Chapter 43. Jewel Stairs

In 1916 Ezra Pound published Cathay, thereby becoming “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our generation” (T.S. Eliot). Many of his translations originate with Li Bo, for example:

The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

Pound’s original note:

Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.

玉階怨

玉階生白露
夜久侵羅襪
卻下水晶帘
玲瓏望秋月

Someone else might say:

Yes, it’s that damn fall moon.
No, he didn’t come.
So how come my good silk stockings are all wet?\textsuperscript{364}

Or if you want the sound of the Tang, here is how Li Bo might have said it, in what we now call Middle Chinese.\textsuperscript{365} With a translation inspired by such sounds.

\begin{verbatim}
ngjowk keaj jwon
ngjouk keaj sraeng baek lu
yae kjuw tshim la mjot
khjak hae sywij tsjeng ljem
leng luwng mjang tshjuw ngjwot
\end{verbatim}

Jade steps grief

Jade steps and white dew,
Long nights of damp shoes,
Let’s let down the shades,
Ling-long, where’s the moon?\textsuperscript{366}

A piano reduction of an orchestral piece is a transposition from one musical idiom to another. Essential melody, harmony and rhythm are preserved, but coloration and texture are drastically diminished, and you lose the way the English horn is fighting with the ’cellos.\textsuperscript{367} We know how Li Bo’s words were pronounced, and in what rough rhythm, but we haven’t much been able to reproduce this in any good English. Furthermore, his orchestra has far more sonorities than our own well-tempered keyboard can produce, and instruments that, I fear, we’ve never even heard. Such as Zhuangzi’s bamboo pipes (\textit{lai} 簫), which (like some woodwind families) come in three sizes:

“You hear the piping of men, but you haven’t heard the piping of earth. Or if you’ve heard the piping of earth, you haven’t heard the piping of Heaven!”
“The Great Clod belches out breath and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly. Can't you hear them, long drawn out? In the mountain forests that lash and sway, there are huge trees a hundred spans around with hollows and openings like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like rifts, like ruts. They roar like waves, whistle like arrows, screech, gasp, cry, wail, moan, and howl, those in the lead calling out yeee!, those behind calling out yuuu!” […]

“May I ask about the piping of Heaven?”

“Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself — all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding?”

Sunlight, becalmed by reflection, refined by indirection, becomes moonlight, coolness penetrating our deepest recesses. Autumn brings Yin’s exquisite maturing — the beads of the crystal curtain, the drops of dew on the white stairs, the tears of regret that ripple like arpeggios across black and white keys in a Chopin Nocturne, also suffused with seductive lunar melancholy.