, who could consult a large range of printed texts. And those same scholars, of course, had a particular advantage in knowing all the poems Li Shangyin had not yet written and the experiences he had not yet had. Li Shangyin was erudite, but one may legitimately ask the degree of erudition he presumed in his audience and how allusion and reference were meant to be apprehended.

Li Shangyin tells us precisely what the response to these poems might have been, and perhaps should have been. Liuzhi did not assume that Li Shangyin was hopelessly attached to another woman. Rather she asked, "Who could feel this? Who wrote it?" 誰人有此，誰人為是. "Who could feel this?" is literally "Who has this [within himself]?" The poems are taken as the evidence of a sensibility, a capacity for feeling.

Liuzhi must have heard beautiful fragments. These fragments touched the occasions of feeling in the Chinese erotic tradition: the agony of loss and separation. The very fragmentariness of the poems embodied the disorientation of passion, discursive discontinuities that were the counterpart of Liuzhi's behavior, rising suddenly from her unfinished toilette to go out and play impassioned music. There is, as we will see, a formal structure of coherence to bind discontinuities together, but discontinuity functions effectively as the mimesis of passionate distraction.

Liuzhi clearly wants to meet the author of such a poem, but her desire is expressed through a wish for more poetry, offering her sash so that the poet can write something for this woman he had never met and perhaps had never heard of. There is little doubt regarding the kind of poem she expects to receive. Li Shangyin and Liuzhi then meet in a scene that reenacts the encounters in Tang tales of romance, with the woman "showing herself" in stylized and seductive concealment. An assignation is arranged, but through a mishap, the adolescent banality of which plays counterpoint to the putative intensity of feeling, the rendezvous is avoided, thus producing not a sexual liaison, but yet another image of a woman lost and a woman who has lost her beloved. Word that Liuzhi has been taken by an "eastern grandee" offers an occasion of helpless longing and encourages the poet to produce yet more poems, for which the anecdote above is the preface.

This then is the context for poetry like the "Yan Terrace Poems," a culture of romance in which the image of a beloved anticipated, denied, or lost is a value shared among a group of people who communicate with one another through poems, stories, letters, and verbal accounts. No doubt actual sexual encounters and longing occurred, but their reality is only incidental.

To someone potentially engaged in a liaison like Liuzhi or Li Shangyin, the representations offered by the go-between (Rangshan reciting Li Shangyin's poems or Rangshan telling Li Shangyin about Liuzhi, thus providing the material of the preface) promise a capacity for passion rather than indicating past life experiences. The larger community is no less interested in such representations and is as

much the intended audience of the poems as the potential beloved. Li Shangyin, after all, asks Rangshan to write the "Liuzhi" quatrains he has composed on Liuzhi's Luoyang dwelling—Liuzhi herself has been taken away, so the poems are left for the Luoyang community to read (they no doubt sought a follow-up to the thwarted encounter).

As one more example of the functional role of poetry in the culture of romance, we might first consider the simple assignation quatrain supposedly sent by Yingying to Zhang in "Yingying zhuan":

> I await the moon on the western porch,
> my door half ajar, facing the breeze.
> Flower shadows stir, brushing the wall—
> I wonder if this is my lover coming.

In the story the verse is followed by Zhang's exegesis of the secret message. "Zhang understood the subtle message implied. That night was the fourteenth of April [hence the full moon would be the next night, on the fifteenth]. There was an apricot tree on the eastern side of her apartments, and by climbing it he could get into her quarters."

In the "Huo Xiaoyu zhuan," when the mother is introducing her daughter Xiaoyu to Li Yi, a variation on the poetic punch-line is quoted.

> Then she ordered that wine and food be served and had Xiaoyu come out from her chamber on the eastern side of the hall. Li Yi went to greet her, but all he was aware of was something like an alabaster forest and jade trees throughout the whole room, casting their dazzling radiance back and forth, and as he turned his gaze, the crystalline rays struck him. Xiaoyu then went and sat by her mother, who said to her, "You are always fond of reciting:
>
> When I opened the curtains, wind stirred the bamboo,
> and I thought it was my old lover coming.[17]

[17]故人, of course, need not be a lover, but that is clearly the implication in context.

> Those lines are from a poem by this very Li Yi. Better to see him in person than to spend the whole day imagining him as you recite." Xiaoyu lowered her head giggling . . .

Huo Xiaoyu's fascination with the lines is not as an invitation or a reference to her own experiences; rather they offer an image of love and its passionate attentiveness; they provide that image to someone who has not yet experienced love, someone who "spends the whole day imagining him as [she] recites." For her the author is not a rake but someone with a sensibility that makes him attractive as a lover.

What Did Liuzhi Hear?

If space permitted, it would be best to consider all four seasons of the "Yan Terrace Poems" together.[18] Although the attempts of some Chinese commentators to integrate the four seasons with a single biographical narrative are strained, as seasonal variations the poems do echo and support one another.[19] For the sake of economy, however, I will limit myself to a reading of "Spring."

All four poems are written in heptasyllabic quatrain stanzas, with rhymes changing at the stanza breaks. This form has a distinct structural character, with each stanza representing a self-contained "moment" within the poem. Indeed, the genre is formally identical to a series of heptasyllabic quatrains (without regulation).

Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1805) rejected the erotic reading of the poem and suggested a covert political meaning (jj, 94); but despite Zhang Caitian's 張采田 (1862-1945) elaborate attempt to offer such a reading (jj, 96-97), most critics and commentators have preferred to take the poems in reference to a love affair. In one revealing moment of class snobbery, Liu Xuekai 劉學鍇 and Yu Shucheng 徐恕誠 ridicule the possibility of a political referent on the grounds that the daughter of

[18] I am going to avoid, for the present, the question of the meaning of the title. *Yan-tai* can mean "the office of a provincial governor," but when Ye Jiaying relates it in a general way to Li Shangyin's biography, it ignores the problem that these poems were written under this title well before any of his later experiences occurred.

[19] For a summary of the various theories of the unity of the set see YJY, 48-49.

a merchant would never have been able to appreciate such "subtle import" (*weiyan* 微言) (jj, 98). Quite the contrary, we might well suppose that a young woman like Liuzhi, in contact with the gentlemen of the city and their political gossip, would have had a far keener sense of oblique political reference to current affairs than any Qing or modern scholar. But the preface implies that Li Shangyin considered Liuzhi's response was not inappropriate; and Liuzhi's response was an overtly erotic one.

Feng Hao tentatively introduced what has become the dominant scenario: Li Shangyin's beloved was taken from him by a powerful official, and the poems express his frustrated longing. Reading the "Yan Terrace Poems" together with others, this scenario is elaborated into a fuller narrative in which she is taken south, but is no longer there when the poet passes through the region in 848.[20] Liu Xuekai and Yu Shucheng retain the basic narrative of love and loss, but change the site and situations. Zhou Zhenfu's reading is close to that of Feng Hao, but he makes the woman someone else's beloved and not Li Shangyin's own.

Extrapolated from passages in these poems and from other poems assumed to be related (such as "Heyang" 29648), these biographical scenarios become, in turn, the ground on which to explain the poems' obliquities and apparent discontinuities. New commentators elaborate or change particular points of their predecessors, but they tend to preserve some of the most basic assumptions, which they have come to take for granted by having first read the poems through the commentaries of predecessors. The most striking example is the presumption that the point of view in "Spring" is that of a man. The poem is read in the context of a "Li Shangyin" whose full life has been reconstructed in the Qing and modern times, a man with a complete political career and a private life that invites speculation.

Liuzhi, by contrast, would have heard the poem without any biographical scenario. She obviously did not know Li Shangyin, whom Rangshan identifies simply as his cousin. Li Shangyin was

[20] Many commentators wanted the beloved to be Liuzhi herself; but Feng Hao pointed out the obvious problem with such an interpretation.

still very young when he wrote these poems. His complex political fortunes and his responses to them lay in the future. His later loves—including the abortive episode with Liuzhi herself—lay in the future.

Liuzhi *was* interested in the poet, but to "know" him she would have brought to the poem a more general knowledge of how to understand poetry and how to join conventional images of romance to produce meaningful fragments of coherence. As we suggested earlier, it is unlikely that Liuzhi took the poem as evidence of some earlier love affair of the young poet; the images of the poem must permit her to occupy that role as an imaginative possibility.

Our Liuzhi is, of course, a fictive construct. We have her third hand, from Rangshan's report to L i Shangyin and from his report to us. But the preface tells us that Li Shangyin could comfortably entertain the prospect of such an auditor (/reader) for his poems.

One further point needs to be made. The "Yan Terrace Poems" are notoriously difficult, but not all poetic difficulty is of the same type. The "Yan Terrace Poems" are, for the most part, not difficult due to the allusive density or twisted lexical usages of many of Li Shangyin's other "difficult" poems. The "Yan Terrace Poems" are difficult because of indeterminacies of reference, syntactic ambiguities, and apparent discontinuities. On one linguistic level, however, the "Yan Terrace Poems" in general, and "Spring" in particular, are not difficult at all. They use many common compounds that would have been aurally comprehensible to anyone acquainted with recited poetry or literary song. Many of Li Shangyin's historical poems and *yongwu* would not have been even marginally comprehensible without a written text; their textual allusions and usages are such that the phonemes alone are inadequate to recognize words. But the words of "Spring" probably could be understood without too much problem.

How those words go together is another matter.

The bright weather moves gradually
    along the east-west paths,
for how many days has the charming soul
    sought but not found?

The honeycomb's winged visitor
is like the loving heart,
seductive leaves, courtesan twigs
recognize him, everywhere.

In "Bright weather," *fengguang* 風光, the very first phrase, Liuzhi would have heard the season marker, which any reader of Tang poetry or auditor of Tang poetry and song would have used to contextualize the verse. The "gradual movement," *ranran* 冉冉, is generally taken as the gradual awakening of spring; however, the unusually specific orientation of the paths as "east-west" also suggests a linear vector that calls to mind the dawning and course of light on a spring day. The question "how many days"in the following line will suppress that association, but the later image of waking late in the day and the setting of the sun in the final couplet provide an associative frame that holds the poem together. In the same way the change to summer clothes in the penultimate couplet serves the same function of bringing to closure the other sense of *ranran* as the onset of spring weather. These two time frames—the course of a day and the course of the season—cannot be logically reconciled, but their function is more formal than logical, like the reintroduction of *fengguang* as *feng* and *guang* in parallel positions in the final couplet. Attention to shifts in things of the season or markers of the time of day and spatial orientation were one way in which readers of poetry grasped sequences in the hypotactic poetic language.

In the poetry and song of romance markers of gender were equally important. In this stanza we have images associated with a man and a woman and a "seeking but not finding." The *jiao* 嬌, "charming," in the phrase "charming soul" qualifies that soul as belonging to a woman. "The honeycomb's winged visitor," the bee, is masculine and suggests a man who seeks out women ("flowers").[21] As suggested earlier, Liuzhi would surely have heard the play on *mifang* as both "honeycomb [cell]" 蜜房 and "bedchamber" 密房. The

[21] James Liu insists that *fangxin* 芳心, "loving [fragrant] heart," should belong to a woman; but this term is far less gender specific than *jiao* 嬌, and it forces the highly unlikely interpretation of the bee as a woman (Liu, 70).

"winged visitor," *yuke* 羽客, is an immortal as well as a bee, suggesting the common figuration of erotic encounters as meetings with divine beings.

The terms of an erotic situation—spring, man, woman, seeking—are clear, but the situation itself is far from clear, due to one fundamental ambiguity. The line 幾日嬌魂尋不得 can be interpreted either as above, with the woman seeking, or as "for how many days has the charming soul *been* sought but not found?" That is, we do not know if the woman is looking for the man or the man is looking for the woman. This is, shall we say, basic information. Such grammatical ambiguities are common in poetic Chinese, but the ambiguities are usually resolved by other markers, such as the title or further context. In this poem, however, the situation is never clarified. The reader or auditor will here make an immediate determination as to whether the point of view, the presumed subject in the poem, is a man or a woman. That choice will then shape the understanding of the rest of the poem, as the auditor hears new and disparate elements in the context of prior choices.

Part of the pleasure of the poem is precisely that imperfect process of meaning formation; it is neither a static "meaning" to be discovered, in which every element can be mapped on a perfectly coherent scenario, nor is it merely a series of beautiful images that all randomly contribute to a vague poetic scene, as Ye Jiaying suggests in her reinterpretation. The closest, and perhaps intentional, model for such understanding is dream providing fragments of coherence that never fully achieve full definition.

Under the influence of the biographical scenario, Chinese commentators generally identify the point of view as that of the man, Li Shangyin himself, seeking for the beloved who eludes him. Even Ye Jiaying, who abandons the biographical scenario, wants to keep this as a drama of the poet's passion.

For Liuzhi, however, the alternative interpretation, with the woman as the seeker, would probably have come more readily.[22] The woman would, of course, never be represented as physically seeking

[22] James J.Y. Liu is one of the few modern interpreters who have read the poem from a woman's point of view.

out the beloved; but the figure of woman in these lines is explicitly a "soul." In dreams the soul does go out seeking the person for whom the dreamer longs; and here was a conventional erotic image of the cloistered woman, filled with "spring desires," who longs for and dreams of the absent man. In "Spring Desires" (20875), attributed to Li He, Li Shangyin's poetic mentor, we have such an image:

> On the precious pillow hangs hair-cloud, seeking a spring dream,
> an inlaid box wards off cold, its dragon-brain camphor frozen.[23]
> Ahou ties brocade and seeks young Zhou Yu,[24]
> depending on the east wind to kindly send her there.

This conventional image allows various reasons for the man's absence, but sometimes he is off in the pleasure quarters keeping company with other women, perhaps the "seductive leaves and courtesan twigs." If Liuzhi began the poem with such an assumption, she would find much later in the poem to sustain it.

At this particular moment in history images of women longing for absent men are far more frequent than of men longing for absent women. There are a few earlier figures of male longing and attempting to find the beloved in dream; Xuanzong is a good example, though his passion is a third person passion rather than the first person passion that the biographical interpreters seek. Others of the "Yan Terrace Poems" mingle images of female and male longing; and later in his life Li Shangyin would write many poems about seeking the elusive beloved, including seeking her in dream. Although Li Shangyin's commentators know these poems well, Liuzhi could not have anticipated them.

Ye Congqi dates the "Yan Terrace Poems" in 835 (I prefer 833 or earlier). We do not know the dates of Wen Tingyun's song lyrics, but they are quite possibly from roughly the same period, and they make repeated use of similar erotic images of the longing woman,

[23] Reading the homophonous 辟寒 for 碧寒, as in the first of Li Shangyin's "Walls of Sapphire" 犀辟塵埃玉辟寒.

[24] Commentators generally take Ahou as a type name for a singing girl (cf. 20873). Zhou Yu is the standard type name for a handsome young man.

often dreaming. If such images were circulating in song, it seems likely that this would have been the most immediate context for Liuzhi's understanding.

The poet-centered scenario, with the male lover seeking the elusive beloved, produces a rather different interpretation. Liu Xuekai and Yu Shucheng offer the following paraphrase of the situation: "These four lines recall seeking spring on the paths in the past. The 'charming soul' refers to the woman he loves; 'the honeycomb's winged visitor' refers to the poet himself. The general import of the four lines is that spring's light gradually arrives and spring's colors spread everywhere over the paths; my 'loving heart; is like 'the honeycomb's winged visitor'; everywhere I recognize and am recognized by 'seductive leaves and courtesan twigs,' but the sweet traces of her alone I seek everywhere without finding. Although the 'winged visitor' refers to the bee, it also seems to imply that he himself is a Daoist" (jj, 82). This leads on to a general framing of the rest of the poem in terms of moments of memory of the beloved and loss.

We can never know with any certainty what Li Shangyin assumed in composing "Spring." It would not be inconceivable that he "intended" that the poem be read from a male point of view, while Liuzhi understood the same words in the context of the conventional image of the woman longing for the absent man. We may, however, offer one observation: assuming the point of view of a woman requires considerably less interpretive ingenuity in linking the stanzas.

The first three lines of the stanza set the scene, the players, and an ambiguous seeking. The two lines of interpretation divide sharply in the fourth line. Despite Ye Jiaying's implausible attempt to make the image simply an example of spring splendor, "seductive leaves and courtesan twigs" strongly suggests the pleasure quarters, the place of "willows," where the bee samples the available women. This presents a problem for the biographical interpreters. Zhang Caitian, for example, suggests that the speaker was familiar with such women before he met the beloved (jj, 94); Ye Congqi, by contrast, suggests that the beloved was a courtesan and known to all, thus requiring the hemistich be translated, "recognize her every-

where" (Ye, 572). For those who want to take the seeker as a man, Ye Congqi's explanation is the only plausible one; and the subsequent image of the beloved in isolation and no longer accessible requires that she be removed from the pleasure quarters—presumably by another man.

The alternative version, which has the seeker as a woman, has the dreaming soul looking for him throughout the pleasure quarters, where he is known to all—yet still not finding him.

Warm and hazy the glow moves slowly
west of the peach trees,
her high chignon stands at the level of
the chignon of the peach tree.
Male dragon, hen phoenix,
where, faint in the distance?
the flow in tangles, the strands profuse,
even Heaven loses the way.

The woman is clearly physically present here, and this creates a problem for the interpreters who assume a male point of view, which previously had the man vainly seeking the beloved. Zhu Yizun offers the obvious comment: "It seems like he met her" (jj, 82). Liu Xuekai and Yu Shucheng solve the problem by declaring the first couplet of the stanza to be an unmarked shift to a scene in the past (following Zhang Caitian): "The point is that back then they met in the warm and hazy light. The chignon of the peach tree and her cloudlike hairdo at an equal level reflected against one another. But now the male dragon and the hen phoenix are faint in the distance to one another and cannot meet. The feelings of love longing are like 'floss in tangles and strands profuse,' a confusing mass, and I suspect that if Heaven had feeling, even it would feel lost" (jj, 82). Ye Congqi solves the problem by having the poet imagine the woman elsewhere, filled with spring longing, presumably for the poet himself (Ye, 572).

Perhaps at this moment Liuzhi has the advantage over Qing and modern commentators. She would be particularly attentive to the use of time markers to indicate sequence; and the first line of this

stanza, like the first line of the first stanza, contains a time marker. The commentators generally ignore what would probably have been obvious to any Tang reader or auditor, that it is late afternoon.[25] That stanzaic "moment" is read against one version of the first line of the poem, in which the daylight steadily advances along the "east-west paths." Instead of an unmarked shift of time and place, in this reading we have straight temporal sequence, from the passing day to late afternoon. Correlated with this sequence we have the opposition between the dreaming soul and the woman awake and standing, her physical presence revealed in the synecdoche of her hair. These correlations require an inversion of norms: the woman sleeps during the day and wakes in the late afternoon. The third stanza will confirm this.

The scene is apparently outdoors. If her hairdo is level with the figurative hairdo of the peach tree, its array of leaves and buds, we might guess she is standing on a balcony or raised porch. The "warm and hazy" quality of the late afternoon and light that is a diffuse glow, *hui* 輝, initiates the motif of blurring. This strangely resolves in to the emblematic figures of male and female, fading into a mutual or joint distance; here the term of blurring and uncertainty is *yao* 杳, "faint in the distance." This quickly resolves into another kind of blurring of vision brought about by the tangled floss of the trees (probably willows, corresponding to the willows implicit in the fourth line of the first stanza). The phrasing echoes Li He's famous line "If Heaven had feeling, Heaven too would grow old" 天若有情天亦老 (20703); this tacitly links passion with the "becoming lost" or "confusion," *mi*, that even Heaven would experience in such a scene. Of course, we could just as easily read the line as the woman becoming confused as to her view of the heavens through the tangles of floss.

What would our fictive Liuzhi have heard in this stanza? She would have first heard a line that offered some temporal and spatial orientation, followed by lines about blurring and disorientation, lines whose discontinuities enact disorientation. Confusions and

[25] *Chi* 遲 is an attribute of the spring sun; the lengthening days are the sun's "slow[ing]" passage.

margins of uncertainty, whether brought about by distance, visual blurrings, or passion, are central to this moment in the poem. In the next stanza they will be contextualized and rationalized, potentially explained as the fog of waking from dream.

Rising drunk, the faint sunlight
    is like first dawnlight,
it shines on the curtains, the dream breaks off,
    the fading words are heard.
In sorrow taking an iron net
    to draw in coral,
the sea is vast, the heavens broad,
    nowhere to be found.

Trying to preserve the biographical scenario, Liu Xuekai and Yu Shucheng continue to interpret this as the man longing for her and dreaming of her (jj, 83). Ye Congqi, though he began with the man seeking the woman, at this point shifts to the woman.

Our fictive Liuzhi would probably have noticed that like the two preceding stanzas the third stanza begins with light, marking the time of day. Such images provide a formal ground of coherence that would dispose the auditor to understand to take the stanzas as a unified sequence of time. At the same time, the opening of the stanza provides a rationalization that prevents the poem from going off into a blur of discontinuous images; it confirms that someone has been asleep during the day, dreaming of the beloved, only to wake late in the afternoon when the sun is low in the sky. Since the person awake in the late afternoon was clearly a woman (stanza 2), and the wandering soul [in dream] was also a woman's (stanza 1), the most natural way to understand the third stanza is as referring to the woman. The illusion of morning in the late afternoon sunshine coming through the window is a rationalized image of confusion, the grogginess from sleep that would contribute to the blur in preceding stanza.

This heavy-handed exposition is an attempt to account for processes that would be largely intuitive, the way in which repeated patterns provide a ground for articulating differences and aligning

them. Unlike Liuzhi (or the young Li Shangyin himself), Qing and modern commentators would read these lines in the context of many later poems by Li in which he does speak in the first person of passion's disorientation and of elusive dreams of the beloved woman. Thus they would read the lines of "Spring" in a context that would be equally intuitive, though producing temporal and spatial discontinuities that would require the construction of more elaborate scenarios.

As the second stanza shifted to the discontinuous image of the male dragon and hen phoenix, this stanza shifts from trying to catch the fading words as she/he wakes from dream to the image of using an iron net to take coral. Although the image is discontinuous (that is, it cannot be integrated with the scene of sleeping and waking), it is easy for the auditor to read this attempt to catch something that is submerged and out of reach as a figure for the fading words. The following image of vast and empty spaces then suggests the failure of the attempt.

In the last phrase of the stanza, what Liuzhi might have heard and the commentators' equally intuitive reading will diverge in an interesting way in the phrase "nowhere to be found," *mi chusuo* 迷處所. Liuzhi could have heard this without particular resonance, as it was not uncommon in contemporary poetic usage.[26] The Qing and modern commentators, however, assuming a man waking from a dream of the beloved, would hear the same phrase in the context of the disappearance of the goddess of Wu Mountain after her sexual encounter in dream with the King of Chu (echoing the preface to the "Poetic Exposition on Gaotang," where the phasing that describes her absence is *wu chusuo* 無處所.[27] Both readings are equally "natural," depending on the expectations formed in reading up to this point and the literary context within which one reads.

[26] For example, a quatrain in the Du Mu *waiji*, "Sending Off an Old Friend on His Return to the Mountains," uses exactly the same phrase to refer to the fact that he will not be able to see his friend after his departure. *Fanchuan shiji zhu* 樊川詩集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 377.

[27] The phrase is duly cited by Zhu Heling.

The gown's sash lacks all feeling,
    it may be loose or tight;
spring mists are naturally sapphire,
    the autumn frosts are white.
Grind cinnabar, split stone—
    Heaven does not know—
would that Heaven's Jail
    locked up the wronged soul!

The first line of this stanza is an excellent example of the role of conventional expectations in understanding. The line is not read for its surface meaning, which makes very little sense; rather it is read against images and motifs evoked by the situation and the use of particular terms. To mention the "gown's sash" will, under the circumstances, call to mind the conventional image of the clothes getting looser as a person grows gaunt from longing. To state the obvious, that something in nature or some inanimate object "lacks feeling," implicitly invokes a human being who does have feeling. Ultimately the line does nothing more than say that the woman (or man) has grown thin from longing.

The truism of the second line of the stanza has nothing to do with the situation and invites commentarial ingenuity. At an early stage in the interpretive tradition Zhu Yizun suggested: "The scene is balmy and beautiful, but the heart is sad and chill" (jj, 83). This rather improbable suggestion is followed by most modern interpreters (Zhou, 64; Ye, 573). Ye Jiaying is good here, noting the connection to the preceding line's "lacking feeling," how natural processes continue on their own, indifferent to human cares.

It is hard to guess here "what Liuzhi heard"; however, we can assume with some confidence that the line was easily comprehensible aurally. It seems unlikely that she would have thought of gloomy, autumnal sentiments in spring. More likely, she would have heard the line in some commonplace poetic sense, suggesting the passage of time in the alternation of the seasons and the changes of things and weather that accompany seasonal changes.

The banality of such a reading of the line, while it does no credit to either the poet or his fictive auditor, does offer a context for the third line. As time passes, things "lacking feeling" change—the sash of the gown and signs proper to each of the changing seasons. But she/he does not change. Though crushed and under duress, the cinnabar and stone keep unchanging properties, like the love that she/he feels.

Since the speaker is the aggrieved party, the third line of the stanza would seem to suggest a wish that the constellation Heaven's Jail would lock up her/his own "wronged soul." Despite various ingenious attempts to have such a wish make sense (Ye Congqi, James J.Y. Liu, and Ye Jiaying), the commonsense impulse would be a wish on the part of the speaker to lock up the beloved's soul. Liu Xuekao and Yu Shucheng come to this conclusion, though they cannot explain how it follows from the words (jj, 84).

The problem with that obvious interpretation is: in what way can the beloved's soul be qualified as *yuan* 冤, "wronged"? It is, of course, possible to invent scenarios in which the beloved has been abducted and taken away from the speaker. But we might instead return to our question, "What did Liuzhi hear?" Even more than with the phrase discussed earlier ("nowhere to be found," *mi chusuo*), the *yuan* here may help us distinguish Tang poetic Chinese from "literary Chinese."[28]

In "literary Chinese," which is a written language, lexical meaning is governed by a full range of precedent usage. Much Tang poetry, including a significant portion of Li Shangyin's own work, makes use of the full resources of literary Chinese. But Tang poetic Chinese not only had lexical and grammatical usages that were peculiar to it, it could also admit vernacular usages that were excluded from "literary Chinese." Although there was indeed much poetry that required the visual recognition of characters, a large part of Tang poetry could certainly have been understood aurally, with-

[28] Here I am accepting the imprecise distinction sometimes made between "classical Chinese" as pre-Qin Chinese, perhaps extending into the Western Han, and "literary Chinese," the written evolution of classical Chinese as practiced in medieval and late imperial China.

out reference to a written text. Although Tang poetic Chinese conserved many archaic features, it was, in part, a stylized oral dialect.[29] In that oral/aural aspect, contemporary poetic usage would have priority over written precedent in the determination of lexical meaning.[30] Thus Liuzhi, literate but probably not learned, would have heard "nowhere to be found," *mi chusuo*, in a plain sense, while later commentators, reading the passage as literary Chinese, would have heard echoes of the "Poetic Exposition on Gaotang." Whatever were Li Shangyin's intentions in using this phrase, both readings are natural.

The case here that sets literary Chinese against poetic Chinese is the phrase "wronged soul," *yuanpo* 冤魄. In offering this translation I have followed Qing and modern commentators in interpreting it as "literary Chinese." In literary Chinese *yuanpo* is clearly a variation for rhyme on the established compound *yuanhun* 冤魂, especially the soul of someone wrongfully killed. Our Qing and modern commentators, by the very way they understand the language of poetry, cannot escape such an interpretation. Liuzhi, however, might well have heard the vernacular extension of *yuan* in lovers' discourse, as in the term *yuanjia* 冤家, the "beloved," already attested in the ninth century and common in love song in later centuries. Such an interpretation would give us the commonsense reading of the line ("my beloved's soul"), while sparing us the ingenuities necessary to account for the literary Chinese sense of the phrase.

We do not know what Li Shangyin, both classically educated and a participant in the urban romance culture, intended. Nor do we truly know what Liuzhi heard. But it seems not unlikely that she

[29] A good analogy here might be the English of the King James Bible, conserving archaic features that could be understood and used by illiterate speakers and those who were literate enough to read the Bible but not learned. American sermons freely mixed this stylized biblical language with the colloquial. Such a specialized dialect escapes the standard distinction between "spoken" and "written" language. But someone competent in the "dialect" of the King James Bible would not have been able to understand the "literary" English of seventeenth-century prose.

[30] Contemporary poetic usage, of course, included many compounds that could ultimately be traced to prior textual usage.

heard the term *yuan* in this vernacular sense, and thus understood the poem as expressing a wish to lock up the "beloved's soul" to keep it from wandering, recalling the situation in the first stanza.

The lined clothes are cast off in the chest,
the unlined silks brought out,

her fragrant flesh, chill, placed between
the tinkling pendants.

This day the east wind
cannot bear it,

it turns into a hidden light
entering the Western Sea

As the first stanza blurred the distinction between the course of the day and the course of the season, the final stanza both distinguishes and conjoins them: it is *chunmu* 春暮, "spring's twilight" as the "end of spring." The changing of clothes was a conventional way to mark the change of seasons, here preparing for summer and the next poem of the set. The first couplet of this stanza clearly refers to a woman, posing yet another problem for those commentators who have been trying to read the poem with a male protagonist. Liu Xuekai and Yu Shucheng have the speaker imagining the woman in the distance; Ye Jiaying has to invoke the "Li Sao" and have the poet figuring himself as a woman. If our fictive Liuzhi has from the beginning assumed a female protagonist, she need not be troubled by such ingenuities, but can focus attention on the strange and sensuous image of the second line of the stanza with the peculiar phrasing "chill, placed between," *leng chen* 冷襯, presumably the pendants feeling chill through the unlined cloth, a chill intensified by the warmth of the flesh in summer.[31]

In the last couplet the term for summer weather, *fengguang* 風光 ("wind-light"), is broken into parallel terms, the "east *wind*" turning

[31] *Leng chen* is not a common combination that would have been recognized aurally as such. However, so far as I can tell, both words are distinct phonemes in Middle Chinese. *Leng* (*lœng*) 冷 is unique and *chen* (*tsìn*) 襯 is by far the most common usage of that phoneme.

into "hidden *light*." The east wind is another conventional season marker for spring, and as the season changes, the east wind also changes into a light that is now invisible. The "east-west," *dongxi* 東西, paths of the first line also returns here as the "east wind" (coming from the extremes of the east) makes a full crossing of the earth and enters the "western sea." In terms of a sequential argument the final couplet is not entirely satisfying: responding to her misery or to the onset of summer's heat, the east wind gives up and turns into the hiding sunlight, leaving the world in darkness. In the formal sequences that unify the poem, however, the ending is perfect, moving from full light to late afternoon, and here to darkness, which is both night and the end of spring.

What Was on Li Shangyin's Mind?

This impossible question is the complement of the impossible question that gives this paper its title. We have already considered two possible contexts for the composition of the "Yan Terrace Poems," contexts that frame the particulars of interpretation. The first context has the impassioned poet pouring out his heart for his lost beloved, or his ideal beloved, or someone else's lost beloved. This was the context that many of the Chinese commentators and critics brought to reading these poems, and it was a context that followed inevitably from reading these poems beside many of Li Shangyin's later poems. It is, moreover, an interpretation that fits the "literary" culture of Tang poetry as it came to be conceived in the late imperial period.

The second context was a discursive culture of romance, with understanding guided by contemporary poetic usage and contemporary images of love and desire. Here the poet is not "pouring out his heart" but demonstrating a sensibility. He need not, therefore, be the central figure in the poem; and we have seen how "Spring" can easily be read with a woman as the protagonist. In this version Li Shangyin lets his poetry be circulated to participate in the culture of romance. This was the version of the poem we constructed for our fictive Liuzhi, and Li Shangyin was clearly proud of the intensity of response that his poems provoked in such a frame of reference.

Let me offer, in closing, yet another possible contemporary context. In this context the poems are also composed to demonstrate sensibility and talent, but in this case they are directed more to his self-image as a poet than to the culture of romance. The "Yan Terrace Poems" were written very early in Li Shangyin's career, before he passed the metropolitan examination.[32] The only earlier poet clearly alluded to in "Spring" was Li He, another youthful genius, whose poetry always exerted a powerful influence on Li Shangyin. If young Li Shangyin were looking to Li He as a model at this stage of his career, he might have turned his attention to Li He's earliest works, when he was making his public debut. Li He's cycle of poems for the twelve months (plus one intercalary month, 20668-680), were written at the age of 19 *sui* for the Henan district examination. Such cycles of single poems on the months (or seasons) are otherwise unattested in this period. We might recall that Li Shangyin composed the "Yan Terrace Poems" in Luoyang, the same city where Li He had composed his "Twelve Months" only twenty-five years earlier. Dare we, in this context, recall that "Yan Terrace" means the office of a provincial governor?

The "Yan Terrace Poems" were clearly not district examination poems, but our third context suggests that they might have been poems circulated, in official circles, to demonstrate the young poet's talent as another Li He. Was Li Shangyin trying to seduce the gov-

[32] Ye Congqi dates both the "Yan Terrace Poems" and the Liuzhi poems to 835. This is clearly not possible since the preface to the Liuzhi poems speaks of them as having been written the "following year" after his encounter with Liuzhi. Although the preface does not explicitly say that Li Shangyin is going to Chang'an to take the examination, it does refer to Li Shangyin as a "youth," *shaonian* 少年. Although this is an indeterminate reference, the scenario does not suggest a *jinshi* with offices and postings. Li Shangyin took the examination three times, in 833, 835, and 837. Considering his peregrinations after his failures in 833 and 835, it would seem that the most likely date for the encounter with Liuzhi would have been 833 at twenty-one *sui*, when he was traveling back and forth between Taiyuan and Luoyang before setting off to Chang'an. This would place the "Yan Terrace Poems" in the same year or earlier. I suspect that these poems may be even earlier, the product of late adolescence; this would resolve not only the biographical problems that securely locate Li later, it would also be consistent with the prank of stealing the bedclothes.

ernor and succeeded in seducing Liuzhi instead? It is hard to believe that poems so overtly devoted to romance would have been appropriate for such advertisement of talent, but then we recall that on some occasions at least, romantic *chuanqi* served a similar function, to draw the attention of senior officials to a young writer's talents.[33] Li He's "Twelve Months" were by no means as intensely erotic as the "Yan Terrace Poems"; nevertheless they are strange lyrics for a poet to offer in an examination, and images of lonely women, feeling the chill of isolation, figure prominently. Maybe things were different in Luoyang. Since Li Shangyin's "Spring" focuses on spring's end, let me offer here Li He's "Third Month":

The wind comes from the east,
    springtime fills the eyes.
In the city of flowers the willows conceal,
    making people utterly melancholy.
In tiered palaces and deepset halls
    a bamboo wind arises.
Dancing gown-flaps of fresh azure,
    clear as water.
The luminous wind turns melilotus
    for over a hundred leagues.
Warm fog drives the clouds,
    bumping Heaven and Earth.

Palace performers in army uniforms
    put on thin mascara brows.
Brocade banners are swaying,
    the walled passageway is warm.
The wind-tossed scent at the Bending River
    goes off, not to return,
when the pear blossom have all fallen,
    it becomes an autumn park.

[33] Note also anecdotes in which an aspiring young poet presents a senior official a poem about women and is dismissed. Cf. Cui Hao seeking to meet Li Yong, *Tangshi jishi juan* 21.

Although there are profound differences between the "Yan Terrace Poems" and Li He's "Twelve Months," the young Li Shangyin was clearly imitating Li He's style in general. In the years to come Li Shangyin was to take a variation on that style and make it so much his own that critics and readers a thousand years later, knowing his work as a whole, would take the "Yan Terrace Poems" as characteristic of one aspect of Li Shangyin's own poetry. But in Luoyang in 835 or 833 or earlier, the style of "Spring" would have boldly recalled the brilliant young poet who died in 817. And to some perhaps, the situation in Li Shangyin's "Spring" might also have recalled Li He's "Pearl, the Fair Maid of Luoyang" (20686):

The young mistress Pearl
    came down from the blue expanse,
in Luoyang's parks on the fragrant breeze
    she flew with unhurried ease.
From cold tresses hairpins slant,
    their jade swallows glint,
in her high bower she sings at the moon,
    tapping dangling medallions.
Orchid breeze and cassia dew
    strew concealing azure,
red strings make the clouds quiver,
    sobbing her deepest longing.
His flowered robes and white horse
    do not come back,
her dark moth-brows fold as willow leaves,
    her fragrant lips are drunk.
A screen with golden geese,
    her dream, of that mountain in Shu,[34]

[34] This is reference to Wu Mountain, whose goddess had a sexual encounter with the king of Chu in dream. The "moving" mist in the next line identifies her with the goddess, going forth to seek her lover in dream.

her luan-bird skirt and phoenix sash
are heavy in moving mist.

Windows all around engulf her in light,
the eyelids lightly stir,

threadlike sunbeams profusely scatter,
twilight's glow in the gauze hung chamber.

In the lanes of the Quarter south of the market
there is no autumn chill,

Chu's thin waists, the tresses of Wei
smell sweet through all the seasons.

Jadelike throats trill with melody,
brushing the light from the sky,

drawing clouds along and trailing snow,
they detain young Master Lu.[35]

In Li He's poem the situation is more fully developed than in "Spring": Pearl is like an immortal, yet her lover is away and does not return. After drinking, she goes to sleep and has an erotic dream, apparently waking late in the day (it is unclear whether *xun* 曛, translated as "twilight's glow," is figurative or literal, but it certainly could be read as literal). The final quatrain contrasts her solitude with the lively pleasures of the entertainment quarter, and we may surmise that the young rake enthralled there is the absent beloved.[36]

Most of the pieces of the situation Li Shangyin's "Spring" are here, and what better way could Li He's young epigone, Li Shangyin, show his talents than by taking a scene from the master and recasting it in still more elusive terms? It is not inconceivable that Liuzhi could have known Li He's poem, but she was probably more interested in Li Shangyin as a lover. To the male audience, however, this would be a demonstration of poetic mastery.

[35] Master Lu here is a figure for a rake.

[36] We might contrast this situation with the successful concubine in Li He's "A Song for Lord Xu's Miss Zheng" (20859), also set in Luoyang: "Ever since her tiny beauty-marks came on the road to the east, / the long brows in the entertainment quarters rarely see anyone."

Multiple Readings

These various readings are, I believe, all "intuitive"; that is, they follow directly from the interests and knowledge of particular classes of historical readers who would feel, with some justification, that they share a common linguistic and cultural ground with the poet. Yet in their differences these readings raise some interesting questions regarding the limits of historical validity in interpretation and authorial intention.

The Qing and modern Chinese commentators bring an immense wealth of historical and textual knowledge to their interpretations. By our hypothetical question "What did Liuzhi hear?" we are able to ask the difficult question—if perhaps they knew and still know too much. We take it for granted that we should know all a poet's works, his life, and times to make certain kinds of historically-based judgment in interpretation. But to bring knowledge of what happened to Li Shangyin later in his life and the complete corpus of his works is, strictly speaking, anachronistic in reading the "Yan Terrace Poems." Assumptions about "Li Shangyin," drawn from reading later poems, strongly dispose the reader familiar with Li Shangyin to take the point of view in "Spring" as masculine, in some way representing Li Shangyin himself. In the same way a too perfect knowledge of "literary Chinese" disposes such erudite readers to understand usages in terms of the earliest sources rather than contemporary usage. If we were attempting to be historicist in a strict and radical sense, these would be two distinct and serious problems. We could point out other anachronisms in Qing and modern readings; for example, unmarked time shifts to remembered moments, necessary to sustain the male perspective, are relatively rare in poetry up to the 830s; such shifts become common only later, in the tradition of the song lyric.

The problem with such radically historicist modes of reading is that they require an unnatural effort of forgetting. When reading old texts, we always exclude a level of association and knowledge; that is as it should be, and the necessity is particularly apparent to the reader raised in European cultural traditions. But the perfection of

the radically historicist reading is a vanishing point that can never be attained. It is well known that we can never reach the poet's mind at the moment, even if we were able to perfectly reconstruct contemporary norms of reception. But even the reconstruction of contemporary norms of reception is itself a vanishing point. We cannot know if Li Shangyin's fascination with male longing later in his work (not to mention the large number of poems we cannot date) was already present in "Spring." All we can say, by the device of Liuzhi, an external contemporary reader/auditor, is that a female point of view is easier to sustain in a contemporary context, as best as we can reconstruct it—and our reconstruction is imperfect.

The variance between Li Shangyin presenting himself as someone with the sensibility of a lover to participants in a discursive culture of romance and Li Shangyin presenting himself as the "young talent," a new Li He, to a primarily male audience interested in supporting talent is a more subtle and interesting distinction. The question turns on Li Shangyin's sense of the prospective audience for his poems. Li Shangyin clearly did not object to Liuzhi's response to his poems; I hope it will not seem brashly presumptuous to suggest that he probably would not have objected if some high official in Luoyang, reading the "Yan Terrace Poems," saw him as a new Li He. Those two response are not different interpretations, but similar interpretations in different contexts with different significances. Authorial intention, insofar as we can speculate on it with at least minimal probability, is promiscuous; and we may suppose that he would have been equally pleased to seduce either Liuzhi and those interested in romance or the high officialdom of Luoyang by his poems.

If one reads Li Shangyin's poetry in its entirety, one realizes that sometimes the erotic is a figure for political relations and sometimes it is simply erotic (in the majority of cases we cannot tell) Such a question of intended reference is another way of talking about prospective audiences, their own interests and frames of reference. Here, if we set aside the interpretation of the "Yan Terrace Poems" as purely private expressions of the poet's response to prior personal experience, we can see how the erotic and the political converge.

Whether the end is passion or promotion, both share the willingness to seduce by a calculated display of talent.

What remains at the end is the strange contradiction. on the one side is calculation, evident poetic control, and a formal mastery that cannot be mistaken (the reappearance of *fengguang* 風光 in the final couplet is no more an accident than the other techniques of formal integration). On the other side is the representation of passionate disorientation and helplessness. This contradiction can never be reconciled, but we can note that the contradictory positions are mutually necessary to one another.