Let me tell you why I don't like this translator.

First, look at this brief poem by Wang Wei, translated by someone else, a scholar whose only goal is to put you in a position to judge what Wang Wei said. This translator has no desire to compensate for the loss of rhyme, rhythm, concision, etc. He knows only too well that his translation is not what Wang Wei would have written if he were a contemporary American poet.

7.23
**Zhongnan Mountain**

Taiyi nears the capital of Heaven,
a stretch of mountains reaches to the edge of the sea.

White clouds come together when you turn to gaze at them;
blue mists disappear when you enter them and look.

Delineating the land, the central peak marks the change;
shadow and light are different in the multitude of ravines.

If you want to put up with someone for the night,
inquire of that woodcutter across the stream.

I've installed white spaces between the couplets; I don't know why it isn't done that way in my copy text (*The Poetry and Prose of Wang Wei*, trans. Paul Rouzer, De Gruyter, 2020). Such spaces seems patently warranted. Anyhow, you might want to read those eight lines over again before proceeding.

Now look at the poem, translated word-for-word. (I copied this out of a book. I *do* know a tiny bit of Chinese, but nowhere near enough to produce something like this.)

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tai | yi | • | approach | heaven | capital |
| linked | mountains | • | reach | sea | corner |
| white | clouds | • | look back | behold | merge |
| green | haze | • | enter | see | nothing |
| divided | region | • | middle | peak | change |
| shadowed | sun-soaked | • | myriad | gorges | differ |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| wish | find lodging | • | man | place | overnight |
| across | water | • | ask | wood | cutter |

Those "•" things mark the expected caesurae. It's regular as a clock.

Now, I need you take a second and savor the parallelisms in the middle two couplets. Especially,—

> White clouds, as I turn and gaze, merge.
> Azure mists, as I enter and look, disappear.
>
> (trans., Pauline Yu, 1980)

The first couplet is pretty parallel too, but that's extra. The rules Wang Wei was following only require the middle two couplets to behave like that.

OK! Now we come to a crucial moment. This is where we ask ourselves: Do we *like* this strange poetry? Do the parallelisms and ultra-collapsed syntax (function words banished, grammatical subjects obscured)—*do* it for us?

If it does do it for ya, if you don't have a problem with end-stopped lines and received forms, then you might be apt to lose patience with translators who are just dying to make Wang Wei write like an American magazine poet of today (or better say a magazine poet of about thirty years ago).

Let me show you exactly what I mean. Here is David Hinton's translation of the above poem:

> **Whole South Mountains**
>
> Star mountains for a deep-sky capital, these
> Great origin peaks stretch to far seas.
>
> Returned to white cloud, my gaze is whole:
> in azure haze, sight empties nonbeing utterly.
>
> Our star-lands orbit around this central peak,
> valleys all shifting shadow and light. Here,
>
> if I wanted human company for the night,
> I'd cross the water, visit a woodcutter, no more.

Is that the worst translation ever? No. Does it make eight lucid Chinese lines into spacey, awkward mush? Yes.

Comparing Hinton's lines with the word-for-word seems specially damning to me. You see what he's doing. He's taking every opportunity to make Wang Wei into a poet he can respect: a poet who relentlessly traffics in "emptying nonbeing utterly." Also, Hinton wants "interesting" line breaks. Wang Wei's, to him, are monotonous, predictable…

I really don't like that "no more" at the end of the last couplet. Look at it:

> if I wanted human company for the night,
> I'd cross the water, visit a woodcutter, no more.

The only reason it's there is so the line will be the same length as the others. This is Hinton's cherished idea: Since the Chinese poems look absolutely rectangular on the page, the English should be made to follow suit. Ah, but that means arbitrary line breaks and padding. No matter; no one will mind.

He has been doing this since his very first book, *The Selected Poems of Tu Fu* (1989). That's thirty years of rescuing Classical Chinese poetry from its monotony and formal commitments. He lays it out for you with honorable straightforwardness in this original preface. He's talking about the parallelism thing, as it appears in Du Fu's work:

> The […] contrasts and similarities between words and phrases create richly expressive relationships which are very important to a poem's field of meaning. A particularly good example is the second couplet of "Impromptu":
>
> (bank)
> sand head | sleep egrets // gather fists | tranquil
>
> boat tail | jump fish // spread cut | cry (sound)
> (wake)
>
> Throughout this couplet, the pairing of contrasting elements creates a sense of poise, which is the most basic function of parallelism. This balance of contrast is uncomplicated in the first three positions (sand-boat, head-tail, sleep-jump). But in the fourth, a threatening tension arises when predator is coupled with prey, an impending violence already foreshadowed in the striking description of egrets as clenched fists in the first line (it is when reading the second line of a couplet that this added dimension of parallelism is registered). The tension builds through the fifth and sixth positions, and is released by the ambiguity in the couplet's final character: while a derivative meaning of "*ming*" is simply "sound," which accurately applies to the leaping fish, the written character is made up of the elements for mouth and bird, and its primary meaning is "a bird's cry." When read in its original sense, then, "*ming*" sets off the relentless life-and-death struggle of existence, shattering this peaceful scene (as well as the couplet's poise).

> This is a remarkably expressive couplet, in which parallelism goes far beyond its basic function of holding the two lines together in a balanced relationship. Parallel construction creates another dimension in the poem, an interiority which is impossible to reproduce in English, although some of its effects can be rendered indirectly:
>
> Serene
>
> Flock of fists on sand—egrets asleep when
> A fish leaps in the boat's wake, shivering, cry.
>
> It is only because Chinese is such an austerely minimal language that individual words have enough weight and immediacy for these parallel interactions to occur. If a translator mimics parallel structures in English, the very lines which are richest and most intricate in the original become the most noticeably flat, simplistic, and monotonous.
>
> (p. xii–xiii)

The above is Hinton, age thirty-five. I don't even understand the grammar in his translation of that couplet. Anyway, he's showing you how he prevents Du Fu from sounding simplistic and monotonous. The basic deal is the translator has to hunt up, in the etymology of the characters, the weirdness that is lacking in the plain meaning of what is being said. Also it is very important to *shatter poise*…. To me, though, the result looks like the obscure stuff you'd see in a magazine, written by a follower of Lucie Brock-Broido. Feckless line breaks? Check. Precious diction? Check. Straight-up devitalizing/fatiguing/obscure? Check.

Hinton's "flock of fists" is really something. Look at Stephen Owen's translation of the same lines:

> Egrets spending the night on the sand, legs bent under, quiet;
> at the boat's stern a leaping fish makes the sound of splashing.

Burton Watson's translation:

> Along the sand, roosting herons bunched together, silent;
> by the stern a fish leaps up, comes down with a smack.

Mark Alexander:

> On the sand, egrets sleep, peacefully curled together,
> Behind the boat I hear the splash of jumping fish.

Where are the **fists**? Mark Alexander provides a swell word-for-word gloss that helps one see what happened there.

> sand head overnight egret • join curl peaceful

boat stern jump fish • splash noise

Where every other translator sees “curl” Hinton sees “fist.” Where every other translator hears the sound of a fish, Hinton hears the cry of a bird.

Hinton’s main stylistic move is to make you have to read sentences twice and three times to figure out the grammar. Here are some choice bits out of the 1989 Du Fu:

My bones a father’s love,
my flesh a mother’s—how are they so
broken in a son still alive to guess at

his death (shaking free of its reins,
a horse tearing blue silk from my hands, or
after inching down a mountainside, eighty
thousand feet, trying for a fallen flag)?

•

An old man from Tu-ling unhinged a life
in twisted thought and harlequin rags
begging to rescue the times like any fool,
as if he were Chi or Chieh.

•

Sitting grief-stricken in the grasses,
I sing wildly, wiping away tears for life
scarcely passes into old age, and no one
ever finds anything more of immortality.

•

Will geese ever arrive, now autumn
Waters swamp rivers and lakes there?

•

The purpose driving
Heaven become human now, I stand where
Uncounted sorrows begin beginning alone.

•

A cup of wine,
A thatched home—that I am here as today’s
Flawless morning passes gathers me in joy.

•

A perched bird knows the ancient Tao. Sails
Only drift toward night spent in whose home?

•

I bet I know what's going on with all this. Hinton knows that Classical Chinese is flexible about parts of speech. All languages are, of course: Something that's usually a noun will be deployed as a verb, and vice versa, etc. But Classical Chinese does it to a surprising degree. So why not do the exact same thing in English?

And you know what, you could! But you'd have to do it like the eighth-century Chinese did it: *elegantly*. Tang poetry sure as hell didn't do to make their sentences unintelligible. But, see, this is where Bright Ideas can be such a liability. Anton Chekhov's figure for this was a painter getting the bright idea that he should attach a three-dimensional replica of a nose to the middle of his painting of a lovely lady. Won't that make the painting just that much more realistic?

I was excited when I heard a *revised* Selected Du Fu was coming out. I wanted to compare Hinton's praxis, age thirty-five vs sixty-five. I knew he would never turn his back on the Rectangle Effect. Having used that as an operating procedure in all his books, I'm sure he thinks he has the technique perfected by now—but I was curious as to what would strike him as a splendid English sentence, these days.

Before getting to that, I think it's worth adding here that my desire to be done with the man and all his works is defeated by a single strange fact. His translation of one of the all-time most famous pieces of Chinese *prose*—Tao Qian's "Peach Blossom Spring"—is hands-down the best I've ever read. I've read six. In that piece, for reasons I cannot grasp, all (or almost all) of Hinton's vices go away. He makes the thing entirely limpid and entirely charming. I have given friends and students that thing millions of times. And so I have this worry that, after all, he's just got some bad ideas—he's not inherently a bad writer. Moreover, his taste in *what to translate* is as conservative and reliable as it could possibly be. So, let's see what the new Du Fu is like! Here's what I saw:

#1 The translations are often drastically altered from 1989.
#2 He says nothing by way of apology or explanation regarding the changes.
#3 There are *way* more poems.
#4 The translation is no better than before. Anyone striking up an acquaintance with Du Fu *and starting with this book*, will think Du Fu is boring, New Agey, and convoluted as hell.

Look at the following sentences, each one a masterpiece of awkward, unlovely, obscure, square-wheeled perversity:

•

Longing to ease heart-slash
cries turns the mind to thread-ends ever

tangled.

•

Clouds drift away south at dusk, clouds
I can watch but never ride home, home.

•

Dawn, the fortieth year of my flight
into dusk's light's over. Who changes,

who even slows this dead dazzling
drunk in the wings of life we live?

•

O when

will it find us together, drapes drawn empty
open, light traced where it's dried our tears?

•

Sleepless, I breathe
delicate mystery of incense, mind clarity

itself.

•

Autumn-bright chrysanthemum petals
litter stone ancient war-carts scarred.

•

Back then, out full-tilt across Mighty Mudball earth,
you must have stumbled and fallen, so this desertion was fated.

•

Hinton can't help it. His taste in poetry is just like this.

Do you remember the first time you were exposed to Gerard Manley Hopkins' most out-there experiments? Look at the infamous "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves":

> Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous, . . . stupendous
> Evening strains to be time's vast, | womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.
> Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, | her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height
> Waste; her earliest stars, earl-stars, | stárs principal, overbend us,
> Fire-féaturing héaven. For éarth | her béing as unbóund, her dápple is at an énd, as-
> Tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; | self ín self stéepèd and páshed—quíte
> Disremembering, dismembering, | all now. […]

People tend to look at that when they're twenty and go "Wow." A whole new vista opens up. But then, one writes some lines like that and comes to one's senses. "If I write like this, how will anyone know what I'm saying?" "If I write like this, how will I know which of my lines are good?" "If I write like this, who will read more than a page?"

Granted, Hinton's Du Fu is only 15% as twisted up as "Sybil's Leaves," but in some ways that's actually worse, because at least with the Hopkins you give up hope right away and just "roll with it." Whereas, when the obscurity is sorta *tucked in*, what happens is you experience, wide awake, the effect of reading something difficult when you're falling asleep. You read a bunch of words thinking it's all a dependent clause and then you stub your toe on a period. You must have read it wrong. You go back, fatigued…

These days, the person who wants to go *mano a mano* with Du Fu has some good resources. Stephen Owen, who is probably the greatest living American expert on Tang poetry, recently (2016) came out with a six-volume godsend: a translation, with notes, of *all* of Du Fu's poetry. This is a monumental work, and I'm pretty sure you can read it for free online. It's the kind of thing only somebody at Owen's level could even *plan*, let alone execute. And pleasantly he promises, in his introduction, that knowing Du Fu *whole* makes a big difference. His point is that most people's impressions of Du Fu are highly dependent on the anthologizing tastes and instincts of the Song Dynasty people who canonized our poet. For them, Du Fu was a paragon of Confucian morality—so his "best" poems were those that showed him playing that role. Owens delights in the prospect of freeing Du Fu from this paradigm.

I have not read those six volumes. But I guarantee that what Owens is saying is right. Anyhow, Wang Wei was exactly like that, for me. When I read all Wang Wei's poems earlier this year I found a guy very different from the Buddha-on-the-brain self-extinguishing sage that I had seen in almost every other book. *Here* was a guy with a sexuality, a guy with a sense of humor, a sycophant, a job applicant, a guy who knows how to "rub it in"… Who knew?

And here's the thing. Hinton is narrower than any medieval Confucian. *They* imprison poets in morality—which at least is complex. Hinton imprisons poets in mysticism—which is easy. He wants guys like Du Fu to have an answer for everything—stuff on the level of emptying nonbeing utterly, the holiness of perception, vast mountain distances in static

purity that is neither pure, nor not pure, nor both, nor neither—nor is there any need for speaking….

Here, watch this. Poem on page 1 in Hinton:

> **Gazing at the Sacred Peak**
>
> What is this ancestor Exalt Mountain like?
> Endless greens of north and south meeting
>
> where Changemaker distills divine beauty,
> where *yin* and *yang* cleave dusk and dawn.
>
> Chest heaving breathes out cloud, and eyes
> open dusk bird-flight home. One day soon,
>
> on the summit, peaks ranging away will be
> small enough to hold, all in a single glance.

Now, straight prose crib of the same from David Hawkes' *A Little Primer of Du Fu*. I'll add marks to show where the line breaks would go:

> **"On a Prospect of T'ai-shan"**
>
> How is one to describe this king of mountains? | Throughout the whole of Ch'i and Lu one never loses sight of its greenness. | In it the Creator has concentrated all that is numinous and beautiful. | Its northern and southern slopes divide the dawn from the dark. | The layered clouds begin at the climber's heaving chest, | and homing birds fly suddenly within range of his straining eyes. | One day I must stand on top of its highest peak | and at a single glance see all the other mountains grown tiny beneath me.

At this point, 3000 words in, there's no need to spell out the differences between those two translations. One thing stands out I haven't mentioned yet: Hinton's love of translating names of places and monks—proper nouns in general—into their most literal form. And here I want to end on a thought experiment.

Imagine someone who considered the United States an exotic place of wonders and sages, and so decided to translate place names in a spirit of amped-up magic and mystery. Chicago might be translated as "the Place of Wild Garlic," and Los Angeles of course would be the "Realm of Divine Envoys." The translator could take the Missing Persons song "Walking in LA" and make it into a mystical tour de force:

Original

♩ **Walking in LA!** ♬

♬ **walking in LA…?** ♩

♩ **only a nobody walks in LA!** ♬

Translation

Traversing the Realm of Divine Envoys, tres-
passing the Realm of Divine Envoys, only an

arhat emptied utterly of nonbeing dare trans-
navigate the Realm, desert-pure, of Envoys.

•