

# Liet's Poem

I began translating Liet's poem about form in Phoenix in 1966 and have been studying and tinkering with the English version ever since. Translation is like mining, although when mining for meaning, you're never quite sure whether you are finding what is there, what you're looking for or both. Probably both. While I am sure that my persistence and scrutiny have taken me closer and closer to the poet's original intentions, I also recognize how much I have changed as a reader and interpreter over the thirty year process.

"One of the special challenges of an ideographic language is how contextually dependent the characters are. Relationships between adjacent and nearby characters influence and subtly shade the meaning. Gradually one also learns to look beyond the immediate and proximate for the additional perspectives, tone and nuances given by a more global patterned context. It takes a truly great poet to have created such a multi-scaled network of relationships and figural patterns that are still able to guide and please after eleven centuries.

Robert Frost's witty remark (at the time) that it was poetry that was lost in the

## THE SOUL OF FORM

by Liet Ho-em\*

When an idea is a royal blue ball,  
And feelings balls of other hue,  
Is Form the spheres or the basket that they fit in?  
No. Is Form the basket and the balls?  
No. Is Form the relationship between the two?  
A structure not a container, yes,  
But a structure of the structured and structurer.

Ten thousand iridescent nets are severed,  
New order churning in a churning sea;  
Meaning rising from the deepest welling  
Awakened vivid fresh relations;  
Prized patterns gather, webbing into Form.

Each intention has a garden of expressions.  
In rows and layers of expression some relate.  
Why is each horizon only epidermal Form?

Behold! attendant crystalline desire  
And wormy world are wound into

The one within the soul of Form.

Translation by Jerome Diethelm  
\*Liet Ho-em was a 9th century  
Chinese poet

translation has served as a kasina for this meditation along with the poem. For me the poetry has been in the translating, in my engagement with the poem. This is of course the postmodern perspective. Poetry is not the thing, the artifact, but rather the relationship that the reader, or listener, has with the material.

“The official attitude about the Frost remark is that “no one believes that anymore.” But since I will trust a poet’s insight over a critic’s ideological axis every time, and because of my own confirming experience, I am not quite able to let Frost go. There is something more to say here; there is something more that is going on.

“Experience in designing leads one to be very skeptical of formulations into this or that. First there was *this* emphasis on the poem and what the poet meant; then there was *that* emphasis on the reader’s relationship with the poem. In designing it is always the both and one’s relation to them as a whole, taking first the one and then the other point of view. Why should it be different with poetry?

“My experience translating Chinese characters has taught me the profound rewards of looking for deeper relationships. And so, in this meditation, I am imagining the poet’s relationship with the poem to be a deeper relationship which is layered under the one I have. The relationship I have with the poet is only

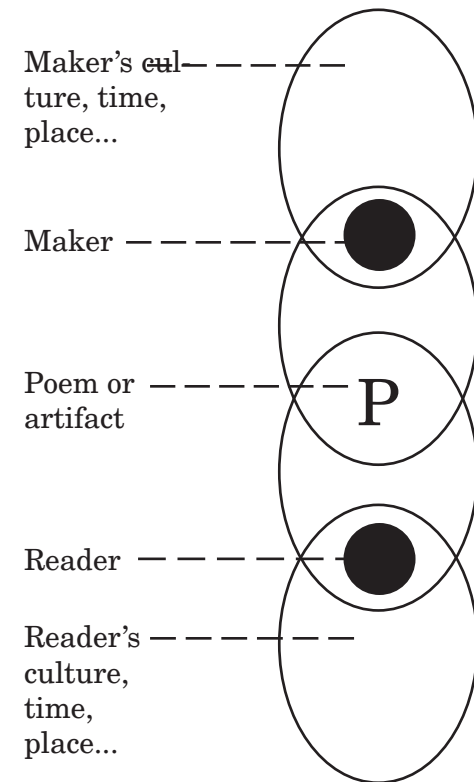
through the poem, but since it is an intentional structure I can sense and begin to winkle out some of the thought, feeling and purpose behind the work. I know my translation will inevitably be a construction influenced by my own life experience and point of view. Are not our Supreme Court justices in the exact same situation with the two century old Constitution? Even with excellent scholarship, one would expect the Brennan and Renquist versions of Liet’s poem to be quite different in terms of interest, emphasis and tone.

“While it is not always easy to sort out my meaning from the poet’s, an attempt to become more aware of the biases I bring to the experience and an openness to other possibilities always leads to new depths of insight in the work and personal growth.

“There is yet another layer beneath the one I have been describing as the poet and the poem. No poet can ever be detached from their own time, place, language and culture. Each subject is decentered in place and time. Metaphors are born out of this experience. One can only wonder about the spectacle of juggling or sport that occasioned ideas to be compared to ‘royal blue balls.’ Does this refer to the court or perhaps to the importance of the ideas? Or both? Was it at court where the really important ideas and concerns were set into work? If there is a layer behind the poet and the

poem, then it is easy to imagine another behind any reader, linking that person deeper into their own situation and culture where the reading is taking place.

That make four important relational layers:  
“Designer’s, like all who participate in



Four Relational Layers

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creating the reality of experience, alternate consciously and intuitively between the maker and the reader positions. A good writer, for example, needs to know what makes a good read and that means more than just making the reader's head jingle; the pulse must race and the bones tingle. Designers, poets, makers in the broadest sense, all have a naturally heightened interest in the way that metaphoric compositions mediate between the valuing of making and the meaning of experience.

“Given the number and complexity of the human filters involved, it ought to be very obvious that making and meaning can not be connected simply as suggested by the linguistic sign. Nor can it be remotely comparable to electromechanical processes, such as that of the telephone, which transform sound energy into electrical patterns and then back into recognizable sound. Neither is an adequate model. Music, to paraphrase and oversimplify Susanne Langer, presents a constructed image of feeling as it unfolds in time. In Chopin's Opus 28 No. 4, for example, we do not have to feel sad or melancholy to enjoy the piece. In fact we may have quite the opposite feeling as we re-cognize authentic human experience, measured against our own, out of the musical composition. Poems and places are similarly made, experienced and complexly measured.

“In Liet's poem, it is the original callig-

raphy which I think defies translation. With some study and care the poem's ideas are transportable over the centuries, but the ‘joyous playful strokes,’ as one critic described Liet's brushwork, seem trapped forever in a culture distant in more than time which experiences a portion of intended meaning in the visual manner of the writing.

“If there is no way to adequately reproduce the clearly intended spirit and feeling of the writing, perhaps Frost is partly right and some of the ‘poetry’ is lost or unavailable in translation. Perhaps metaphors or contextual relations between words or in places are much more uniquely tied to a particular time, place and situation than we have realized.

I remember being shocked to see London Bridge reconstructed over Lake Powell in Lake Havasu City, Arizona. Severed from its web of cultural relations it had become more theme park or urban zoo than London Bridge. As a student in Germany, I remember being baffled by the children's riddle: ‘A sewing needle and a thimble fell in the water. Why couldn't the needle hear the cries for help and save the drowning thimble?’ Every German child responds, ‘Because it got water in its ear.’ German needles have ears instead of eyes.

“I have tried to reproduce the Liet's focusing structure by organizing the number of lines in each stanza in a diminishing

sequence of 7,5,3,2,1. It is, if you will, a kind of V-like conception with each part building up to, contributing to and being integrated into the whole. The focal line functions much like the concluding couplet in a sonnet.

“The last line of the first stanza,

*But a structure of the structured and the structurer.*

comes as close to the valuing relationship I have been describing as anything I've encountered. Old wisdom laying dormant for eleven centuries?

If the first stanza is full of philosopher jugglers at court, the second is set in the sea where a cyclic upwelling of new possibilities tends and mends the cultural net.

In the third, we are in the garden, making something out of our intentions, trying to find correspondences between their possible expressions by ‘putting them in rows.’

The final three lines return to an image which binds up an attending presence, the driving force of human desire and an organic, tangled Darwinian world.

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