The Poetry of Silence (1915)

E. E. Cummings

Inasmuch as the period from 1870 to the present year,—that is to say,from Monet and Cézanne to Brancusi and Duchamp-Villon [Marcel Duchamp],—has given birth to one of the most extraordinary of all revolutions in the domain of Art,--and inasmuch as the slogan of these revolutionists,—the vital essence of their message,—is summed up in the single word "Primitive,"it may appear pertinent to examine the essentially primitive literatures of two always inspiring countries,China and Japan.

While the Western movement appears most significant in painting and sculpture,—where the Post-Impressionism of Cézanne flowers exotically in so-called Cubism,with the creators of *Mlle.Pogany*, *A Nude Descending the Staircase*, and *The Dance at the Spring*,—it is in Poetry that we find the topmost blossom of Eastern primitive Art.[1] In the course of a few pages, I shall try to expose, in necessarily crude fashion,the beauty and significance of this primitive poetry. I shall first take up Chinese poetry,both because the elements of its prosody are peculiarly unsympathetic to those of English verse, and because Chinese poetry seems to me to be,at any rate from the artistic standpoint,less suggestive than Japanese.

To begin with,every Chinese character is invariably a monosyllabic word. Moreover,each differs from its neighbor not only in phonetic sound,but also in pitch or "tone." There are four of these "tones" in the language: the "low and even," the "sharp and rising," the "clear and far-reaching",and the "straight and abruptly finished." They help, among other things,to distinguish the meanings of certain words identical in phonetic sound. Chinese prosody groups the above "tones" into two classes:(1) the "low and even"(*Ping*) (2) the other three, taken together (*Tseh*). Successive combinations of the *Ping* and *Tseh* "tones" are felt as the rhythm of the Chinese Poem [(Budd 19-20)]. The unit of composition is a poem called the "*Tsüeh*",which consists of four lines,and which occurs in two poems,one beginning on the *Ping* tone,the other on the *Tseh*. I quote from Budd's *Chinese Poems* the following example of the former type,which he calls a "perfect Tsüeh" [(24)]. The abbreviations "p" and "ts" underneath the words indicate the arrangement of tones, which is, of course, arbitrary, like the rhyme-scheme of the Provençal sestina.

"Ch'un fung tseh ye tao Yü Kwan
p p ts ts ts ts p
Ku kwoh yen hwa siang i tzan [Budd: "tsan"]
ts ts p p ts ts p

Shao fu puh chi kwei wei teh
ts ts p p p ts ts
Chao chao ying shang wang fu shan"
p p ts ts ts p p

[Budd, Chinese Poems 22)]

Rhyme is for the most part,curiously enough,a matter of "tone";that is to say, the "tone"controls the rhymes,which may occur,as here,at the end of lines 1,2,and 4. In this connection, it is interesting to compare the Ottoman "Rubai",in which Omar wrote and FitzGerald sang.[2]

It is evident from the above analysis,that word-for-word rendition of Chinese poems in English verse may not be hoped for. Although there are other forms besides the "Tsüeh",in all which we find (in addition to the monosyllabic) that tonal influence is essential.

The most famous collection of primitive Chinese poetry is the *Shi-King*, and it is significant that most of its 300 odes were actually set to music and sung. It is scarcely necessary to state that the *Shi-King* is the only one luckily preserved fragment of early unwritten,and consequently unperpetuated, poetry [(Budd 10-12)].

Myth-born legends combine with delicate personal emotion to form the subject-matter of these Chinese song-poems. The point of view of the writer,or more properly,of the singer,is deliciously naïve beyond that of the Japanese poet,(to whom we shall come presently),but lacks that extraordinary charm which pure impressionism gives to the hokku and tanka. Because the translated *Tsüeh* is hopelessly devoid of rhythm and atmosphere, I shall quote a Chinese legend,as an example of the subject-matter of the legendary verse.[3] Here is a typical legend:

> "K'ien-Niu(cowherd) and Chih-Nü(Spinning Girl) are the names of two stars and,according to a Chinese legend,these two stars are lovers doomed to gaze at each other across the wide 'River of Stars';i.e.the Milky Way, but never to meet. According to one version of the legend, however, the lovers are allowed to meet once a year,on the seventh night of the Seventh Month,when birds form a bridge over the 'River of Stars' to enable the Spinning-Girl to meet her lover." [(Budd 70)]

In this legend,brief as it is,the fascination of Chinese poetry is infinitely better exemplified than in the pseudo "translations" of the poems themselves by our own rhymesters.

Let us now turn to the Japanese field,which is certainly more easily appreciated by the Western mind,and which offers the critic a technique embodying absolutely unique subjective beauty.

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E. E. Cummings, "The Poetry of Silence" typescript, with Dean Le Baron Russell Briggs' suggestions and corrections in ink. [Houghton Library, Harvard University. Cummings Papers, MS Am 1892.6 (94) 6 s. (6 p.)]

By way of varying the attack,I immediately submit to the reader the following lines:

> "The well bucket taken away
> By the morning glory—
> Alas,water to beg!"
>
> [Chiyo-ni, qtd. in Noguchi 50]

I beg that he will read this several times,—as many times as he may have turned to that now famous “cubist” bust,portraying an egg-shaped head, two enormous eyes,and a sinuous fragment of upper arm,and entitled *Mlle.Pogany. Brancusi*.[4]

I submit that he will be as unable to appreciate the intention of this poet as to grasp the technique of Brancusi. To clear the mystery,I proceed to the artistic definition of “primitive”,(purposely withheld till now):—Primitive (=first,earliest) refers to that technique which deals with the subject only in the simplest terms,artistically speaking,—rejecting all but the essential characteristics.

In a [Briggs inserts: *single*] sentence,by applying this interpretation,we can explain Brancusi. Being a truly sincere primitive,he rejects all the superficial,conventional tricks and tours-de-force of modelling; for the same reason he also eliminates all that is unessential in his model;or,in the words of Walter Pach,—“line,volume,and surface are used for their aesthetic and expressive effect,independent of realism” [(Pach 851)].[5] Precisely the same idea, (unconscious of course), is at the bottom of the hokku,(or Japanese sonnet) above quoted.[6] Remembering that the essential act of “primitivism” is elimination,we are prepared for the following reconstruction of the absolutely wonderful poem above quoted.— A Japanese girl goes to the well to get water. She finds that in the night a morning glory has curled around the bucket. Of course she will not disturb the flower; she will beg for water elsewhere. —Thus the lengthy explanation; here follows the original poem:

A-sa-ga-wo ni
Tsu-ru-be to-ra-re-te
Mo-ra-i mi-zu [(qtd. in Noguchi 49)]

Observe that this,the hokku, has three verses, and contains in all just 17 syllables,never more nor less.

The standard model of Japanese poetic structure is the 5 versed,31 syllable “tanka”,of which the first three verses form metrically a hokku,as is seen in this example,taken from the *Hyakunin-isshu* (a famous collection of early poems):

“Life! Thou string of gems!
If thou art to end,break now
For,if yet I live,
All I do to hide my love,
May at last grow weak and fail.” [(MacCauley xxxi)]

In this syllabically accurate translation (by Mr. Clay MacCauley),the structure of the tanka is manifest.

Here is another exquisite specimen:

> "If it were my wish
> White chrysanthemum to cull:--
> Puzzled by the frost
> Of the early autumn time
> I,perchance,might pluck the flower."   [(MacCauley xxv)]

And here is a verbal Japanese screen,executed in simple and suggestive tints:

> "At the break of day,
> Just as though the morning moon
> Lightened the dim scene,
> Yoshino's fair hamlet lay
> In a haze of falling snow."   [(MacCauley xxv)]

Listen to [Yone] Noguchi: "When our Japanese poetry is best, it is . . . a searchlight or flash of thought or passion cast on a moment of Life and Nature, which, by virtue of its intensity, leads us to the conception of the whole." [(Noguchi 19) Noguchi continues: "it is swift, discontinuous, an isolated piece."] — In this sentence is summed up the entire case for Post-Impressionism,or Cubism,or Primitivism,as against Realism. In Realism, the whole is indirectly inferred through details concretely presented. In Primitivism,detail is inferred from the directly presented aspect of the whole.[7]

It may seem strange that I have so far left the title of this essay unexplained. I plead that the foregoing discussion is necessary to the appreciation of the explanation,— which at this point I wish to introduce. Yone Noguchi,the poet,shall be the spokesman:

> The real poet in the Japanese understanding is primitive, as primitive are the moon and flowers . . . [(37)][8] Since every syllable of the Japanese language ends in a vowel, and there are only five vowels, no poet could be successful in the use of rhyme [(93)] . . . Japanese poetry . . . is different from Western poetry in the same way as silence is different from a voice [(18)] . . . Oh, our Japanese life of dream and silence! Japanese poetry is that of the moon, stars, and flowers, that of a bird and waterfall for the noisiest[.]! If we do not sing so much of Life and the World, . . . not to sing of them is the proof of our reverence toward them. [(18-19)] I have no quarrel with one who emphasizes the immediate necessity of joining the hand of poetry and life; however, I wish to ask him the question what he means by the word life. . . . . When we sing of the beauty of night, that is to glorify, through the attitude of re-

verse, in the way of silence, the vigor and wonder of the day. . . . Poetry should be meaningful. . . . . [(24-25)] Indeed the main question is: what is the real poetry of action for which silence is the language? [(28)].

The last sentence is made clear when we cite a hokku written by Hokushi,to Basho,the greatest hokku poet of the 17th.century,upon the burning of the latter's house:[9]

"It has burned down;
How serene the flowers in their falling." [Noguchi (27)]

"With that action as a background,"comments Noguchi,"his (Hokushi's) poem,although it is slight in fact,bursts into a sudden light and dignity." [(28)] After the above criticism,let the reader consider two more poems,—which may truly be said to speak for themselves. The first is by Basho. I quote his fellow-countryman's analysis: "The lone poet on a certain forgotten highway found the beauty of the wisteria flowers most strikingly appealing to his poetic mind now simplified,therefore intensified, through the physical lassitude resulting from the whole day's walk."[10] [(42)] — Follows the poem,which is, in my humble opinion, perhaps the most beautiful hokku ever written:

"Being tired,—
Ah, the time I fall into the inn,—
The wisteria flowers." [(Noguchi 42)]

While this thrills me,utterly,as no other poem in any language, I can conceive of readers who cannot share it with me. For such I quote the following less abstract example,a poem spoken by Chiyo as she looks out and sees boys playing,and thinks of her own little dead son. If Basho's cry is ecstasy,Chiyo's is sublimity:—

"The hunter of dragonflies,
Today,how far away
May he have gone!" [(Noguchi 41)]

After all, perhaps Noguchi was right in saying:"an appreciative reader of poetry in Japan is not made,but born,just like a poet." [(19)] When I hear someone exclaim of Duchamp-Villon's *Nu*,—"But I don't see the lady!"—tears of wrath are in my soul. Not for such are the glories of the primitive;not for such is the poetry of China and Japan;and so, a good night to my poor essay!

And yet,if there be one reader to whom the wonders of the shrine have

been opened by my enthusiasms,—for truly I cannot and would not claim aught beyond this,—I shall be very happy;for he and I have wandered together in that new way and old which is yet almost untrodden,—upon that night of which the old poet sings,through the shadow of two thousand years:[11]

> "The night of the Spring,—
> Oh,between the eve
> And the dawn!" [(Noguchi 48)]

Dean Briggs' comment:
Exceptionally interesting and sympathetic. On p. 1 your exposition shows one weak spot. Throughout you are over-fond of "above" in the sense of "above-mentioned." Such uses are partially authorized, but will not fit for anyone with your feeling for style. This sense of style, though in some of your writing you do it injustice—is unquestionable.

Notes

1. Cummings saw Constantin Brancusi's sculpture *Mademoiselle Pogany*, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and Francis Picabia's *Dances at the Spring* (*La Danse à la Source*) when he attended the Boston version of the Armory show in May 1913, the second semester of his sophomore year at Harvard.
2. Cummings refers to the aaba rhyme scheme of the quatrains in the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* as translated by Edward FitzGerald.
3. This comment on translations of Chinese poetry as "hopelessly devoid of rhythm and atmosphere," along with the comment a bit later about the "pseudo 'translations' . . . by our own rhymesters" show that "The Poetry of Silence" was written before Cummings had read Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, which was published in London in April 1915.
4. Besides having seen Brancusi's sculpture *Mademoiselle Pogany* at the Boston version of the Armory show, Cummings would have seen a reproduction of the work in Walter Pach's article "The Point of View of the Moderns," and he may also have consulted a description (208-209) and photo of the work (206) in Arthur Jerome Eddy's *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (1914).
5. Artist and critic Walter Pach helped secure much of the European art for the Armory Show. The quote is from the caption to the photo of *Mademoiselle Pogany* that appears on the first page of Pach's article "The Point of View of the Moderns." The first sentence of the caption reads: "A magnificent grotesque; the model is portrayed by emphasiz-

ing the salient characteristics" (851).

6. Obviously, in formal terms Japanese haiku are nothing like the Western sonnet. Most likely, Cummings is only remarking that the haiku is the fixed form used most often by Japanese poets, just as the sonnet is the fixed form used most often by Western poets. Cummings wrote sonnets his whole life, expanding the form's thematic and formal parameters.
7. Cummings would seem to be referring to F. S. Flint and Ezra Pound's article on "Imagisme," which stated the first rule of imagism as, "Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective" (199). However, this article appeared in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, before Cummings became interested in modern art. And even in his paper on imagism, "The Poetry of a New Era" [Harry Ransom Center, Box 5, folder 6], written in the spring of his M.A. year (1916), Cummings makes no mention of the article on "Imagisme," or of Pound's "A Few Don'ts," which appeared in the same issue of *Poetry*.
8. Noguchi echoes a famous passage in which Bashō says that the artist should "be one with nature, throughout the four seasons of the year. Whatever such a mind sees is a flower, and whatever such a mind dreams of is the moon" (71-72). See also Makoto Ueda, *Matsuo Bashō*, pp. 132-137.
9. Noguchi says that Hokushi's house burned down, not Bashō's.
10. Briggs underlines the words "now simplified,therefore" and comments: "Interesting."
11. According to Noguchi, this poem is by Buson.

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