
Poems on Poetry by Tai Fu-ku and Yuan Hao-wen

Translated by John Timothy Wixted

戴復古

Tai Fu-ku (b. 1167)

FROM A SERIES OF TEN

Poem Four

Creative endeavor takes shape supernaturally;
If the tip of your pen has power, let it range freely.
One should bring forth what is in one’s heart;
By all means avoid dogging others’ footsteps.

Poem Seven

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.
Poem Eight

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.

Poem Ten

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.
Yüan Hao-wen (b. 1190)

Literary criticism by Yüan Hao-wen 元好問 (1190-1257) is notable for being expressed principally in poetry. The short, seven-character quatrain form serves as the vehicle for Yüan’s most important critical effort, 論詩三十首 "Thirty Poems on Poetry". The same form had been used earlier by Tu Fu 杜甫 (712-770) and by Tai Fu-ku 戴復古 (b. 1167) in short series of poems on poetry, but Yüan Hao-wen was the first to employ the form in a sustained effort at literary criticism. In the history of literary criticism, Yüan Hao-wen’s poems, taken as separate units, became part of the corpus of critical opinion concerning earlier individual writers or groups of writers. Taken as a whole, they became a model for later series of criticism, among which they hold a position of primacy.
Poem 4

An expression natural is fresh for all time;
Trappings fully shed, there emerges true purity.
In the sun under his southern window, transported to a mythic age,
T'ao Ch'ien was still and all a man of the Chin.

The poem’s opening couplet describes two of the characteristics Yüan Hao-wen most admires in poetry in general, and specifically in the poetry of T'ao Ch'ien (365-427): natural freshness and unadorned simplicity.

In Line One, Yüan says that a phrase that is natural is wan-ku hsin; that is to say, while being new and fresh (hsin), it is timeless (wan-ku), partaking of the eternal from ancient times. To this he adds in Line Two that, once all trappings are shorn from poetry, real purity is revealed. The idea is then communicated that T'ao Ch'ien had a freedom that took him back to a time synonymous with primitive simplicity. And in the poem’s final line, Yüan says that T’ao’s mental peregrinations to a pre-mythic age did not hinder his being a man of the Eastern Chin dynasty. The timeless spirit evoked in Line Three takes place at a specific point in time, although, in a sense, it does not matter when T’ao Ch’ien lived.
Poem 5

His poetic pen freely displaying lofty sentiment,
With what could he wash the roughness in his heart smooth?
Old Juan was not mad—who can understand?—
“Stepping outside his gate, he just laughed at the Great River across his way.”

The Wei dynasty poet, Juan Chi 亀籍 (210-263), displays in his poetry a freedom and lack of constraint, coupled with lofty emotion, that prompted Yuan Hao-wen’s opening line of admiration. The literal answer to the question posed in Line Two, “With what could he wash the roughness in his heart smooth?” was wine. Yuan Hao-wen refers to Juan Chi almost affectionately as “Old Juan”. And the poem’s final line is lifted in its entirety from a poem written by Huang T’ing-chien 黃庭堅 (1045-1105). In his use of the line, Yuan may be describing Juan Chi’s reaction to the frustration he feels at being blocked by unfavourable political forces of the time. Or, using an image strikingly analagous to that of Line Two, he may be describing Juan as cathartically cleansing himself of the cares that weigh upon him. Again, Yuan may simply be depicting Juan’s behaviour when drunk. Using wine to wash smooth his care-strewn heart (Line Two), Juan would sometimes step outside and laugh at that which made his own cares, by comparison, seem small—the Yangtze River. Because of such behaviour, he was mistakenly taken to be a madman.

Ultimately, the poem describes the state of mind, one free of petty concern, that enabled Juan Chi to produce the poems of lofty sentiment which Yuan Hao-wen considered made him great as a poet.
Poem 11

Naturally inspired is the line where the eye gives shape to the mind; Trueness is lost if one gropes about in the dark. Of those painters copying out Ch’in stream scenes, How many have been to Ch’ang-an themselves?

In the opening line of the poem, Yuan Hao-wen relates the “emergence of mind” (hsin-sheng) to the organ of sight. It is only when one’s mind is informed and given shape via the “eyes” (yen-ch’u), i.e., through real experience of the senses, that one’s poetic lines will, as a matter of course, be superb.

Yuan is here drawing on two earlier views concerning literary genesis. The one is that a wide variety of experience enables a writer to write with perspicacity and sound judgment. The second view, one that can be traced to a statement attributed to Confucius, is that true writing, being the unadorned expression of thought or sentiment, will naturally be excellent.

Yuan continues with the metaphor of sight in Line Two. “To grope about in the dark” (an-chung mo-so) is to be without clear vision or understanding; it necessarily leads to error. As becomes clear from the next line, Yuan Hao-wen uses the image of groping in the dark to describe the mindless imitation of earlier poets. The language of the line is partially drawn from terminology dealing with painting. Lin-ch’u 楷出 refers to the painter’s process of drawing a scene while looking at a copy-model close at hand, as opposed to the closer copying, mo 揮, “tracing” (or “groping”) referred to in Line Two. If one’s poetry is about Ch’ang-an (Line Four, and the “Ch’in streams” of Line Three), then the scene at hand, working through the senses, must evoke a poetic response in the writer before he can compose effective lines.

The painterly vocabulary of the poem suggests the interpretation that copy-book imitation of poetry is like copy-book imitation in painting. Such groping in the dark naturally leads to error. Magnificent descriptions of natural scenes are as a matter of course inspired (tzu-shen), because they are drawn from the poet’s own experience.
Poem 12

"Emperor Wang's spring-tide heart, entrusted to a nightjar,"
The beauty's patterned lute laments the youthful years.
Poets generally love the fine quality of Li Shang-yin's verse;
One only regrets there is no Cheng Hsüan to explicate it.

The opening line of the poem is taken *verbatim* from Li Shang-yin's 李商隱 (812-858) most famous poem, "The Patterned Lute," while Line Two of Yuan's poem employs two phrases from the same source, "patterned lute" and "youthful years". Alluding to and echoing Li Shang-yin's extremely suggestive poem, which has been open to a wide variety of interpretations, Yuan Hao-wen has made his own opening couplet similarly difficult to construe. As becomes clear in the final couplet of the poem, however, any attempt to assign to Yuan a specific interpretation of Li's work is to work counter to the central theme of the poet-critic here. The poem's opening couplet illustrates Yuan's contention that Li Shang-yin's poetry, though beautiful, is in fact frustratingly polysemous.

Yuan tells us in Line Three that poets generally love the fine quality of "Hsi-k'un" verse. And in Line Four, he regrets there is no Cheng Hsüan to make a commentary on it. Cheng Hsüan 蕭玄 (127-200) was the late-Han scholar whose commentaries on the *Poetry Classic* and *Record of Rites* supplanted earlier commentaries on these works.

There are two ways of understanding the "Hsi-k'un" verse of Line Three. One is to understand the term as referring to the poetry of early-Sung period "Hsi-k'un style" writers, whose work was collected together in the *Hsi-k'un ch'ou-ch'ang chi*. The second is to take "Hsi-k'un" to be a reference to Li Shang-yin himself. The latter reading seems more acceptable, as it lends greater unity to the poem and reflects better Yuan's attitude toward early-Sung poetry.

Two interrelated statements are made in the poem. First, Li Shang-yin's poetry is extraordinary; it is only regrettable there is no Cheng Hsüan to enable us to appreciate it more. Second, the fact that it takes a genius like Cheng Hsüan to make clear Li's poetry underscores its one defect, its obscurity.
In Poem Thirteen, Yuan Hao-wen discusses the poetry of Lu T'ung (d. 835), a late-T'ang poet noted for his bizarre imagery and strange phrasing. In the poem's opening line, Yuan ironically makes his own verbal play against an earlier poetic allusion to Lu T'ung. As stated in Line Two, the poet (referred to by his self appellation, "Jade Stream" Lu) went criss-cross all over the highways and byways of writing.

In the final couplet of the poem, Yuan shifts time-periods to the contemporary scene and employs the metaphor of calligraphy. We are told, "Simple standard-script does not appeal to people nowadays". Chen-shu 常書, also called cheng-shu 正書, is the plain calligraphic style used by officials, i.e., k'ai-shu 括書. In its unadorned legibility, chen-shu contrasts with ts'ao-shu 草書 or k'uang-shu 狂書, "grass- or mad-style calligraphy". It is used here to contrast with the indecipherable charms mentioned in Line Four. What is "true" (chen 真 or, synonymously, what is "correct" 正), Yuan argues, does not concern his contemporaries.

In the poem taken as a whole, Yuan is arguing that poetic diction can be original or strange without being improper. But those who, at one stage removed (cf. Poem Eleven), do unusual variations on what is already strange, unique, or unusual are simply children mindlessly drawing obscure charms. That is to say, they are removed from the mainstream of the tradition and their works are written in a private language out of keeping with the proper nature of literature. To Yuan, Lu T'ung's poetry is unusual yet acceptable, but he cannot abide his later imitators.

Poem 13

Always has literature had its broad, level path;
But for going every which way, none can compare with Lu T'ung.
Simple standard-script does not appeal to people nowadays,
So children end up drawing exorcists' strange signs.
Poem 24

“Sentient peonies brim spring tears,
Listless roses lie on morning branches.”
Set Han Yu’s line from “Mountain Rocks” against these,
And it becomes clear, Ch’in Kuan’s is girlish poetry.

Yüan Hao-wen here criticizes Ch’in Kuan (1049-1100) for writing “effeminate” poetry. For this, he is unfavourably contrasted with the late-T’ang poet, Han Yü (768-824). The first two lines of the poem are a direct quotation from a seven-character quatrain by Ch’in Kuan, entitled “Spring Day”. These two lines of Ch’in’s verse are used metaphorically to refer to an important segment of that poet’s verse writing.

Yüan Hao-wen contrasts Ch’in’s couplet with Han Yü’s poem, “Mountain Rocks”. The Han Yü line in “Mountain Rocks” being alluded to in Line Three reads: 藤蔓大嫩葉肥 “The banana leaves were huge, the gardenias plump.” By comparison, Ch’in Kuan’s is said to be girlish poetry.

In sum, Yüan Hao-wen decries verse writing that to his view is excessively mannered or prettified or effeminate.
Poem 29

“Spring grasses on the bank”—the Hsieh family springtime;  
How eternally fresh this single line!  
Proofreader Ch’en behind his locked gate should be told,  
“Too bad there’s nothing gained, wasting so much effort versifying.”

Yüan Hao-wen here contrasts the Six Dynasties poet, Hsieh Ling-yün 謝靈運 (385-433), with Ch’en Shih-tao 陳師道 (1053-1101) of the Sung. The opening phrase is drawn directly from a line in Hsieh Ling-yün’s poem, “Mounting the Poolside Pavilion”. The freshness of Hsieh’s line is meant to contrast with the studied ploddingness of Ch’en Shih-tao’s compositions, which are described in the poem’s final couplet. Ch’en is closely associated with the Chiang-hsi school of poetry of the Sung (江西派), which he largely represents in this poem.

In Line Two, Yüan states that Hsieh’s simple five-character line has a “freshness” (hsin) that is “eternal and perennial” (wan-ku ch’ien-ch’iu). These are qualities which for Yüan characterize Hsieh Ling-yün’s poetic corpus as a whole; they also represent an ideal in his scheme of criticism. For Yüan, Hsieh’s “freshness”, being the inspired expression of direct experience which no effort can avail (cf. Poem Eleven), is very much akin to the natural quality (tzu-jan) of T’ao Ch’ien’s poetry (cf. Poem Four).

Ch’en Shih-tao is sharply contrasted with Hsieh Ling-yün. There is a special quality to the way Yüan refers to Ch’en by his official title of “Proofreader” (cheng-tzu 正字); gentle irony is implied in the fact that Ch’en was continually, as it were, “rectifying (cheng) his (poetic) wordings (tzu)”. Ch’en would lock his gate and toil at his poems for days on end. Yüan considered this a waste of mental energy. The phrasing expressing his view, all of Line Four, is taken verbatim from a poem Wang An-shih 王安石 (1021-1086) wrote in criticism of Han Yü. Ch’en Shih-tao in turn criticized Wang An-shih by turning Wang’s own words about Han Yü on Wang himself. Hence, Yüan Hao-wen’s use of the line is clearly witty and ironic: what Ch’en criticizes Wang for criticizing Han Yü for, is precisely what Ch’en himself should be criticized for.

In breadth of vision, we are told, Ch’en Shih-tao’s verse-writing, which stands for Chiang-hsi style poetry overly concerned with poetic technique, scarcely measures up to that of Hsieh Ling-yün.
Poem 30

I know my foolishness, a mere ant trying to shake a tree;
Such is the tyro’s urge, ever to criticize.
With old age, leaving behind a thousand poems—
By whom will their strengths and weaknesses be judged?

The poet-critic diffidently asks, in the light of his youthful presumption in criticizing his betters, by whom will he someday be judged. The opening line is written in humorous self-deprecation, Yuan Hao-wen likening himself to an ant trying to shake a tree. The image, which comes from a poem by Han Yu, is intended to contrast his own smallness with the greatness of the poetic tradition that he presumes to judge.

In Line Two, Yuan adds, it is the student’s (shu-sheng), i.e., tyro’s, temptation to criticize. The “urge” of which he speaks (chi-yang) is the itching on the part of someone to display some skill or talent he possesses.

Lines Three and Four pose a problem of interpretation, depending on whether Poem Thirty was written as a later addition to the original series of poems, composed when Yuan Hao-wen was twenty-seven years old. In the final couplet, the poet could be expressing confidence in his own future ability as a writer. Or, the line may suggest a perspective later in life on the part of the author. There being no evidence to the contrary, however, it is preferable to construe Poem Thirty, as well as the entire series of thirty poems, as being the product of the writer’s reflections while a young man.

Yuan Hao-wen’s poems on poetry are written with great skill and are memorably expressed, the earlier poetic and critical traditions having been widely drawn upon for their formulation. In this, the concluding poem to the series, the poet’s customary maturity, perception, and self-confidence are tempered by a certain self-deprecation.