

Original/Translation: The Aesthetic Context of Kenneth Rexroth's Translations of Du Fu and Li Qingzhao

by Lucas Klein

Stuck in the back of *One Hundred More Poems from the Chinese: Love and the Turning Year*, Kenneth Rexroth presents as his last poem, closing a mini-anthology of three-thousand years of the Chinese poetic tradition, his version of a verse by Wang Hung Kung. Titled “In the Mountain Village”, it reads:

Wild flowers and grass grow on
The ancient ceremonial
Stairs. The sun sets between the
Forested mountains. The swallows
Who nested once in the painted
Eaves of the palaces of
The young prince are flying
This evening between the homes
Of woodcutters and quarrymen.

More ancient by far than the stairs
Are the cyclopean walls
Of immense dry laid stones covered
With moss and ferns. If you approach
Quietly and imitate their
Voices, you can converse all day
With the tree frogs who live there.¹

The poem's first stanza presents a negative nostalgia: what was once is now gone. Ancient ceremonies have been abandoned, leaving the site to be overgrown. The sun is setting, representing a closing of an age. Even the swallows, birds ubiquitous in traditional Chinese poetry, are gone, and the princes have turned into woodcutters and quarrymen.

Within the second stanza, the poem finds a kind of solace within the decay. Something is still alive amidst the ancient stairs and more ancient “cyclopean walls”. The tree frogs, with their mysterious and subtle chirp, can entertain those who know how to enter their world and mimic their voices. Not all is lost: the tree frogs' quiet singing still resounds. And though Rexroth's note offers no explanation behind the identity of Wang Hung Kung, calling him only “a contemporary poet”²—the only contemporary poet presented in the volume—this poem's nostalgia and position at the end of the book suggest a relevance to the entire tradition of classical Chinese poetry. The poem seems to put

¹ Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred More Poems from the Chinese: Love and the Turning Year* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 119

² *ibid.*, 132

itself in dialogue, as with the tree frogs, with the ancient Chinese poets, even as the ruins of their monuments have been covered by weeds and wildflower.

This interpretation makes all the more sense when the real identity of Wang Hung Kung comes out: Wang Hung Kung was Kenneth Rexroth. The name—seemingly put together as a translation of Rex, meaning king, 王 *wang*, and Roth, from German *rot*, red, 紅 *hong*, with the classical Chinese “sir” 公 *gong*³ added at the end—may be Chinese, but the poem is pure Rexroth. Realizing this, the closing lines “If you approach / Quietly and imitate their / Voices, you can converse all day / With the tree frogs who live there” take on a more immediate meaning. The tree frogs are indeed ancient Chinese poets, and despite the decay of their world, Rexroth is able, through quiet study and imitation—not to mention translation—to communicate with this classical tradition. My paper will present an examination of Rexroth’s imitation of the two poets Du Fu and Li Qingzhao, working its way towards an understanding of how Rexroth’s translations of these poets create a context through which readers can, in turn, better communicate with the whole of Rexroth’s poetry.

Perhaps Kenneth Rexroth’s most often quoted, while most unexamined, sentence is, “Tu Fu has been without question the major influence on my own poetry”⁴. Despite this sentence’s prevalence in Rexroth studies, where it usually proves Rexroth to be a multiculturalist and wide reader, the extent to which Rexroth’s poetry was shaped by his reading of Du Fu is generally underexamined, perhaps because it remains so nebulous a topic. Nevertheless, significant scholarship has been done on Rexroth’s translations, particularly of Du Fu. Steve Bradbury, contributing to a special Rexroth section on John Tranter’s online *Jacket Magazine*, reads his translations of Du Fu in terms of the context of Rexroth’s life during the 1940s; Ling Chung, who co-authored Rexroth’s *Women Poets of China* and *Li Ch’ing-chao: Complete Poems*, has also examined the poet’s translations, interrogating his versions for their fidelities and liberties.

Each of these approaches has great merit, and both scholars come up with penetrating readings. Bradbury, for instance, demonstrates a trajectory from free translation to stricter literalism, following Rexroth’s use of Du Fu to express his personal anxieties about World War II and leftist society in America. Speaking of contexts and of Rexroth’s translation of Du Fu’s “Snow Storm”, Bradbury presents two impulses:

“Snow Storm” becomes a text that invites us to pretend as if this poem were actually Tu Fu’s. If we accept this invitation, Rexroth disappears and we enter the reading moment, where we find an aging and solitary Chinese poet in some

³ I use *pinyin* for Romanization of Chinese where Rexroth used Wade-Giles. Transitions in this paper between the two systems should be evident. For reference, in addition to some vowels being presented differently, the Wade-Giles system distinguishes voiced and unvoiced consonants with an apostrophe, so that Wade-Giles *kung* corresponds to *gong* in *pinyin*; Rexroth’s Tu Fu is thus Du Fu. Another split between the two systems is the inscription of some consonants, where *hs* becomes *x*, *ts’* becomes *c*, and *ch’* becomes *q*. Thus, Rexroth’s Li Ch’ing-chao is my Li Qingzhao.

⁴ Kenneth Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 319

stormy winter of his discontent, voicing his despair over his impoverishment and “the uselessness of letters.” Even without knowing the origin of this vocational crisis we are moved by both the intensity of Tu Fu’s feelings and his deft feeling for form.⁵

Finding this historically—not to mention poetically—naïve, Bradbury compares Rexroth’s version against his source, a character-for-character crib by Florence Ayscough, after which he announces a “significant departure in Rexroth’s version: suppression of the context in which Tu Fu was writing”⁶. For Bradbury, Rexroth’s disappearance in the “reading moment” reverses, and the poem, in the end, belongs less to Du Fu than to Rexroth.

Ling Chung’s approach does not trace the contexts of Rexroth’s translations, but rather traces Rexroth’s relationship to accuracy:

Literal exactness has never been Rexroth’s goal. He states his ambition thus: his translation should be “true to the spirit of the originals, and valid English poems.” Furthermore, many source texts which he consulted were not the original Chinese, but translations of Tu Fu into English, French, or German. The power and the beauty of his translations often lie in the passages which he rendered most freely and which bear little resemblance to the Chinese texts.⁷

Rexroth himself was honest about his dismissal of fidelity in translation if it interfered with creating a better poem. In a speech given at the University of Texas, entitled “The Poet as Translator”, Rexroth explains his notion that the poet’s association with the original material—his ability to “approach quietly and imitate their voices”—trumps all else. Holding all the great translations of history together, he says, is the fact that “the translator’s act of identification was so complete that he spoke with the veridical force of his own utterance, conscious of communicating directly to his own audience”⁸. This identification, this sympathy, is so important to Rexroth that he returns to it in his conclusion, urging others to translate, as well:

Translation... can provide us with poetic exercise on the highest level. It is the best way to keep your tools sharp until the great job, the great moment, comes along. More important, it is an exercise of sympathy on the highest level. The writer who can project himself into the exultation of another learns more than the craft of words. He learns the stuff of poetry.⁹

Rexroth’s success in his exercises in sympathy was so complete that Eliot Weinberger, in the introduction to the *New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry*, says,

⁵ Steve Bradbury, “Reading Rexroth Rewriting Tu Fu in ‘The Permanent War’”, *Jacket*, Issue 24, November 2003, <<http://jacketmagazine.com/24/rex-brad.html>>

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ “This Ancient Man is I”, 308

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, 190

“More than any other translator of Chinese, it is almost impossible to separate Rexroth’s translations from his own poetry; they tend to speak as one”¹⁰. With this in mind, we can look at Rexroth’s translations as similar to his own poems, though I still prefer to distinguish between the two¹¹. More specifically, we can investigate how his translations and original poems interact with each other: if his translations are acts of sympathy with his own poetry, then they should create a context wherein Rexroth’s originals can be understood better. Rexroth’s volumes of translations, then, are “personal anthologies” (the term comes from Jorge Luis Borges), reflecting a light in which to read his original poems with more clarity.

It is time, then, to take a closer look at the second half of Rexroth’s oft-quoted, oft-misunderstood sentence, beginning “Tu Fu has been without question the major influence on my own poetry”, which is: “and I consider him the greatest nonepic, nondramatic poet who ever lived”¹². Rather than invoking a close reading of Rexroth’s as influenced by Du Fu, his positioning of himself as influenced by the Tang Dynasty poet indicates an authorial wish for his readership. In short, Rexroth wants to be considered “the greatest nonepic, nondramatic poet” himself.

The main thrust of Rexroth’s poetry is unquestionably lyric. Even his long poems meditate on themes as lyric poems do. And yet, this meditation is tempered with a detail that differentiates it from more standard lyrics. Rexroth noted this in Du Fu, as well. In *Classics Revisited*, Rexroth calls Du Fu’s

a poetry of reverie, comparable to Leopardi’s “L’Infinito,” which might well be a translation from the Chinese, or the better sonnets of Wordsworth. This kind of elegiac reverie has become the principal form of modern poetry, as poetry has ceased to be a public art and has become, as Whitehead said of religion, “What man does with his aloneness.”¹³

Thus, through hints of position, the unmentioned modern poet Rexroth is linked to the explicit poetry of reverie he finds in Du Fu.

Here is Rexroth’s “I Pass the night at General Headquarters”, poem XXVI in *One Hundred Poems*:

A clear night in harvest time.
In the courtyard at headquarters
The wu-tung trees grow cold.

¹⁰ Eliot Weinberger, “Introduction”, (New York: New Directions, 2003), xxiv

¹¹ Rexroth, too, for the most part, kept a clear distinction. Exceptions, such as *The Love Poems of Marichiko*, and the Wang Hung Kung poem in *Love and the Turning Year*, do not mitigate the separate publication of books of translations from those of his original poems. Sam Hamill and Bradford Morrow, editors of *The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth*, have also kept a clear distinction, including none of his translations in their volume.

¹² *Autobiographical Novel*, 319

¹³ Kenneth Rexroth, “Tu Fu: Poems”, *Classics Revisited* (New York: New Directions, 1986), 91

In the city by the river
 I wake alone by a guttering
 Candle. All night long bugle
 Calls disturb my thoughts. The splendor
 Of the moonlight floods the sky.
 Who bothers to look at it?
 Whirlwinds of dust, I cannot write.
 The frontier pass is unguarded.
 It is dangerous to travel.
 Ten years of wandering, sick at heart.
 I perch here like a bird on a
 Twig, thankful for a moment's peace.¹⁴

An affecting poem, it creates a storm between the warm front of the natural world and the cold front of the mind's interior. Never settled, the natural world switches from the "clear night in harvest time" to the cold *wutong* [paulownia] trees, from the "splendor / of the moonlight" to the "Whirlwinds of dust". The agitation in nature exacerbates the speaker's anxiety, though another tension exists in the lack of clear cause-and-effect relationships. "I wake alone by a guttering / Candle", he says, not revealing if the candle's flicker woke him. And though he complains, "Whirlwinds of dust, I cannot write", the reader cannot be sure if the dust storm keeps him from writing, or if they are merely coincident. In the end, the poem offers an uneasy respite: "a moment's peace" made unstable by the verb *perch* and the breakable noun *twig*.

"I Pass the night at General Headquarters" follows nearly every move that Du Fu's original makes. Nonetheless, a closer look at the original will reveal much about Rexroth's task as a translator. I quote Du Fu's original, with my word-by-word meaning below:

		宿		府		
		reside		tent		
清	秋	幕	府	井	梧	寒
clear	autumn	army tents		well	paulownia	cold
獨	宿	江	城	蠟	炬	殘
alone	reside	river	city	candle		dwindle
永	夜	角	聲	悲	自	語
whole	night	horn	sound	tragic	self	language
中	天	月	色	好	誰	看
mid-	sky	moon	color	good	who	see
風	塵	荏	苒	音	書	絕
wind	dust		delay	voice	letter	end
關	塞	蕭	條	行	路	難
border	posts	desolate		to move	road	difficult

¹⁴ Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 25

已	忍	伶	俚	十	年	事
already	endure		wander	ten	year	stuff
強	移	棲	息	一	枝	安
force	mobile	perch		one	branch	to settle

The basic movement of Du Fu's original poem is replicated in Rexroth's translation, but his deviations are obvious and significant. Du Fu's line begins with a simple 清秋 "clear autumn", which becomes "A clear night in harvest time" in Rexroth's version. The speaker of Rexroth's poem wakes besides a "guttering candle", which is a poetic overstatement compared to Du Fu's more austere 蠟炬殘 "the candles have gotten shorter", with no mention of waking. And rather than "disturbing my thoughts", the bugle calls of Du Fu's poem talk to themselves—or, conversely, the persona talks to himself amidst bugle calls—emphasizing the inner/outer tension I mentioned above. Rexroth gets furthest from Du Fu's original in the next couplet, where what in American verse becomes a grandiose "The splendor / Of the moonlight floods the sky. / Who bothers to look at it?" out of a simple—even weak—中天月色好誰看 "In the middle of the sky the moon is nice, but who's looking?" Du Fu's plain adjective 好 "nice" or "fair" is not accidental; instead, it proves the point of its language, namely, that no one is bothering to look up at the moon long enough to be moved to describe it well. If Du Fu had wanted to write about "the splendor of the moonlight flooding the sky", he could have. Instead, he picked one of the most powerless words in Chinese, as if to demonstrate that the moon, too, is powerless.

The next line, which Rexroth makes "Whirlwinds of dust, I cannot write", also indulges in misinterpretation. The winds and dust of Du Fu's poem—here associated with the battle—are responsible for cutting off the speaker's contact with the rest of the world. In Rexroth's version, however, not only is the cause-and-effect relationship downplayed, but the act of writing is different, too. Du Fu talks of 音書 "news and mail"; Rexroth talks of being unable to write, implying poetry more than a letter home. His translation extends beyond the reach of Du Fu's Chinese, taking words that indicate nouns and making words that indicate concepts. In Du Fu's next two lines Rexroth turns 難 "difficult" into "dangerous", then invents "sick at heart" out of 忍 "endure", likely because of an interpretation of the character being composed of a blade 刃 on top of a heart 心.

And yet Rexroth's most interesting piece of poetic creation comes in his last two lines, in which Du Fu's 強移棲息一枝安 "Forced to move, I perch, settling on one branch" inspires him to "I perch here like a bird on a / Twig, thankful for a moment's peace." As is evident, "like a bird" and "thankful" are Rexroth's efforts alone, owing little to Du Fu. The phrases clarify the image, where "perch" alone might not be strong enough to give the English reader the jittery quality of the poem's conclusion, and where "thankful" sounds an ironic note, pointing to the desperation of the situation. But the most telling of Rexroth's decisions is to translate the last word 安 as "peace". To be sure, 安 does mean peace. But depending on context, it can also mean "where" or, most aptly in this poem, "to settle", or even "to dwell in". Here Rexroth doesn't change the meaning so

much as he changes the emphasis. The main point of Du Fu's line is intact, but the subtleties have changed with the weight of Rexroth's "peace".

The result is a poem written by a poet whose persona is shaped by Rexroth's. Rather than Du Fu whole, we get Du Fu by Rexroth. The result is, for all Rexroth's own multitudes, somewhat expurgated. For instance, when Stephen Owen, America's pre-eminent scholar of Tang poetry, describes Du Fu, he is enthusiastic:

Tu Fu was the master stylist of regulated verse, the poet of social protest, the confessional poet, the playful and casual wit, the panegyricist of the imperial order, the poet of everyday life, the poet of the visionary imagination. He was the poet who used colloquial and informal expressions with greater freedom than any of his contemporaries; he was the poet who experimented most boldly with densely artificial poetic diction; he was the most learned poet in recondite allusion and a sense of the historicity of language.¹⁵

Compare this with Rexroth's Du Fu:

His poetry is saturated with the exile's nostalgia and the abiding sense of the pathos of glory and power. In addition, he shares with Baudelaire and Sappho, his only competitors in the West, an exceptionally exacerbated sensibility, acute past belief. You feel that Tu Fu brings to each poetic situation, each experienced complex of sensations and values, a completely open nervous system. Out of this comes the choice of imagery—so poignant, so startling, and yet seemingly so ordinary. Later generations of Chinese poets would turn these piercing, uncanny commonplaces into formulas, but in Tu Fu they are entirely fresh, newborn equations of the conscience, and they survive all but the most vulgar translations.¹⁶

Rexroth's translations are anything but vulgar, but they do present Du Fu the way he later writes Du Fu to be: the focus is less on Owen's breadth of styles but rather on a unity of sensibility, as individual style is what often gets lost in translation—particularly Rexroth's translations—and sensibility can lead Rexroth to say "He has made me a better man, a more sensitive perceiving organism, as well as, I hope, a better poet"¹⁷.

Rexroth's use of Du Fu for his own ends, however, is not incongruous with the way Du Fu was used by later Chinese poets, as Stephen Owen helps us understand:

Tu Fu assimilated all that preceded him and, in doing so, changed his sources irrevocably. The variety of Tu Fu's work became a quarry from which later poets drew isolated aspects and developed them in contradictory directions. Indeed,

¹⁵ Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry—The High T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 183 – 184

¹⁶ *Classics Revisited*, 91

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 94

one of the commonplaces of Tu Fu criticism was to list which famous later poet developed his own style out of which aspect of Tu Fu's work. Each age found in Tu Fu's poetry what they were seeking: an unrivalled mastery of stylistic invention, an authentic personal "history" of a period, the free exercise of the creative imagination, the voice of the moral man exposing social injustice.¹⁸

In the end, Rexroth may in fact be interacting with the tradition of classical Chinese poetry just as much as his persona speaks to the tree frogs in Wang Hung Kung's "In the Mountain Village". The question is how this applies in Rexroth's own poetry. Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉 sees in Rexroth's poetry that "objects and events in nature (echoing Chinese motifs) have a fairly spontaneous emergence without the poet's disruptive commentary"; he further states that Rexroth's poetry is "self-sufficient landscape poetry, in which objects exist in a kind of 'presentational immediacy' without going through, in Rexroth's words, 'permanent archetypes intellectually and discursively'"¹⁹. Robert Kern has noticed how Rexroth's translations present a "speaker [who] is reading the natural landscape in human terms... [where] the scenic or natural details double as metaphors or as images invested with human meaning"²⁰. With this, plus the emphasis Rexroth places on Du Fu's open sensibilities over craft, we can read Rexroth's own poetry—specifically influenced by Du Fu and not—in light of its relationship to Rexroth's own Du Fu.

This relationship slides his poems into one harmony across decades and phases of Rexroth's own life. In "Mocking Birds", Rexroth displays his plain-language combination of poignant, startling, and seemingly ordinary imagery as it envelops his open-nervous system themes of memory, love, and the rub between nature and psychological realities. He also lands on tree frogs, fourteen years before publishing Wang Hung Kung's poem is *Love and the Turning Year*.

In mid-March in the heart of
The night, in the center of
The sterile city, in the
Midst of miles of asphalt and
Stone, alone and frustrated,
Wakeful on my narrow bed,
My brain spinning with worry,
There came to me, slipping through
The interstices of the
Blowing darkness, the living,
Almost imperceptible,
Faint, persistent, recurrent

¹⁸ *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry*, 183

¹⁹ Wai-lim Yip, *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 129

²⁰ Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 247

Song of a single tree toad—
A voice sweeter than most birds.
Seven years ago we lay
Naked and moist, making love
Under the Easter full moon,
The thick fragrant light shaking
With the songs of mocking birds.²¹

While most criticism linking Rexroth to Chinese poetry focuses on Du Fu, the only poet whose complete extant oeuvre Rexroth translated—as well as the only poet Rexroth translated multiple times throughout his life—was the Song Dynasty poetess Li Qingzhao. While only a fraction of her total output survives today, she is undisputed as the most prominent female poet before modern times, embodying a fully-formed poetic style and sensibility at once uniquely female without needing to be overtly feminine or feminist.

Rexroth's translation of Li Qingzhao has warranted some attention, particularly in light of Rexroth's immersion in female poetry late in his life. His biographer, Linda Hamalian, whose work often draws attention to Rexroth's maltreatment of women, wonders why his psychology would compel him to compile volumes such as *The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China*, *The Burning Heart: Women Poets of Japan*, and *Li Ch'ing-chao: Complete Poems*:

Why did Rexroth turn to translating women poets exclusively? ... It could be argued that Rexroth wanted to ride the wave of the new feminist consciousness which had surfaced in the sixties; but it is more likely that he was trying to understand why his three marriages had been such disasters, and why his relationship with his daughters was growing distant. Perhaps if he could enter the psyche of women poets, he would learn more about women than he had while living with them.²²

Her question was foretold by Eliot Weinberger, who suggested that after the poet's death the academy would have to re-write literary history to make room for Rexroth:

And it will have to take into account one of the more startling transformations in American letters: that Rexroth, the great celebrant of heterosexual love (and for some, a "sexist pig") devoted the last years of his life to becoming a woman poet.²³

²¹ *Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth*, 527

²² Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 340

²³ Eliot Weinberger, "At the Death of Kenneth Rexroth", in *Works on Paper* (New York: New Directions, 1986), 117

Calling his work on Li Qingzhao “his finest translation”²⁴—probably because it is as poetic as his earlier translations while not, for once, playing fast and loose with accuracy—Weinberger links his Li Qingzhao versions with Rexroth’s persona in *The Love Poems of Marichiko*. While Hamalian is skeptical, indicating that Rexroth needs to explore the female point of view, Weinberger is laudatory, praising his approach to Buddhist enlightenment:

The Marichiko poems, together with the Li Qingzhao translations, are masterworks of remembered passion... Man as woman: a renunciation of identity, a transcendence of self. As Pound recanted the *Cantos* and fell into silence; as Zukofsky ended “A” by giving up the authorship of the poem; Rexroth became the *other*.²⁵

Yet by focusing on the end of Rexroth’s life, and on the personal motives—born base and reaching heaven—of his translations of poetry by women, both critics overlook the fact that Rexroth had been translating Li Qingzhao all along. With seven poems, she is one of two women collected in *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*, one of three women in *Love and the Turning Year* with six poems, and one of fifty-three women in *Women Poets of China*, where she is represented by seven poems, plus two more attributed to her. Compared to Du Fu, whom Rexroth all but ignored after the original *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* (*Love and the Turning Year* gives one more poem by Du Fu)—and whose poems he never re-translated later on—Li Qingzhao seems to be the real influence on Rexroth’s life as a poet.

To examine the interplay between Li Qingzhao’s poetry and Rexroth’s, I will examine his translations of her verse in the context of each other, rather than in comparison to the original. Working with Ling Chung for the complete volume, his translations—at least in the final versions—can be expected to be closer to the original Chinese, rather than representative of the partial portrayals found in his Du Fu. Comparing earlier translations with late, however, paying attention to the notes he offers for her translations, will elucidate the development of Rexroth’s poetic, as well as how he uses words to create a specific reading of his poetry.

One of Li Qingzhao’s most famous lyrics is included as number LXXXIX in *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*, under the title “To the Tune, ‘Plum Blossoms Fall and Scatter’”:

The perfume of the red water lilies
Dies away. The Autumn air
Penetrates the pearl jade curtain.
Torches gleam on the orchid boats.
Who has sent me a message
Of love from the clouds? It is

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*, 118

The time when the wild swans
Return. The moonlight floods the women's
Quarters. Flowers, after their
Nature, whirl away in the wind.
Spilt water, after its nature,
Flows together at the lowest point.
Those who are one being
Can never stop thinking of each other.
But, ah, my dear, we are apart,
And I have become used to sorrow.
This love—nothing can ever
Make it fade or disappear.
For a moment it was on my eyebrows,
Now it is heavy in my heart.²⁶

A moving poem with a very human voice—indicative of the more open and personal style of Song Dynasty song lyrics, a different form than the poems widely written during the Tang—this poem owes its warmth to the close association with nature. The ineluctable ephemera of nature pervades the speaker's existence, even as her sorrow proves permanent, not ephemeral at all.

Rexroth revisited this poem again with a significantly revised—and considerably more accurate—translation in *One Hundred More Poems from the Chinese: Love and the Turning Year*, with the title “To the Tune ‘Cutting a Flowering Plum Branch’”:

Red lotus incense fades on
The jewelled curtain. Autumn
Comes again. Gently I open
My silk dress and float alone
On the orchid boat. Who can
Take a letter beyond the clouds?
Only the wild geese come back
And write their ideograms
On the sky under the full
Moon that floods the West Chamber.
Flowers, after their kind, flutter
And scatter. Water after
Its nature, when spilt, at last
Gathers again in one place.
Creatures of the same species
Long for each other. But we
Are far apart and I have
Grown learned in sorrow.
Nothing can make it dissolve

²⁶ Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 97

And go away. One moment,
It is on my eyebrows.
The next, it weighs on my heart.²⁷

紅藕香殘玉簟秋。輕解羅裳，獨上蘭舟。
雲中誰寄錦書來，雁字回時，月滿西樓。
花自飄零水自流。一種相思，兩處閒愁。
此情無計可消除，纔下眉頭，卻上心頭。

This version—later reprinted as is in the collected *Li Ch'ing-chao* with the only change the spelling of “jeweled”—presents a different “Plum Blossoms Fall and Scatter”. While the first version makes its realm the borderlines between interior and exterior realities, this version moves deeper inside with a bolder treatment of the speaker’s sexuality. She opens her dress, the moonlight that had flooded the women’s quarters now seems to be entering her own room, and while the earlier draft presented love in the mind (“Those who are one being / Can never stop thinking of each other”), the revision calls up an animal love that comes from somewhere lower: “Creatures of the same species / Long for each other”. And while in the first publication the speaker reacts to the lights on the orchid boat, in the second she is alone, on the orchid boat.

Rexroth’s note about the phrase “orchid boat”—“her sex, or specifically her vulva”²⁸—foregrounds the element of sexuality in his writing. Another translation re-worked at various times in his life reveals elements of another strong strain in Rexroth’s writing. Here, the first poem in *Women Poets of China*:

TO THE TUNE OF “THE HONOR OF A FISHERMAN”
The heavens join with the clouds.
The great waves merge with the fog.
The Milky Way appears
Turning overheard.
A thousand sails dance.
I am rapt away to the place of the Supreme,
And hear the words of Heaven,
Asking me where I am going.
I answer, “It is a long road, alas,
Far beyond the sunset.”
I try to put it into verse
But my words amaze me.
The huge roc bird is flying
On a ninety thousand mile wind.
O wind, do not stop
Until my little boat has been blown

²⁷ *Love and the Turning Year*, 95

²⁸ *Love and the Turning Year*, 125

To the Immortal Islands
In the Eastern Sea.²⁹

天接雲濤連曉霧，星河欲轉千帆舞；
彷彿夢魂歸帝所，聞天語，殷勤問我歸何處。
我報路長嗟日暮，學詩漫有驚人句；
九萬裡風鵬正舉，風休住，蓬舟吹取三山去。

Given the context of the “orchid boat”, the lines “Until my little boat has been blown / To the Immortal Islands” could easily be read as sexual, suggesting that orgasm could—as is revealed in esoteric Daoism—be linked to eternal life. Such striking sexuality towards the end of the poem is introduced more subtly in the opening lines as verbs “join” and “merge” describe the actions of natural phenomena heavens, clouds, great waves, and fog. And yet something else is going on, too: rapture, “the Supreme”, a long road “Far beyond the sunset”, and a roc “flying / On a ninety thousand mile wind” create for the poem an ethos of the spiritual in Li Qingzhao’s poem. Rexroth’s note to this poem proves particularly helpful. He says:

“The huge roc bird,” a favorite Taoist legendary creature, can be equated with what we now know to be the autonomic nervous system; the little boat with the Serpent Power, hidden in the perineal plexus, and the Immortal Islands in the East with the thousand-petaled lotus of Indian Yoga. (The three mountains in the Eastern Sea are the paradisaal home of the Taoist Immortals.) During the brief period of stability of the Kuomintang regime in Nanking, poems like this and the *Songs of the South* interpreted in terms of erotic mysticism were very fashionable in the more sophisticated intellectual circles, especially in Shanghai... This poem raises the question: How many of Li Ching-chao’s [sic] “love poems” are, like those of Hafiz or Dante, actually mystical?³⁰

Thus, the translator’s note helps the reader move beyond the spirituality of the poem and into a reading focusing on the spiritual, the mystical. In addition, the note begins to read the whole body of Li Qingzhao’s work, as well, asking “How many of Li Ch’ing-chao’s ‘love poems’ are, like those of Hafiz or Dante, actually mystical?”

In *Li Ch’ing-chao: Complete Poems*, the translators have rearranged the primacy. Where “To the Tune of ‘The Honor of a Fisherman’” was a love poem first, mystical poem second, in its second printing the revised translation gives us:

TO THE TUNE OF “THE HONOR OF A FISHERMAN”
The heavens join with the clouds.
The billowing clouds merge in fog.
As the dawn approaches in the River of Heaven,

²⁹ Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung, *Women Poets of China* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 41

³⁰ *ibid.*, 128 – 129

A thousand sails are dancing.
I am rapt away to the place of the Supreme,
And hear the words of Heaven,
Asking me where I am going.
I answer, "It is a long road, alas,
Finally I've come to where the sun sets."
I try to put into verse my experience
But my words only amaze me.
The huge roc bird is flying
On a ninety-thousand-mile wind.
O wind, do not stop
Until my little boat has been blown
To the Immortal Islands
In the Eastern Sea.³¹

Only minor details have changed, but their significance is not hindered by being slight. To say "The great waves merge with the fog" hints at sexuality, but saying "The billowing clouds merge in fog" gives the beginning of the poem a wholly aerial quality, giving the reader a vision of mist that is not far away from the mystical. And when "Milky Way" is changed to the word-for-word literalism of "River of Heaven", its later echo in "the words of Heaven" calls greater attention to the ethereal, other-worldly subject of the poem. By the time the reader gets to "my little boat", it can only barely be read sexually, its meaning replaced with the boat as a metaphor for life in search of the spiritual.

The note, however, reads the same, repeating, "How many of Ching-chao's [sic] 'love poems' are, like those of Hafiz or Dante, actually mystical?" While the translation presented in this volume is difficult to force into the framework of a love poem, the result in both translations and notes is a mingling of the sexual with the mystical. And as with Rexroth's presentation of Du Fu, the poetry of Li Qingzhao as written by Rexroth pertains to Rexroth's original work, as well. One could easily ask, "How many of Rexroth's 'love poems' are, like those of Li Qingzhao, actually mystical?"

The answer is, many of them. Writing about the Song Dynasty, from which Li Qingzhao herself sprang, Rexroth describes painting:

In fact, Sung painting can be described most succinctly by saying that it sought two goals. The portrait painter, the painter of flowers, birds, animals, detailed or, so to speak, close-up studies of landscape, the genre painter of human activities, all strove to concentrate with such intensity on the realization of the subject, the Other, off there opposite their eyes, that the integument was burst asunder and the Buddha nature shown forth.³²

³¹ Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung, *Li Ch'ing-chao: Complete Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1979), 73

³² Kenneth Rexroth, "Sung Culture", in *The World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, ed. Bradford Morrow (New York: New Directions, 1987), 109

The same is not only true of Song poetry, of Li Qingzhao's poetry, but of Rexroth's poetry, as well. Nearly all poetry, charging language with meaning, imbues the physical with a specific spiritual quality, but in Rexroth the two are brought together with a force unknown in most other poets. A typical move in Rexroth is to compare the body to the mind, as in "For the Chinese Actress, Gardenia Chang", in which we see "All your body's movement like / Thought in some more noble brain"³³. In Rexroth's shorter poetry, this gesture may reach its apogee in a poem that has no specific reference to Chinese literature at all: "When We with Sappho"³⁴.

Too long to describe in detail here, the poem follows a lyric narrative of two lovers on an open field, reading Sappho and, discovering her erotic power, making love as they commune with nature while the rest of the world drops away. Nearly each instant of carnality is at once described with a touch of the spiritual. Consider, "Summer in our hair, and the smell / Of summer in our twined bodies", or "Stop reading. Lean back. Give me your mouth. / Your grace is as beautiful as the folding / Of your hands in sleep". Lines such as "Her memory has passed to our lips now. / Our kisses fall through summer's chaos / In our own breasts and thighs" erase the division between the sexual and the natural: all love is divine love; Eros has merged with Agape. In "When We with Sappho" even a nature charged with cosmic significance is described in terms of erotica: "The air presses against the earth / Thunder breaks over the mountains". Language, too, grows sexual, as Rexroth puns, "Read again those isolate, poignant words / Saved by ancient grammarians / To illustrate the conjugations / And declensions of the more ancient dead". The poem ends, after a delicate running through of nearly all of Rexroth's themes, with the body transcended into the seasons:

Your body moves in my arms
On the verge of sleep;
And it is as though I held
In my arms the bird filled
Evening sky of summer.

"When We with Sappho", published in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* in 1944, predates all of Kenneth Rexroth's translations of either Du Fu or Li Qingzhao. While perhaps some reverberations from his meeting with translator Witter Bynner, who pushed Rexroth toward Du Fu when he was nineteen, ring through even in his earlier poetry, the question of influence and its anxieties does not interest me here. Indeed, for a conference on the "Age of Spontaneity", I am focused on a conspicuously non-spontaneous phenomenon: like Steve Bradbury, I am interested in contexts. But while Bradbury's context is psycho-historical, examining what in Rexroth's life would have compelled him towards the idiosyncratic in his Du Fu translations—my context is aesthetic.

³³ *The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth*, 298

³⁴ *ibid*, 205 – 208

Every life in poetry is in some ways a development of a voice, an aesthetic identity that marks a poem as written by a certain poet. Even when poets actively rebel against the limits of a single unity, they are nonetheless working within the confines this voice entails. For Rexroth, whose stylistic shifts are soft and whose aesthetic is remarkably steady throughout his poetic career, each poem can illuminate all other poems in a cross-referencing arc of light, as each poem benefits from the creation of the context to which it contributes. The reader who approaches this oeuvre is then granted a full view, and my task has been to show how, via prose and translation and notes, Du Fu and Li Qingzhao constitute a significant portion of Rexroth's complete aesthetic context.

The key words are sensibility, sexuality, and spirituality. In focusing on these elements in the poetry of Du Fu and Li Qingzhao, Rexroth in turn shifts the focus onto these elements within his own poetry. For Rexroth, and for the development of his poetics, the focal point of his contextual arc is his sensibility—his nervous system as completely open as Du Fu's—towards the combination of the sexual and the spiritual, creating a body of work whose love poems are, like those of Li Qingzhao, actually mystical.