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# Sung-Dynasty and Western Poems on Poetry

By John Timothy Wixted

THE ALLIANCE between criticism and poetry is an ancient one both in China and the West.<sup>1</sup> Horace and Pope are the two most familiar figures in the West who join the two. The marked influence of Horace extends into relatively recent times, and Pope's "Essay on Criticism" is distinguished, if not for its originality, at least for its verbal wit, prosodic skill, and summary of Western neo-classical critical ideas. Renaissance and later European writers like Vida and Boileau also wrote criticism in verse. The genre, poems on poetry, is of a class the same as versified philosophy or history. In spite of falling into relative disuse since the eighteenth century, it is not without its modern practitioners, including Karl Shapiro and Archibald MacLeish.

In China, versified criticism is early represented by the third-century "Rhyme-prose on Literature" 文賦 by Lu Chi 陸機. Tu Fu was the first to write a series of poems on poetry. And Ssu-k'ung T'u 司空圖 of the late T'ang, to whom is attributed a series of twenty-four poems on poetry, also wrote a rhyme-prose on the subject. Other T'ang writers, moreover, made occasional comments about poetry in their verse writing.

In the Sung period (and with the Chin dynasty in the North), such poetic commentary increased. Writers spoke of their own and others' poetry, and offered general remarks on the art. The discursive element in much of Sung poetry is of importance in this regard; so too is the development of series of poem on specific subjects, including poetry—specifically those by Tai Fu-ku 戴復古 and Yüan Hao-wen 元好問.

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In short, the poet, whether in China or the West, has often "described his mission, put forward his claims, defended his activity, and spoken well or ill of his fellow poets."<sup>2</sup> He has done this in verse, as a poet or poet-critic, and in prose, as a critic or simply as one who has literary opinions.

It is my intention here to outline briefly certain parallels between Sung-dynasty and Western poems on poetry, in the hope of highlighting some common concerns and of pointing out a few differences. Sung dynasty poets, I might add, are here taken to include Yüan Hao-wen of the Chin period, who wrote his major criticism while the Southern Sung was still flourishing.

The question of how later writers will view one's work has long been a concern of poets. Normally it is predicated on the assumption that great writing is immortal. This immortality is spoken of by Ezra Pound, who contrasts it with that of great monuments, where—

*Flame burns, rain sinks into the cracks  
And they all go to rack ruin beneath the thud of the years.  
Stands genius a deathless adornment,  
a name not to be worn out with the years.*<sup>3</sup>

Ts'ao P'i 曹丕 in third-century China had written of the immortality of letters:

Our life must have an end and all our glory, all our joy will end with it.  
Life and glory last only for a limited time, unlike literature (*wen-chang*)  
which endures for ever.<sup>4</sup>

年壽有時而盡，榮樂止乎其身。二者必至之常期未若文章之無窮。

Poets may add their own wry note to the formula. Robinson Jeffers compares poets with stone-cutters, whom he addresses as—

*You fore-defeated  
Challengers of oblivion  
[Whose square-limned letters] . . . .  
Scale in the thaws, wear in the rain. The poet as well  
Builds his monument mockingly.*<sup>5</sup>

The same hesitant note is struck by Yüan Hao-wen at the end of his thirty-poem series on poetry. In words echoing a line by Han Yü, he says:

<sup>2</sup>René Wellek, "The Poet as Critic, the Critic as Poet, the Poet-Critic," in Frederick P.W. McDowell, ed., *The Poet as Critic* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1967), p. 99. The following sentence is also paraphrased from Wellek.

<sup>3</sup>"Homage to Sextus Propertius," in Robert Wallace and James G. Taaffe, eds., *Poems on Poetry: The Mirror's Garland* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1965), p. 74.

<sup>4</sup>*Wen hsüan* (Hu K'o-chia 胡克家 edition, 1809; rpt. Taipei: Cheng-chung shu-chü, 1971), 52.7b, 魏文帝: 典論論文. Tr. by Donald Holzman, "Literary Criticism in China in the Early Third Century A.D.," *Asiatische Studien* 28.2 (1974), p. 131.

<sup>5</sup>"To the Stone-Cutters," in Wallace and Taaffe, p. 43.

*I know my foolishness, a mere ant trying to shake a tree;  
Such is the tyro's urge, ever to criticize.*

撼樹蚍蜉自覺狂，  
書生技癢愛論量。

To which he adds,

*With old age, leaving behind a thousand poems—  
By whom will their strengths and weaknesses be judged?*

老來留得詩千首，  
卻被何人校短長。

In other words, he asks, will I make the grade of immortality?

Poets, being interested readers, often express evaluations of other writers, including poets. Sometimes such evaluation is laudatory. Keats, for example, in a poem entitled "On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair," says of the author of "Paradise Lost":

*O what a mad endeavour  
Worketh he,  
Who to thy sacred and ennobled hearse  
Would offer a burnt sacrifice of verse  
And melody.<sup>6</sup>*

Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修 wrote in praise of the T'ang poets Han Yü 韓愈 and Meng Chiao 孟郊:

*Han and Meng are to writing  
Two masters with strengths complementary.  
Their pieces, weaving in talking and laughter,  
Are thunder and lightning striking the firmament.  
.....  
Though their two modes are different,  
They harmonize together, mated phoenixes singing.<sup>7</sup>*

韓孟於文詞  
兩雄力相當  
篇章綴談笑  
雷電擊幽荒  
.....  
二律雖不同  
合奏乃鏘鏘

Comment by one poet on another, however, is often less than favourable. Jonathan Swift, like Tu Fu, sarcastically satirized upstart contemporaries who had the pretension, but not the talent, to displace earlier worthies. Swift wrote:

*So modern rhymers wisely blast  
The poetry of ages past,*

<sup>6</sup>Wallace and Taaffe, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup>Ou-yang Wen-chung kung wen-chi 歐陽文忠公文集 (SPTK), 2.10b-11a. For complete translation, see

John Timothy Wixted, *Poems on Poetry: Literary Criticism by Yuan Hao-wen (1190-1257)* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982), p. 145.

*Which after they have overthrown,  
They from its ruins build their own.*<sup>8</sup>

Tu Fu had written of his younger contemporaries:

*After your crowd is dead and forgotten,  
The Great Rivers [of early-T'ang poetry] will still flow on forever.*<sup>9</sup>

爾曹身與名俱滅  
不廢江河萬古流

Poetic criticism is sometimes more specifically leveled at individuals. Byron ridiculed Wordsworth for—

*Convincing all, by demonstration plain,  
Poetic souls delight in prose insane.*<sup>10</sup>

And Coleridge comes off no better at Byron's hands:

*Though themes of innocence amuse him best,  
Yet still obscurity's a welcome guest.*<sup>11</sup>

Although Sung poets were not above criticizing other poets, including their contemporaries, they evidence comparatively little hostility toward individuals. Criticism is more often generalized than personal. Thus Tai Fu-ku wrote:

*As of late, instead of cries of autumn geese,  
One hears the dull buzzing of countless cicadas in the evening sun.*<sup>12</sup>

近日不聞秋鶴唳  
亂蟬無數噪斜陽

And Yüan Hao-wen could write with more rhetorical assertion than correctness that Northern poets of his Chin dynasty did not accept or imitate the drivel of earlier Chiang-hsi writers.

<sup>8</sup>"Vanbrugh's House," in Wallace and Taaffe, p. 107.

<sup>9</sup>*Tu-shih yin-te* 杜詩引得 (Peking: Harvard-Yenching Sinological Index Series, 1940), p. 360. For translation of this series of poems on poetry, see John Timothy Wixted, "Six Quatrains Written in Jest" by Tu Fu," *Renditions* 14 (Autumn 1980), pp. 39-41.

<sup>10</sup>"English Bards and Scotch Reviewers," in Wallace and Taaffe, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>12</sup>*Shih-p'ing shih-chi* 石屏詩集 (SPTK), 7.20b. The lengthy complete title of this ten-poem series is 昭武太守王子文日與李賈，嚴羽共觀前輩一兩家詩及晚唐詩，因有論詩十絕。子文見之，謂無甚高論，亦可作詩家小學須知。 For English rendering of the entire series, see John Timothy Wixted, "A Translation of a Series of Ten Poems on Poetry by Tai Fu-ku (b. 1167) 戴復古," Appendix C of "The Literary Criticism of Yüan Hao-wen (1190-1257)", D.Phil. diss. Oxford Univ., 1976, pp. 494-96.

Sung poets did write verse referring directly to specific poets. For example, Su Shih 蘇軾 wrote two poems about Meng Chiao. In one, he parodies Meng's style:

*Starving intestines make growling sounds;  
Empty walls tumble with starving rats.  
Poetry that issues from the guts  
Comes out to make the guts miserable.  
It is like Yellow River fish  
That fry in their own fat.*<sup>13</sup>

飢腸自嗚喚  
空壁轉飢鼠  
詩從肺腑出  
出輒愁肺腑  
有如黃河魚  
出膏以自煮

In the other, he characterizes the effort involved in reading Meng's verse:

*My first impression is of eating tiny fishes—  
What you get is not worth the trouble;  
Or of eating boiled tiny mud crabs  
The whole day long, getting only empty claws.*<sup>14</sup>

初如食小魚  
所得不償勞  
又似煮彭蠡  
竟日持空螯

Su Shih himself was criticized by Tai Fu-ku in one of his poems for the facetious tone in many of his verses—perhaps of the sort just cited. Yüan Hao-wen in his series of thirty poems on poetry expresses much the same opinion, adding that poetry is not properly a vehicle for invective. Huang T'ing-chien 黃庭堅 had expressed the same view in his prose writing. Such concern for poetic decorum is a familiar theme in the West. It is a prime desideratum of both Horace and Pope. And Dryden in "The Art of Poetry" emphasizes the seriousness of the art:

*Choose a just style; be grave without constraint,  
Great without pride, and lovely without paint.*<sup>15</sup>

The question of the poet and his role in society, however, is one that differs according to the culture. There is nothing in China equivalent to the madman image of the poet in the West, which is rooted in Plato and finds one modern expression in lines by James Kirkup. Kirkup says of the poet that—

*he must go,  
The lonelier for his unwanted miracle,  
His singular way, a gentle lunatic at large  
In the societies of cross and reasonable men.*<sup>16</sup>

In contrast with this, the role of the poet in China traditionally was one closely involved in the concerns of society, at least in the concerns of similarly educated

<sup>13</sup> *Su Wen-chung kung shih ho-chu* 蘇文忠公詩合註, Feng Ying-liu 馮應榴, ed. (1793 edition), 16.7b. For complete translation, see J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, p. 143.

*Dynasty Poet* (New York & London: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), p. 59, q.v. for complete translation, as well as J.T. Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> *Su Wen-chung kung shih ho-chu* 16.7a-b. Tr. by Burton Watson, *Su Tung-p'o: Selections from a Sung*

<sup>15</sup> Wallace and Taaffe, p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> "The Poet," in Wallace and Taaffe, p. 164.

men of public affairs. The disaffected, like Ch'ü Yüan 屈原 in early times and Lu Kuei-meng 陸龜蒙 in the late T'ang, wrote poetry of disaffection precisely because they could not serve in government. Those who withdrew from public life, like T'ao Ch'ien 陶潛, did not think of themselves as a class apart from society, like Western Romantic poets of the past century, or as ones alienated from society, like many twentieth-century poets.

In Sung times, however, given the developments in philosophy and its concomitant, critical theory, there was a growing differentiation between the roles in which the poet might perceive himself. For Chu Hsi 朱熹 and other neo-Confucian moralists, literature was an auxiliary enterprise, totally subservient to the pursuit of the metaphysical *Tao*. Wang An-shih 王安石 expounded a utilitarian concept of the role of letters. And Su Shih outlined a view of the self-sufficiency of literature, giving a passing nod to the prevalent didacticism of traditional Confucianism.

These developments had numerous effects. For one, to the extent that a poet's role became differentiated from that of the Confucian scholar-official, with or without any personal admixture of Taoism or Buddhism, fragmentation of the earlier unified concept became inevitable. In Sung times, even though the great writers, Ou-yang Hsiu, Wang An-shih, and Su Shih, more than any others in the Chinese tradition embody the ideal of the philosopher-statesman-poet, the concept itself was being undermined. By the time of the end of the dynasty, Yüan Hao-wen had to devote one of his poems on poetry to criticism of the vogue of giving greater esteem to the writings of recluses than to those of officials. The development of the *wen-jen* 文人 ideal—that is, of the artist divorced from political or philosophical concerns—was largely rooted in these Sung philosophical developments.

In addition, the Chinese reaction to Buddhist metaphysics, as manifested in neo-Confucianism, also appears in the writings of numerous Sung poets who were not primarily philosophers. Su Shih, for example, took over Buddhist concepts and terminology in writing poems about poetry:

*If you want to make the words of your poetry miraculous,  
Don't despise emptiness and tranquility.  
When tranquil, you can comprehend the multitude of movements;  
Empty, you receive the myriad realms.  
.....  
Poetry and the dharma do not obstruct one another.<sup>17</sup>*

欲令詩語妙  
無厭空且靜  
靜故了羣動  
空故納萬境  
.....  
詩法不相妨

Also, Yang Wan-li 楊萬里, Lu Yu 陸遊, and even Yüan Hao-wen, with varying frequency, adopted Buddhist terminology when speaking of poetry in their verse.

The Zen (or Ch'an) Buddhist concept of sudden enlightenment that follows extensive endeavor offered a convenient metaphor for the creative act. The twelfth-century poet, Wu K'o 吳可, wrote a series of poems likening the study of poetry to the practice of Zen:

<sup>17</sup>*Chi-chu fen-lei Tung-p'o hsien-sheng shih* 集注  
分類東坡先生詩 (SPTK ed.) 21.391a. Tr. by J.D.  
Schmidt, "Ch'an, Illusion, and Sudden Enlightenment

ment in the Poetry of Yang Wan-li," *T'oung Pao* 60  
(1974), p. 232.

*Learning poetry is much like practicing Zen:  
The monk on the bamboo couch or rush mat does not count the years.  
Simply wait until your own concerns are expended,  
Then whatever you may draw upon will be superb.<sup>18</sup>*

學詩渾似學參禪  
竹榻蒲團不幾年  
直待自家都了得  
等閒拈出便自然

Since Wu K'o speaks of spending years before gaining enlightenment, in this regard he is like Yen Yü 嚴羽, the author of the *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua* 滄浪詩話, who argues that, although enlightenment is sudden, it is only through protracted study of great poets of the past that one will, as a matter of course, be able to write outstanding poetry oneself.

At first glance, this appears to be somewhat different from the Zen-inspired argument for direct and sincere expression voiced in a poem by Yen Yü's friend, Tai Fu-ku:

*To commune with the rules of verse is like communion with Zen:  
The ineffable is not communicated by words.  
Enlightenment born of the individual heart  
And expressed in words, is of itself surpassing.<sup>19</sup>*

欲參詩律似參禪  
妙趣不由文字傳  
箇裏稍開心有悞  
發爲言句自超然

But in other poems in his series on poetry, Tai Fu-ku strikes a balance between spontaneous direct expression on the one hand and the need for craft on the other. Concerning the former, he says:

*Poetry begins, formless in the deep void;  
All-compassing heaven and earth prompt feelings of song.  
Occasionally a startling line may come to mind  
That no exhaustive effort can fabricate.*

詩本無形在窈冥  
網羅天地運吟情  
有時忽傳驚人句  
費盡心機做不成

<sup>18</sup>Shih-jen yü-hsieh 詩人玉屑, Wei Ch'ing-chih 魏慶之, ed. (Shanghai: Chung-hua shu-chū, 1959), 1.8.

<sup>19</sup>This and the following three citations appear in *Shih-p'ing shih-chi* 7.20b-21a.



And concerning the need for craft, the need for the poet to revise and polish his lines, he states the following:

*Hurriedly to piece together stanzas is nothing;  
Making verse is easy—revising it hard.  
Jade becomes a vessel only after being chiselled and carved;  
Poetic couplets must be full and rich, each word fitting.*

草就篇章只等閒  
作詩容易改詩難  
玉經雕琢方成器  
句要豐腴字要安

The pitfalls of either extreme are stated in elegant balance in still another couplet by Tai Fu-ku:

*Too much embellishment results from harmful skill;  
In simplicity one need only shun crudeness.*

雕鑲太過傷於巧  
朴拙惟宜怕近村

The same antithesis between direct expression of feeling and the need for poetic craft is found in Western poems on poetry. Sir Philip Sidney has the poetic muse saying in one line: "Fool, look in thy heart and write."<sup>20</sup> And William Cullen Bryant in his poem, "The Poet," states:

*Seize the great thought, ere yet its power be past,  
And bind, in words, the fleet emotion fast.<sup>21</sup>*

Bryant, however, goes on in the same poem to emphasize the need for revision. And so too does Dryden in "The Art of Poetry":

*Gently make haste, of labour not afraid;  
A hundred times consider what you've said:  
Polish, repolish, every colour lay,  
And sometimes add, but oftener take away.<sup>22</sup>*

Just as too facile a pen is undesirable, too painstakingly belabored a one is perhaps worse. Yüan Hao-wen in his poems on poetry, on the one hand, criticizes Su Shih for not having sufficiently polished his verse to remove the dross, and on the other, is even more critical of the Sung poets, Ch'en Shih-tao 陳師道 and

<sup>20</sup>"Loving in Truth, and Fain in Verse My Love to Show," in Wallace and Taaffe, p. 242.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 182-83.

<sup>21</sup>Wallace and Taaffe, p. 163.

followers of the Chiang-hsi school, for being too absorbed in the mechanics of verse-writing and thereby losing touch with the spirit that must inform good poetry.

There are other themes one might develop in comparing the Sung-dynasty Chinese and Western poetic traditions. For example, one might examine how poets discuss the nature of the creative impulse or how imitation and models are viewed in the two traditions. I hope that what I have said suffices to hint at the richness of the material and to suggest how the treatment of a theme by a writer in one tradition can help appreciation of its treatment by someone in another tradition.

The distinction between critical views written in prose and those in poetry is largely an artificial one. In this, an age of literary criticism in the West, considerable attention has been focused on the former. I suggest not only that we not overlook versified criticism, but that we consider its advantages as a critical medium. Prose certainly offers greater potential for sustained argument (an advantage partially offset by the writing of long poems or of series of poems on poetry), but well-written poetic criticism has advantages of its own: compression and suggestibility of statement and a heightened sense of rhythm, both of which make for memorability of statement. As theoretical statements, poems on poetry "are less than critical theory because they do not profess to argue a subject in the manner of a treatise or textbook. They are more because they do profess to capture not the letter so much as the spirit of a poetic creed."<sup>23</sup>

When Yang Wan-li writes,

*This old man doesn't go in search of a poem,  
The poem goes in search of him,*

老夫不是尋詩句  
詩句自來尋老夫<sup>24</sup>

or Archibald MacLeish says,

*A poem should not mean  
But be,*<sup>25</sup>

what is said, regardless of its merit, will be remembered and repeated far longer than many lengthier treatises on poetics or criticism, past or present.

<sup>23</sup>Citation mislaid.

<sup>25</sup>"Ars Poetica," in Wallace and Taaffe, p. 311.

<sup>24</sup>*Ch'eng-chai chi* 誠齋集 (SPTK ed.), 29.273a.