

聞一多：詩的格律

Form in Poetry

By Wen I-to

Translated by Randy Trumbull

I

IF WE ASSUME that the "play-instinct" theory¹ fully accounts for the origin of Art, then it is perfectly conceivable to compare writing poetry to playing chess; one can no more dispense with rules when playing chess than one can dispense with form when writing poetry. (Here I use *ko-lü* 格律 as the equivalent for the English "form." Although in recent days the word *ko-lü* has become tainted by objectionable associations, it is more appropriate than such literal translations as *hsing-t'i* 形體 ["form" in the sense of a physical object's external features] and *ko-shih* 格式 ["form" in the sense of a pattern or model to be copied]. When we remember that form is intimately related to rhythm, *ko-lü* seems a satisfactory translation.) If one were to set one's chessmen at random on the board and play a game in complete disregard of the rules, what sort of amusement could one derive from the contest? Pleasure is derived from playing when, through some brilliant stroke, one obtains a victory within the game's prescribed limits. So it is, too, that one may derive pleasure from writing poetry. If poetry could be written without regard to form, would it not be easier to write a poem than play a game of chess, soccer, or mah-jong? Small wonder it is that in recent years New Poetry has flourished to such a degree. I realize that some do not enjoy listening to my views, but Professor Bliss

4/3

The article from which this translation was made first appeared in the Literary Supplement of Pei-ching ch'en-pao 北京晨報, May 13, 1926. The footnotes are the translator's.

¹The "play-instinct" theory, *yu-hsi pen-neng shuo* 遊戲本能說. This theory, developed by and debated among European scholars throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, maintains that human beings

have a deep-seated and instinctive need to play, and that play, far from being a trivial activity, is in fact the motivating force behind artistic expression. The most famous spokesmen for the play-instinct theory were Friedrich von Schiller (see his *Aesthetical Letters*) and Carl Groos (*The Play of Man*). Wen I-to may have first encountered this concept in Bliss Perry's *A Study of Poetry*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920, pp. 15-6.

Perry is even more inflexible on questions of poetic form. He writes: "Few poets will admit that they are really in bondage to form. They love to dance in fetters, and even dance in the fetters of other poets."²

I will go on to predict that after many budding poets read the passage quoted above, they jumped to their feet and cried: "If that is poetry, I will never write again! What do you think of that?" I must confess that I feel it would be no great loss if such poets discontinued writing, because if they refuse to dance in fetters, they will never produce respectable poetry. The poet Tu Fu (AD 712-770) once made a wise remark worth considering in this regard: "The older I grow, the more care I take with poetic rules."³

Next the revolutionary spirits of the poetic world cry out: "Return to Nature!" What they must realize is that, although one needs to look carefully, one can still perceive subtle traces of form in the natural environment. The problem is that more often than not Nature's handiwork exists in an imperfect state, and only Art can remedy Nature's deficiencies. Seen in this light, perfectly realistic depictions of Nature impoverish Art. Oscar Wilde put the case well when he wrote, "Art takes up where Nature leaves off."⁴ Nature is not always beautiful. We see beauty in Nature only where Nature happens to approximate Art. This proposition is most easily corroborated by drawing an analogy with the visual arts. Often when we admire a beautiful view existing in raw Nature, we say that it is just as beautiful as a painting. Indeed, we Chinese tend to judge beautiful only those views which resemble traditional landscape paintings. The conception of ideal feminine beauty in pre-Renaissance Europe may be proven incompatible with the modern conception when we compare paintings of the two ages; but the modern-day conception of ideal feminine beauty does tally with that of ancient Greece, as the latter is exemplified in sculpture.⁵ This is because the excavation of Greek sculpture stimulated the development of Renaissance art, and ever since the Renaissance, artistic representations of beautiful women have been patterned upon the Greek model, in this way modifying the conception of feminine loveliness in the minds of Europeans. I have

²Perry's original statement reads differently: "And few poets, furthermore, will admit that they are really in bondage to their stanzas. They love to dance in these fetters, and even when wearing the same fetters as another poet, they nevertheless invent movements of their own, so that Mr. Masefield's 'Chaucerian' stanzas are really not so much Chaucer's as Masefield's." *A Study of Poetry*, *ibid.*, p. 202.

³"The older I grow, the more care I take with poetic rules," *lao-ch'ü chien yü shih-lü hsi* 老去漸於詩律細. *Lao-ch'ü* should read *wan-chieh* 晚節 — "In my later years I have gradually grown careful with poetic rules." See Tu Fu's "Ch'ien-men hsi-ch'eng Lu shih-chiu ts'ao-chang" 遣悶戲呈路十九曹長, *Ch'üan T'ang shih* 全唐詩, Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1979, volume 7, p. 2586.

⁴This concurs with much of what Oscar Wilde had

to say on the relationship between nature and art, but I do not believe Wilde ever made this particular remark. Similar passages are found here and there in Wilde's letters, *The Decay of Lying*, *The Critic as Artist*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

⁵"The modern-day conception of ideal feminine beauty does tally with that of ancient Greece," *hsien-tai te kuan-nien yü t'ung Hsi-la te tiao-hsiang suo piao-hsien te nü-hsing-mei hsiang-fu le* 現代的觀念又同希臘的雕像所表現的女性美相符了. In the original, *pu* ("not") is misprinted for *yu* 又 ("once again"), which makes nonsense of Wen's argument. A few pages later, *yu* is misprinted for *pu*, so the type-setter was probably having a hard time with Wen I-to's handwriting. (Both the 1948 and 1982 editions of Wen's complete works retain the misprints.)

run across a similar theory suggested in a poem by Chao Yi (AD 1727-1814):

*Exactly like a "potted-pond," grouping emerald crags;
Finely-sculpted stumps of stone, filling the river's coves.
Forces of creation, too, enjoy a novel trick;
Oddly they dress mountains up in the guise of man-made hills.⁶*

絕似盆池聚碧孱，
嵌空石笋滿江灣。
化工也愛翻新樣，
反把真山學假山。

This poem tells of one instance in which Nature imitated Art. Our natural environment does, of course, contain beauty, but when we happen to catch a glimpse of beauty in Nature it is only by happy accident. Once in a while we hear poetic rhythms in speech, but if we were to decide on this basis to equate poetry with everyday speech, we would in actuality be doing away with poetry. (Note that I do not exclude the possibility of composing poetry in regional dialects of spoken Chinese. I believe, as I hope to show at a later date, that regional dialects are a rich area for potential development in New Poetry. Right now I would merely have the reader note that poetry may be "composed" in regional dialects—the word "compose" suggesting that such informal language can be transformed into poetry only after a process of editing and selection.) Poetry's ability to excite the emotions rests solely upon rhythm, and rhythm is metrical form. When Shakespeare's plays build up to their frequent climaxes of charged emotion, the playwright naturally slips rhymes into the speech of his players. Goethe also used verse in *Faust*, as he once told Schiller in a letter. When Han Yü (AD 768-824) "hit upon an obscure rhyme, he did not look about for alternatives, because ingenuity is best displayed under adverse conditions. The more difficult the rhyme-scheme, the more extraordinary the poetic effect."⁷ In this way, the more masterful a poet is, the more gracefully he will dance in his fetters. Only those who dance poorly resent their fetters, and only poetasters feel hampered by form. Form impedes the free expression of only those who cannot write poetry; to a true poet, form is a valuable instrument which helps him express himself.

Now another group of young poets flourishing the colours of Romanticism

⁶This is the second of a pair of heptasyllabic quatrains entitled "A Boat-ride on the River Li" (*Li-chiang chou-hsing* 灑江舟行), *Ou-pei ch'üan-chi* 歐北全集, "Ou-pei shih-ch'ao" 詩鈔, "Ch'ieh-chü yi" 絕句一, *chüan* 47, 6b.

The *p'en-ch'ih* 盆池 of line one—"potted-pond" in my translation—is a sort of artificial landscape in miniature which is arranged in a basin and used as a garden ornament by Chinese gentlefolk (cf. E.H. Schafer's "Notes on T'ang Culture," *Monumenta Serica* XXI (1962) 194-6). The words *shih sun* 石笋—"stumps of stone"—suggest geologic formations

resembling the woody root of the bamboo, whose shape is similar to the contours of the karst hills lining the River Li near Kuei-lin. Chao's quatrain, then, compares the natural loveliness of Kuei-lin to the domesticated beauty of a *p'en-ch'ih*. In places like Kuei-lin, the forces of erosion care for the landscape with the same attention to detail that a gardener looking after a *p'en-ch'ih* exercises.

⁷Another quote from Chao Yi. *Ou-pei ch'üan-chi*, "Ou-pei shih-hua" 詩話, *chüan* 3, 3b.

415

prepares to attack form. I only wish to remind these poets of one fact. If they persist in touting Romanticism as their literary creed, all they will do is acknowledge the insincerity of their desire to write poetry, because when we examine what they have written we find that, far from attending to literature, they merely seek the adulation of the reading public. Each of these narcissistic youths fancies himself the most adorable man alive: he feels that all he needs to do is bare his breast to the reader and a literary work will have been created. Do we not hear their constant ranting about "self-expression"? What they have discovered are in actuality no more than the raw materials of Art. They fail to acknowledge form, the tool which transforms these raw materials into literature. The fact that they use a written language as their medium for expression is of no consequence. What concerns these poets most is exhibiting what they refer to as "the Ego," letting the world know just how talented and sensitive a young man "I" am. They gaze lovingly into the mirror their literature proffers, admiring through tear-filled eyes their rakish attitudes of easy grace. How droll it is! How romantic! Yes: the Romanticism of which they speak is romantic only in this respect—it has nothing whatsoever to do with the schools of literary thought. This sort of poet's interests do not lie with literature, so it is too much to ask them to adhere to rules of poetic form, because given such restrictions they would be unable to write poetry. If they did give consideration to poetic form, would they not be unfaithful to their code of writing poetry as they please? To state the case more bluntly: we may see this pseudo-Romantic poetry as a meaningless game, or, if we choose, a peep-show, but on no account should we mistake it for poetry. Consequently, we need not discuss whether it adheres to rules of poetic form. They may denounce poetic form if they wish, but there is no point in wasting our breath bickering with them.

I have stated above what I mean when I use the word "form." Certainly, Art cannot exist without it. I have also stated that poetic form is nothing more than rhythm. When put in such simple terms as these, the importance of form is doubly evident; casual prose essays can get by with comparatively little attention to rhythm, but poetry cannot and will never make do without rhythm. Poetry has never been divorced from formal and rhythmic considerations. No one has ever considered questioning such a basic assumption. And yet today we find that even assumptions as unassailable as this must have their merit proven. Why carry on over this issue? Do people really believe that poetry can dispense with form? Perhaps the furor is due to some anarchist spirit of the age, to a senseless love for fads, to sheer laziness, to a fear of betraying one's incompetence in technical literary discussions, or to . . . well, I give up. I don't know what the reason could be!

II

IN THE PRECEDING pages we have discussed a few of the reasons poetry should not do away with form. Now let us briefly consider the essential properties of poetic form. On the surface of things, we may surmise that poetic form may be examined under two headings: the visual, and the auditory. Actually, these headings should

not be considered separately, because each is closely related to the other.⁸ Examples of visual form would include evenly proportioned stanzas and orderliness of individual lines. Auditory form would include such elements as format, poetic feet, deflected and inflected tone patterns, and end-rhymes. But if format is neglected, stanzas will be unevenly proportioned, poetic feet will be mismanaged, individual lines will be in disarray.

Jaο Meng-k'an has ably discussed questions pertaining to format, poetic feet, tone patterns, and end-rhymes in his article entitled "Thoughts on Metre in New Poetry" (published in two previous issues of this literary supplement). But his comments were primarily addressed to the auditory aspects of poetry, and he neglected to deal with two of the visual aspects. Admittedly, the latter are of secondary importance. But in Chinese literature especially we must not overlook this important matter, because our written language is pictographic, and when we read literary works at least half of the impressions we receive are of a visual nature. Literature is an art that occupies both time and space. It is regrettable that, although the literatures of Europe have physical modes of existence, they lack the ability to present concrete visual images. Our written language can evoke such impressions, and it would be a sad thing indeed if we did not exploit this potential. Therefore, New Poetry's adoption of the Western convention of writing poetry in lines of a length determined by the poet is a break-through of considerable consequence. Whether or not the first Chinese poet to write verse in lines realized the value of his discovery need not concern us here. We still owe him a debt of gratitude, because only now can we see that the true power of poetry is derived not only from musical beauty (metre) and pictorial beauty (ornate vocabulary), but from architectural beauty as well (evenly-proportioned stanzas and orderliness of individual lines). If someone were to ask what one of the characteristics of New Poetry is, we might reply that it provides the poet with new possibilities for architectural beauty.

Recently more and more people have begun to express the suspicion that stanzas of even proportion and orderliness of individual lines symbolize a return to antiquated methods of versification. What a sad fate it is to belong to the past of China! Does this phenomenon not strike one as rather odd? Not only have such honorific titles as "sage" and "master" been denied Confucius, he has even been stripped of his personal name. And yet now, in an age when Confucius is pejoratively referred to as "Junior," Jesus retains his title of "Christ," and Socrates is still called Socrates. We Chinese may still write poems in sonnet form if we wish, but we must beware lest our poems resemble Regulated Verse. Why in the world has Regulated Verse fallen into disfavor? Even if one wished to write Regulated Verse in vernacular Chinese, would it be possible? If one writes a poem whose stanzas are of even proportion and whose lines are ordered, should one be condemned for writing Regulated Verse?

To be sure, Regulated Verse as a formula for composition does possess architectural beauty; but when we compare its beauty to the possibilities for architectural beauty in New Poetry, we realize just how limited Regulated Verse is. Regulated Verse will never present more than one pattern for poetic composition, whereas

⁸Read 'pu tang fen-k'ai-lai Chiang" 不當分開來講, not "yu 又 tang fen-k'ai-lai Chiang."

the number of patterns possible in New Poetry is limitless. This is the first difference between Regulated Verse and New Poetry. When writing a poem in Regulated Verse, one must fit one's theme and artistic conception into the pre-determined pattern—almost as though one has been given a suit of clothes, and no matter whether one is a man or a woman, an adult or a child, one must try to wear it as best one can. New Poetry, on the other hand, tailors itself to individual needs. "Wang Chao-chün Leaves China" could no more have been composed using the format of "Lotus Picking Song" than "Railroad Ballad" could have been composed using the format of "Final Determination," or "Eighteenth of March" could have been composed using the format of "Searching."⁹ If any critic should feel that there is a point in one of these poems where content is at odds with format, where mood is incompatible with construction, I would be intrigued to hear his reasoning. But I ask you: is there an instance in which mood and construction are found compatible within the cut-and-dried formats of Regulated Verse? And among all the examples of scrambled, asymmetric, slapdash free verse, can one poem be found in which mood and construction are compatible?

The second point of divergence between Regulated Verse and New Poetry is that with Regulated Verse, form and content are dissociated, whereas with New Poetry form is designed according to the spirit of content. The format of Regulated Verse has been determined for us by our predecessors, while the format of New Poetry is decided upon spontaneously according to the artist's predilection. This is a third difference between Regulated Verse and New Poetry. Now that we understand these three points of divergence, we must consider whether the format of New Poetry constitutes a restoration of familiar archaism, or whether it is an innovation; that is, whether it is a step backward or a step forward.

Recently we have seen a certain poetic format used by many poets which divides poems into four lines per stanza, with the same number of characters in each line. Readers accustomed to asymmetrical free verse must find this particularly distracting—those lines with the same number of characters look just as though they have been trimmed with a pair of scissors. "How irritating it must be to worry over the length of every line!" they think. Then it occurs to them that, if writing poetry is made so difficult, poetic inspiration must stand in danger of perdition. "And if inspiration is lost," they fret, "where can one begin to look for poetry?" While it is true that poetry is lost without inspiration, refining the lines of one's poems so that they are of even length is hardly an insurmountable task, and inspiration need not come to harm in the process. I have asked several poets who use this poetic format, and each has said the same thing: while they admit that flaws may be found in some of their poems, they feel that the flaws are a consequence of their imperfect technique, and should not be attributed to some defect in the poetic format itself. Let us compare two poems—one written in lines of chaotic syntax, the other in lines of well-ordered syntax—to see for ourselves whether syntactic organization of individual lines affects a poem's metrical grace:

⁹"Wang Chao-chün Leaves China" and "Lotus Picking Song" are by Chu Hsiang 朱湘; "Final Determination" and "Railroad Ballad" are by Liu Meng-wei 劉夢葦; "Eighteenth of March" and "Searching" are by Jao Meng-k'an 饒孟侃.

- (a) *Would that I might pierce the silent haze: that sheer,
floating gauze!
Carefully I listen through the misty drizzle which
quietly descends upon the eaves.
Hearing the falling rain's murmur as it wafts from afar
through the emptiness,
Dimly aware of delicate white petals falling, one by one,
to the ground.*

我願透着寂靜的朦朧，薄淡的浮紗，
細聽着淅淅的細雨寂寂的在簷上，
激打遙對着遠遠吹來的空虛中的嘯歎的聲音，
意識着一片一片的墜下的輕輕的白色的落花。

- (b) *At the story's pause, the lamp outside sputtered
And the old man's terror his eyes for him uttered;
The children gazed in dismay at the old man's face,
He glanced in dismay to where the red flames fluttered.*

說到這兒，門外忽然燈響，
老人的臉上也改了模樣；
孩子們驚望着他的臉色，
他也驚望着炭火的紅光。

419

Which sounds better: the poem with ordered syntax, or the one whose lines are syntactically chaotic? To get to the heart of the matter, organizing one's syntax, far from cramping poetic metre, facilitates achieving metric harmony. Again, some may take exception to this judgment. Let us take a closer look at the second passage cited above to see whether or not orderly syntax impinges upon a poem's metric harmony.

孩 子 們 驚 望 着 他 的 臉 色
hai-tzu-men / ching-wang-che / t'a te / lien-se
(The children gazed in dismay at the old man's face.)

他 也 驚 望 着 炭 火 的 紅 光
t'a yeh / ching-wang-che / t'an-huo te / hung-kuang
(He glanced in dismay to where the red flames fluttered.)

Both of these lines may be broken down into four poetic feet, two "trisyllabic feet" and two "disyllabic feet" (my terms for feet made up of three syllables and two syllables, respectively). The location of the components is left to the poet's discretion, but each line must be composed of a sum of two trisyllabic and two disyllabic feet. Written in this manner, a poem can possess euphony at the same time that each of its lines bears the same number of syllables. Therefore, orderly lines are an inevitable phenomenon associated with metrically harmonized poetry. In a

perfectly organized poem, each line will be of the same length. (But if we turn the formula about, we realize that when the number of syllables in each line of a poem is the same, the metre of the poem will not necessarily be perfectly organized. This is because simply having lines of equal length does not ensure that the poetic feet are properly arranged. Mere syllabic uniformity among lines presents a façade of symmetry, rather than the naturally harmonious outward form created by a fine poem's rich content.)

For this reason, the importance of having the same number of syllables in each line cannot be exaggerated, because the existence or lack of rhythm as one facet of poetry's outward form can establish the nature of its inner spirit. However, if the reader feels that the examples discussed above are insufficient, we may use the same criteria to analyse my poem, "Stagnant Waters."

Beginning with the first line,

這 是 一 溝 絕 望 的 死 水
che shih / yi kou / chüeh-wang te / ssu-shui
This is / a fen-of / hopeless, / stagnant waters,¹⁰

the poem employs a metrical scheme which requires that each line contain three disyllabic feet and one trisyllabic foot. Of course, each line contains an equal number of syllables. The result is a poem which, as an experiment in poetic metre, is more successful than any I have written to date. Many friends have expressed puzzlement over the mahjong-like format of poems like "Stagnant Waters" which divide their poetic feet into increments of two and three syllables, so I have taken the liberty of dealing with this question here. I hope the reader has noted that the metrical nature of New Poetry, as the analysis above has shown, suggests certain practical methods for poetic composition. I predict that when these methods for manipulating metre are more fully disclosed, New Poetry will enter a new period of innovation. In any case, we should recognize that such innovation will be an event of cataclysmic significance in the history of New Poetry.

Whether the cataclysm represents progress or decline will soon cease to be a point of contention.

¹⁰In Wen I-to's article of 1928 on Tu Fu, he quotes part of a sonnet by Wordsworth: "Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour: / England hath need of thee: she is a fen/ Of stagnant waters: . . ." (*Selected Poems and Prefaces by William Wordsworth*, Jack

Stillinger, ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965, p. 172). Previous translators of Wen's "Ssu-shui" have rendered the title literally as "Dead Water," but the similarity of Wen's line to that of Wordsworth is probably not coincidental.

420