Nature Images in Leopardi and Li Po

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A better title for my talk might be: "What in Li Po reminded me of Leopardi" – despite the unarguably vast difference between these two poets. I know more about Leopardi, on whom I have written two books, than about Li Po, whom I have merely read, regrettably, in translation. Let me confess to you how I stumbled upon this perhaps bewildering association that defies time and space by straddling the centuries from the near IXth to the XIXth and by straddling geography by 9,000 miles. Dante might have accepted the association easily on the basis of the numerology of "9," but it was not mysticism of this sort that guided me. It was simply and fortuitously two poems: Leopardi's famous "The Infinite" and Li Po's equally famous "Question and Answer in the Mountains." They are short; I shall quote them. First Leopardi:

> This lonely knoll was ever dear to me
> and this hedgerow that hides from view
> so large a part of the remote horizon.
> But as I sit and gaze my thought conceives
> interminable spaces lying beyond
> and supernatural silences
> and profoundest calm, until my heart
> almost becomes dismayed. And as I hear
> the wind come rustling through these leaves,
> I find myself comparing to this voice
> that infinite silence: and I recall eternity
> and all the ages that are dead
> and the living present and its sounds. And so
> in this immensity my thought is drowned:
> and in this sea is foundering sweet to me.
>
> (trans. mine[1])

And now Li Po:

> You ask me why I nestle among the green mountains;
> I smile without answering, my mind, all by itself, at ease.
> Peach blossoms on flowing water are going far away;
> There is another cosmos, not the human world.
>
> (trans. J. J. Y. Liu[2])

The differences need not be analyzed, lest I be charged with belaboring the obvious. But the similarities, which did not come to me at first reading, later began to dawn upon me, and these I would share with you.

Both, based on nature imagery, are meditations, one on a hill and the other on a mountain, presenting no concrete details; the adjectives "green" for mountains, "peach" for blossoms, and "flowing" for water are surely as common as "lonely" for knoll, "remote" for horizon, "interminable" for space, and "profound" for calm. The impossibility of sight for Leopardi invites the imagination to freedom, as does the impossibility of answering for Li Po. The idea of infinity being both spacial and temporal in both poems comes to signal eternity in a world beyond the human through the image of the sea in Leopardi and water in Li Po. In both, water represents the flowing and changing of things, a living and dying that leaves echoes in thoughts which become our own as readers, since we must infer to complete the vision of the Chinese and Italian poets with our own experience. What the physical eye cannot reach due to the limitations of the finite – and for these poets the definite was unattractive poetically for lyrical expressiveness – the mental eye completes imaginatively, freely roaming beyond the visible into the invisible and modulating into Leopardi's eternity, which is Li Po's cosmos.

This blending of space and time through nature images first stoked my sense of association of these two lyrics, because in Leopardi time is made audible by the drifting of the wind "through the leaves," just as in Li Po space is made visible by the blossoms floating "far away." Both poets thereby play with the concepts of being and non-being with a simplicity of language that conceals a sublimity of vision. The exiguity of man before the infinite reality of being looms lyrically before us, as the ego (the first person "I") floats like a tiny sail on the vast Leopardian sea, not unsimilarly to the Li Poan "I" that diminishes as time and space blend rhythmically in verse 3 to explain why "I smile without answering." The experience allows

the poets and their readers to discover an unexplored region of the mind.[3]

If Li Po is "at ease" all the way through, Leopardi is not in the course of his longer work, but in the end, as in his sea "foundering is sweet" to him, he joins Li Po's serenity. Since illusion has a positive effect, losing oneself in the infinite brings relief. There is isolation and meditation in both poems, and there may be metaphysical sorrow. But in both cases, the danger lies in turning these pieces into philosophical speculations – which they are not. They are idylls, basically sensations, self-possessed flows of intellectual feelings. What one critic said about Leopardi applies to Li Po as well, if you will permit me to edit his comment: "In [these poems] there are... two planes: the near one of [immediate] matters and the remote one of the feelings with which [they]... see it: behind the hedge [and beyond the water's flow], the infinite.... A limit on the first plane, and [beyond] it a [sense of the] limitless... [a cosmos, inducing] serenity."[4] These poems strike us less with their depth than with their brevity (admittedly far more common in Chinese than in Italian poetry), through which universal significance is immediately achieved. In poetry, brevity makes for spiritual compactness. These poems appear paradigmatic, moving from the confidential tones of the poets' lyrical realism to the equally lyrical but remote tones of a transcending reality, the melancholy mystery of the world.[5]

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This rapprochement of poems by two "banished immortals" (to misuse slightly the epithet applied to Li Po by Li Ho[6]) allowed my mind to spawn other similarities, especially in what concerns their concept of nature and their world view derived from their attitude toward it. Time prevents me from elaborating a close analysis of these factors, so I shall be schematic, in the hope of arousing some future interest in my East-West topic.

If not a contrast, then clearly there is a difference between Leopardi's and Li Po's use of nature images. Leopardi's lyricism can best be described as personal, as compared with Li Po's, which is pure – which means that the former's is more inner directed than the latter's. Yet, even through this psychological disparity, an expressive similarity emerges. Simply juxtapose Li Po's objectively shaped suggestion of the jagged peaks and bumpy mountain roads of Szechwan through uneven lines in "Hard Roads in Shu" with Leopardi's reference to his "choking heart" subjectively shaped

by relating the song of the farmer on a lazy solitary road to universal caducity in his "Evening After the Holiday." Traditional themes, perhaps, but being freshly imagined they satisfy the reader so as to blur the demarcation critics like to establish between pure and personal lyricism. I say this despite the fact that on the whole Li Po's writing strikes me as less intimate than Leopardi's in that he allows his setting to communicate his personal emotion rather than address the reader himself self-referentially like Leopardi. Perhaps this was because the Chinese poet during the energetic T'ang Dynasty felt more vigor and zest for life than the Italian did in an ununified land during the infirm Holy Alliance. After all, communion with nature always afforded the more optimistic Li Po spiritual delight, which permitted him a sunnier view of the universe than he felt during those less frequent moments of melancholy mystery. He meditated aesthetically on ordinary nature – the emancipating kind, meaning trees, birds, insects, streams, and flowers. To be sure, Leopardi addressed these too, but he also meditated philosophically on nature's indifference to human misery and mortality (reminiscent of the French poet Vigny) and her frequent cruelty – its larger quaking and cataclysmic movements that mutilate mankind. "The Evening After the Holiday" tells us "how all in life passes away and hardly leaves a trace" and how "time carries away with it each human deed." Li Po, of course, is not impervious to this kind of meditation: in the well known verses of that poem with the laborious title "At Hsieh T'iao's High Mansion in Hsüan-chou: A Parting Banquet for Collator Shu-yün," we read that "Man's life in this world may never find what satisfies the mind,"[7] and, even beyond indifference, a haughty sun and unacknowledging waters actually scorn the poet. But ultimately he found comfort in nature and could say that "heaven and earth are my quilt and pillow,"[8] while ultimately in "The Genista" (the broom plant on Mt. Vesuvius) Leopardi would only refer to nature as "her alone so truly guilty, she who is of mortals mother in birth, step-mother in will."

Similarly, though both poets cultivated the irregular line length (Li Po through the old style form of *ku-shih* and Leopardi by putting aside the classical continuous hendecasyllable), the break from tonal and verbal parallelism (in the West akin to assonance and rhyme), and the unlimited length of stanzas, these factors encouraged Li Po in the direction of fragmentary images, and in his frequent state of intoxication he leaped airily from glimpse to glimpse, emulating the unrestrained will, spinning, in the words of one critic, a hyperbolic fancy or a brilliant disorientation

around us (not unlike the Norwegian Romantic Henrik Wergeland), in the manner of Li Ho's "The Great Man" of Mei Yao-ch'en's "A peal and rumble of thunder."[9] Leopardi's images, on the other hand, are not fragmentary; they are simple: a hen, a cart, a genista, a sheep, a thrush, a knoll, and in his unwavering state of sobriety he wanders personally from meditation to meditation, fashioning and rationalizing illusion as life's only safeguard against worldly and rational deception.

Again, a common factor blends these dissimilarities, for both poets, in their own ways, privileged the imagination over reason, and thus by implication shaped a world view that made them distanced observers of the human condition. It can be argued, no doubt, that the wild bohemian life of Li Po and his gay and dissipated career at court made him a participant in the human enterprise, but this does not come through to me ultimately when I consider his exile and tragic end – both spiritually analogous to Leopardi's. For me, both are poets of the distant optic. And symbolically, the images for this optic become the moon and the stars – certainly not unusual images for poets all around the globe. But the traditional poetic moon, like the bright stars of night, bespeaks nocturnal silence, friendliness, and love, while, without rejecting these characteristics, Li Po and Leopardi endow it with a special sense of solitude, distance, and companionship. It is not merely anecdotal to be reminded that, supposedly according to legend, the Chinese poet died when he drowned having fallen from his boat into the lake in an attempt to embrace the moon's reflection, and that Leopardi died dictating yet another poem about the moon ("The Setting of the Moon") invoking the notion of man's ineluctable destiny as an exile on this planet. In like fashion, an emotional compatibility links Li Po's "Still Night Thoughts":

> Moonlight in front of my bed –
> I took it for frost on the ground!
> I lift my eyes to watch the mountain moon,
> lower them and dream of home.
>
> (trans. B. Watson[10])

with passages in Leopardi's "Memories":

> Bright stars of the Bear, I did not think
> that habit still would bring me back to gaze on you

glittering above my father's garden. . .
How many imaginings, and mad ones too,
your bright mien and your companion stars
more than once engendered in my thoughts
when quiet on the greensward I would sit. . .
[watching the sky. . .]
and those blue mountains I discern from here. . .

Like Tu Fu's ability to telescope distance and intimacy (see his "Yangtze and Han"), Leopardi and Li Po make the observer's remote eyes see the self at a distance, yet with self-reflexive immediacy – a sterling device to convert a simple contemplation of silence and friendliness into a compound meditation of solitude and companionship. Indeed, Leopardi's famous conversation with the "silent. . . , lone, eternal pilgrim" moon in "Night Song of a Wandering Asian Shepherd" is a long, philosophical inquiry into the purpose of existence which by implication embraces Li Po's early desire, in addressing a firefly – "Oh why not fly to heaven afar / And twinkle near the moon – a star?"[11] – as well as his later expectation of conversing with the aster: "See the moon – how she glances response to my song."[12] I cannot possibly conjoin these widely different poetic creations on a conceptual or even inspirational basis, but I can suggest that the emotional bases supporting the two poets would make them kindred spirits in mood if not in mode – and in a more palpable way than through the simplistic verity that all poets are brothers.

The best indicator of the spiritual kinship in mood is the natural image used to modulate from the specific in the poem to the general, call it the cosmic. The technique is not uncommon in either the East or the West, and it has been noted that there is something of a T'ang poet in all landscape poets like Wordsworth. But only something. The moods of Leopardi and Li Po are more intimate (Leopardi's even more than Li Po's). Like the Taoist thinkers who ridiculed the Confucian view of man's centrality, and by revealing the irony and absurdity of the human condition counseled man to look to the natural world, Li Po through his absorption in nature, and Leopardi through his admiration of her – and despite both poets' reservations about her (occasionally strong for Li Po, repeatedly fierce for Leopardi) – find release and redemption in her presence, and by virtue of these stimuli do not shun but renew their meditation on the human condition. The nature images, which characteristically appear at the

beginning of the poems, pass from the descriptive to the symbolic, since what follows is a paralleling account of human events or emotions. I understand that the scholars of the Han refer to this movement as a *hsing*, an analogical lifting up.[13] Accordingly, as a *tao-shih*, Li Po rises from fact to a journey of the imagination, even if from concrete mountain scenery to "jade maidens" of Taoist lore (a reflextion of the *Ch'u Tz'u* or the early *fu* tradition), and the process, if not the subject matter, is identical in Leopardi – in "The Solitary Thrush," for example – whose optic keeps expanding from a natural detail now become symbolic. The outer generates the inner, and the vision etches the personality.

Hear Li Po's conclusion of "Climbing the Peak at Lin-hai":

I turn aside for flowers, rest on rocks – suddenly it's night. . .
waters soft-seething, sending up mists. . .
and from the blue darkness, bottomless, vast and wild,
sun and moon shine sparkling on terraces of silver and gold. . .
Suddenly my soul shudders, my spirit leaps,
in terror I rise with repeated sighs:
only the mat and pillow where now I woke –
lost are the mists of a moment ago!
All the joys of this world are like this,
the many-evented past a river flowing east.
I leave you now – when will I return? –
to loose the white deer among green bluffs,
in my wandering to ride them in search of famed hills.

(trans. B. Watson[14])

And Leopardi, concluding his remarks to "The Solitary Thrush":

You, lonely little bird, when you will reach the evening
of that life the stars have given you,
surely you will not regret
your days; for all your longings
stem from nature's wish.
As for me, if I cannot
avoid by any means
the hateful gate of age,
when these eyes before all other hearts

shall stand by mute, and the whole world for them seem void,
and each day darker and more tedious than the last,
what shall I think of this desire?
and of these years of mine? and of myself? . . .

And the optic of distance still obtains, if Pascal was correct in asserting that it is a far longer journey to reach one's own self than to reach outer space.

It is exactly through this affinity in mood if not in mode that "The Infinite" conjoins "Question and Answer in the Mountains." Nature imagery permits this, even between poets a millennium and more apart. I am not the only one to doubt that human nature, human elation and sorrow, and ultimately human values, differ that much across the geographical expanses of this earth. The use of nature images in poets like Leopardi and Li Po, therefore, prompts deeper suggestions than meets the innocent eye on the printed page. I have hardly scratched the surface of all the image-based similarities I have found between the Italian and the Chinese poet after bringing together initially the two cited poems. I may now conclude with a few theoretical speculations about imagery in general.

James J. Y Liu moves beyond the iconographic sense of the word "image" and reminds us of its denoting a verbal expression that evokes a mental picture or recalls a physical sensation, not necessarily visual, and also of its use to mean an expression that involves two elements, in other words, its metaphoric sense, as I. A. Richards would have it.[15] This is surely the context for Leopardi and Li Po, conflicts in terminology with simile, synecdoche, metonymy, and personification notwithstanding. Liu refers to "compound imagery," a term which avoids the conflicts and enables him to consider the compound image as having only a local significance as compared with the "symbol" which has a general significance. The moon and birds and mountains I have alluded to in the poetry of Leopardi and Li Po are endowed with such universal significance, and by representing something abstract they guide their poetry from compound imagism to symbolism. Particularly in its metonymic associations, their imagery reveals their personality more clearly than in the case of traditional landscape poets. Buffon said that style is the main. The imperceptible blending of imagery and symbolism to reveal the inner by describing the outer endows even the conventional object or *cliché* with high poetic purpose and rejects any semblance of stereotype. But only the master poet can succeed here, and

Leopardi and Li Po were master poets, because through the selectivity they exercised in avoiding the full variety of images that nature in her bounty provides, and in choosing only *certain* images – their recurring predilections – they don them with special worth and through them disclose their own private personalities. Even Confucian scholars treated nature imagery as a set of symbols for *human* values.

To penetrate the inner structure of a thought or feeling involves, say some commentators,[16] a total immersion radically different from detached observation. In wandering outward cosmically, Leopardi and Li Po engage in an inner journey, from periphery to center. Thomé H. Fang is quoted via a passage in which he discusses poets in the Wei-Chin style whom I here replace with Leopardi and Li Po: "Situated at the acme of the Celestial, [Li Po and Leopardi] could gaze disinterestedly upon the stratified world below in which the tragi-comic figures are involved in the repressive lapse into folly and wit, illusion and truth, appearance and reality, all falling off from the consummate Perfection, Truth and Reality."[17] Imagery under their pens emerges from a sensitivity for a particular aspect of the natural world whose value lies in the conjoining with human consciousness. Hence, in many tonal nuances, they become tangible realities of life, realities that know no national boundaries, cultural variations, or periodizational vagaries. The poets of "The Infinite" and "Question and Answer in the Mountains" walked no surer path to universality.

Notes

1. Translation from *G. Leopardi: Poems* (New York: Las Americas, 1963), 35. All translations of Leopardi in this essay are my own.
2. Translation in Tu Wei-Ming, "Profound Learning, Personal Knowledge, and Poetic Vision," *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice*, Shuen-fu Lin & Stephen Owen, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 65.
3. Mario Fubini, *Canti*, (Leopardi) *Canti*, M. Fubini & E. Bigi, eds. (Turin: Loescher, 1964), 115.
4. Attilio Momigliano, *Introduzione ai poeti* (Milan: Tumminelli, 1946), 173.
5. See Salvatore Battaglia, *L'ideologia letteraria di Giacomo Leopardi* (Naples: Liguori, 1968), 316.
6. Quoted from Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 148.
7. Quoted from Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 140.
8. B. Watson, 143.
9. S. Owen, 199.
10. B. Watson, 146-147.

11. Quoted from H. A. Giles, *A History of Chinese Poetry* (Rutland [Vermont] & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, Co., 1973), 151.
12. Ibid., 154.
13. See B. Watson, 123.
14. B. Watson, 152.
15. James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 101-102.
16. S. Lin & S. Owen, 29.
17. T. H. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co., 1980), 131.