

A Failure to Communicate:

Li Shangyin's Hermetic Legacy

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Abstract

An in-depth study of the Tang poet Li Shangyin, focusing on selected hermetic poems that illustrate Shangyin's approach to Chinese poetics. This paper emphasizes the frustrating, elusive quality of Shangyin's hermetic verses, exploring the themes and techniques that both complicate and explain this poet's unique style.

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Introduction

In the *Book of Documents* (*shujing* 書經) it says: *shi yan zhi* “詩言志.”¹ Poetry expresses what the mind intends. Or, as Fusheng Wu puts it, the origin of a poem “is unequivocally located in the poet’s heart or mind.”² Ideally, then, Chinese poetry is an act of communication. The poet and the reader stand separated by a chasm of time and space, but the poem is a bridge, a living string, straddling the abyss and connecting the poet to an unknown future even as it invites the reader through the referent of the poem to experience a moment of sublimity in the unrecapturable past. The poet arrests a piece of the living world, translates it through the medium of his soul, and wrestles it into symbols of constructed meaning until it stands, bolstered by form, bursting with the similitude of life, and, inevitably, sagging under the burden of conveyance. No matter how elegant its allusions or pleasing its patterns of rhyme, the poem’s purpose ultimately rests in its relay-ability; its efficacy as art is judged not merely by what it is, but by what experience it communicates to its reader in the moment it is experienced.

This account of Chinese poetry is well established, particularly in Western scholarship. James Liu, one of the earliest critics in the United States to write extensively on the theory of Chinese poetry, writes, “a poem is at once a reflection of external reality and an expression of the poet’s total consciousness, through the medium of language.”³ The poem thus combines the external inspiration with the artist’s interpretation, and transmits it to a reader, who, by Liu’s account, does not simply soak up the transmittance in passive, sponge-like absorption. When the reader experiences a poem, he is “exploring” it, not “de-coding” it, because “poetry is neither a

¹ Owen, Stephen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p 26.

² Wu, Fusheng, *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p 9.

³ Liu, James J.Y., *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p 200.

physical object nor a kind of code which communicates a message, but a verbal symbol which embodies a mental process of creation on the part of the poet and evokes a similar process of re-creation on the part of the reader.”⁴ In this way, the poem represents a range of possibilities evoked by the poet’s chosen signifiers. But, rather than relegating the poem to a state of abstract potential, distant from evaluative critique, Liu argues that the poem can be judged by how successful it is in creating a discoverable world.⁵ Stephen Owen, too, views the Chinese poem as the key site in a process of communication between the poet and his reader. In Owen’s understanding, the poem is less a holistic world in itself, and more a “limited window on a full world.”⁶ The poem is a two-pronged signal, gesturing toward both the poet’s internal state and that which instigated his state in the real world. The poem is a tunnel, a connection through which the reader gets at something that underlies and suggests it. In both of these understandings, the poem bears the burden of connection, and poems at their most moving and effective will inspire in the reader the same type of emotions and impressions that lead to the poet’s creating of the poem in the first place. This account of Chinese poetry is not a new one, no, but it is, I argue, an incomplete one.

An understanding of poetry as communication only explains the poems that succeed in communicating the kind of comprehensible, discoverable world that Liu and Owen base their accounts upon. It may be that the majority of Chinese poems fit this mold—indeed, it would be difficult to argue that the passions of Li Bai or the serenity of Wang Wei were *not* effectively and consciously transmitted through their poetry. However, there are also poets who seem determined to undermine the efficacy of communication in their poems. What are we to do with

⁴ Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, p 202.

⁵ Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, p 204.

⁶ Owen, Stephen. “Transparencies: Reading the T’ang Lyric.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 39, No.2 (Dec., 1979), pp 231-251. p 239.

poets who resist the discoverability of their poems' worlds? What are we to do with Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813-858), whose poems are “not meant to be ‘understood’ in the usual sense?”⁷ Are we, as Burton Watson suggests, best served by, “setting aside the question of precise meaning and noting instead the richness and beauty of their imagery?”⁸ While aestheticism does have its uses in poetic criticism, the *je ne sais quoi* argument for appreciating a poem without understanding it falls short of both true critique and true appreciation. A more complicated account of poetry in general is called for, if we are to include Li Shangyin's poetry within it. His poetry does not just communicate something—it frustrates and flouts the communicative process as well. His hermetic poems cannot be explained *only* as attempts to communicate, I argue, and they can neither be fully explained aesthetically nor completely understood contextually. To appreciate a poem for what it is and not what it does is as much a disservice as explaining the poem in terms of what it does while ignoring what it does not do. It is as wrong to reduce a poem to its mechanical features while ignoring its emotional effect as it is to assess an individual poem without considering the literary tradition that contextualizes its craft. Ignoring even one aspect of what a poem is, is not, does, and does not do, is a disservice, particularly in the case of Li Shangyin's work. Li Shangyin's poems are both the sum of their aesthetic qualities and the transient embodiment of carried meaning, both a channel for the current of experience through time and space and the dam that blocks that stream from flowing. It is not enough to say that he successfully communicates ambiguity in his more difficult poems, though this is certainly part of Li Shangyin's strategic poetic mode. Instead, we must consider that at times Li Shangyin simply does not communicate anything coherent—not even coherent incoherence. It is not necessary to

⁷ Owen, Stephen, *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827-860)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), p 357.

⁸ Watson, Burton, *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p 192.

consider this failure to communicate a drawback or a defect in his poetry, but it *is* necessary to consider it.

Chapter One: A Short Biography of Li Shangyin

Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813-858), whose style name was “Scholar of the Jade Stream,” was born into a gentry family of little wealth or influence that nonetheless boasted at least three generations of minor government officials. Though his home was in what is now Henan Province, Li Shangyin spent his early years in scenic southeast China with his father, who jumped from post to post every few years. His father died when he was eight, at which time Li Shangyin returned home and took up study under his uncle, a retired scholar said to be of good learning and sound moral principle. A prodigious literary talent, Li Shangyin distinguished himself from a young age with his prose essays, and secured a secretarial job under a prominent member of the Niu political faction, Linghu Chu (令狐楚), when he was sixteen, where he became fluent in parallel prose, a difficult style of writing that he would come to be known for in later years.⁹

Despite his literary talents, Li Shangyin was what people of that age would have called a “cold gate” (*hanmen* 寒門), a scholar without connections or wealth to distinguish his talents and bring them to the notice of the right people.¹⁰ Perhaps because of this lack of connections, he failed the first two times he attempted the Literary Examination at the capital, but eventually passed at age 24 and was given a minor post working for a military governor, Wang Maoyuan (王茂元), at age 25.¹¹ Several commentators note that Wang Maoyuan belonged to a faction that opposed the Niu faction, meaning that it may not have been strictly proper for Li Shangyin to accept a position with him, since his first patron, Linghu Chu, whose son is presumed to have

⁹ Liu, James J.Y., *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp 14-15.

¹⁰ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 353.

¹¹ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, pp 17-18.

been instrumental in helping Li Shangyin pass the Literary Examination at last, was part of the Niu.¹² Li Shangyin never rose to much prominence during his life, and there is some speculation that because of his connection to the Wangs, Linghu Chu's son was reluctant to sponsor Li Shangyin very actively in his later career, but Owen and Liu both agree that Li Shangyin was likely not important enough to be considered part of either faction, and that his spotty political career probably was not a result of factional issues.¹³

Li Shangyin married one of Wang's daughters, who gave him two children, a son and a daughter, and from all accounts Shangyin was a considerate and devoted family man. All his life he bounced from job to job, working at the Imperial Library one year, as a sheriff to a country district the next.¹⁴ The reasons for his dismissals and transfers vary, but it seems that he had a tendency to offend politically prominent people in one way or another. In general, Liu notes that Li Shangyin's frequent relocations were "partly as a result of political maneuvers and partly out of sheer bad luck."¹⁵ At around age 32 he had a passionate but short-lived affair with a girl called Willow Branch, but was nevertheless devastated when his wife passed away in 851. When, after her death, his then-patron tried to present him with a singing-girl, he wrote an often-cited letter refusing, saying that although he often wrote of beautiful women and romance in his poetry, he had no part of it in real life.¹⁶ It is speculated that he became a devout Buddhist late in his life, perhaps "finding solace" in the religion "after a lifetime of disappointments and frustrations."¹⁷ Shangyin died in 858, politically something of a nonentity, well liked for his parallel prose work, but otherwise un-acclaimed at 45 years of age.

¹² Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, pp 18-19.

¹³ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 354-355.

¹⁴ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 20.

¹⁵ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 22.

¹⁶ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 24.

¹⁷ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 25.

Li Shangyin led a restless life, moving from one post to another depending on how the ever-changing waters of the turbulent political climate churned, but despite his many setbacks and difficulties, he is not depicted as cynical, bitter, or unhappy. In fact, his poetry at times reveals an underlying idealism at odds with the disappointment Li Shangyin so often faced in reality. This is not to say that his poetry is not laced with darker themes of frustration, impermanence, and loss; these are all common themes that Li Shangyin develops in his poems. He also, however, deals with themes of longevity, steadfastness, faithfulness, and the earnest expression of emotion. One of the most transparent examples of theme in Li Shangyin's work is also one of his most famous poems. It, like many of Li Shangyin's poems, was left untitled, and conventionally the "untitled" or *wuti* (無題) poems are referred to by the first few characters of the first line, so I will call the following poem "Finding Time to Meet."

相見時難別亦難，東風無力百花殘。
 春蠶到死絲方盡，蠟燭成灰淚始乾。
 曉鏡但愁雲鬢改，夜吟應覺月光寒。
 蓬萊此去無多路，青鳥殷勤為探看。

Finding time to meet is hard, and so is parting,
 The east wind lacks strength, one hundred flowers wither.
 Only when the spring silkworm dies will its thread be exhausted,
 Only when the candle becomes ash will its tears dry up.
 In the dawn mirror, only grieving the changing of cloudlike hair,
 Nighttime chanting, deeply feeling the coldness of the moonlight.
 Penglai Mountain is not far from here,
 Bluebird, spy out the way for me.¹⁸

It begins with frustration—two friends or (more likely) lovers who cannot find the time to meet up, and when they do must part too soon. The next line speaks of a weak wind, the fading of strength, and the fading of life represented by the flowers withering. The lack of sufficient

¹⁸ Feng Hao (馮浩), *Yuxisheng shi ji jian zhu* 玉谿生詩集箋註(Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1979), p 399. My translation.

time is implied in both cases—the lovers wanting to meet, and the flowers slowly fading away. The comparison between the two gives the idea of the lovers' parting the same sense of deep inevitability that withering flowers naturally inspire. Flowers cannot stay in bloom forever, and the lovers cannot remain together forever. The poet admires the springtime of love, but also recognizes the necessity of its inevitable tragedy. These themes are echoed in the third couplet, which speaks of an aging woman, gazing despondently into the mirror and grieving for her lost youth, embodied in the graying of her hair, and again in the cold loneliness of the night, where the moon gives no comfort, despite its light.

These rather melancholy themes in the first and third couplets are partially transformed by the second and fourth couplets, however. The silkworm and the candle embody a sense of boundless determination—only death can stop the silkworm from spinning, and only destruction can stop the candle from weeping. This idea of spending oneself until one literally cannot go on is an inspiring ideal of perseverance and dedication to a task or emotion, though it, too, is tempered by a sense of futility and inevitability. The silkworm is presented in a noble way, continuing resolutely unto death, but it is nevertheless a tragic figure, spinning silk all its life, and knowing nothing else until the end. Owen notes that the word silk/thread (*si* 絲) was commonly used as a pun for longing (*si* 思), layering in the additional idea that someone's longing (perhaps the lovers', the poet's, or the aging woman's) will not be sated until death, either.¹⁹

The final couplet is jarring in its reversal. From inevitability and degeneration we get a bluebird, herald of spring and messenger of the Queen Mother of the West,²⁰ leading us to a destination that is not so far, after all. These last lines could be interpreted as embodying a

¹⁹ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 392.

²⁰ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 392.

renewed hope and vigor that revitalize the poet's fading spirit or simply a peaceful acceptance that the end of the journey (and, by implication, death, if "life" is the journey and the immortal realm the destination) is near. Either way, the interactions between themes of permanence and impermanence, loss and recovery, and determination and futility, are clearly and elegantly expressed in this poem.

The themes in Li Shangyin's poetry are neither as melancholy as Li Bai's, nor as tortured as Li He's, but at around 600 extant works, he is one of the most prolific poets in the Tang. Almost all of his poetry, however, remained unpublished until his death. It is unclear how exactly Li Shangyin's poems were first circulated, whether they were entrusted to an unnamed friend or relative after his passing or whether they were edited by Shangyin himself before he died. The seemingly personal nature of many of his poems, as well as the frustrating lack of comprehensible referents in his most hermetic poems, has led many commentators to suggest that perhaps Li Shangyin never intended for his poems to be circulated at all.²¹ The ambiguity of audience only adds to "the tension between the poet's world and the outside world" that comes across in his hermetic work.²²

Stephen Owen tells us, "Li Shangyin has become the preeminent figure of Late Tang poetry."²³ Owen says "has become" not "was" because Li Shangyin enjoyed little acclaim for his poetry during his lifetime and immediately following his death. It was not until the eleventh century that his poems were collected and examined with enthusiasm by the scholar Yang Yi (974-1020),²⁴ and his work compared flatteringly to that of Du Fu (712-770), thereafter beginning the firm establishment of his position in the canonical tradition of great Chinese

²¹ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 358.

²² Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 154.

²³ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 335.

²⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 336.

poetry.²⁵ Part of the reason Li Shangyin's merit was so slow to be recognized lies in the particular politics of Late Tang poetics. The Early Tang saw the establishment of a unified nexus of poetic ideology that in turn sparked a generation of literary genius, now known as the High Tang. From the decadence and drama of the High Tang came the work of Wang Wei (699-759), Li Bai (701-762), and Du Fu, commonly cited as the three greatest poets in Chinese history. The poets of the Late Tang, Li Shangyin among them, lived and worked in the shadows of giants, as the High Tang "remained the fixed center that defined the positions of all later poets."²⁶ All poetry of the time was both conceived and ultimately judged in relation to the great, untouchable poetry of those who had come immediately before.

Li Shangyin's poetry, which often deviates egregiously from the conservative expectation of what good Tang poetry ought to be like, was for a long time considered morally suspect, and subjected to all manner of scrutiny and critique. The ambiguous quality of his hermetic poems in particular inspired effusive commentaries that attempted to either defend or attack Li Shangyin's work in relation to the great poets and the poetic ideologies they inspired. It is perhaps due to the hermetic nature of these poems that Li Shangyin's work could neither be fully accounted for nor completely dismissed, securing him the distinction of having "amassed more commentaries than any individual poet except Du Fu."²⁷ Li Shangyin's hermetic poetry is engaging, dynamic, and resounds with a sense of validity and life. It cannot be argued that such poetry lacks distinction and worth on its own terms, but a large part of its importance to the tradition of Chinese poetics lies in the contention it inspires in those who have experienced it.

²⁵ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, pp 149-150.

²⁶ Owen, Stephen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p xi.

²⁷ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 335.

Commentators have historically had difficulty attempting to include Li Shangyin among the other great poets in the Chinese tradition, partly because so many of his poems appear to deal with clandestine or unsuitable topics. Some of his poems are explicitly about love and desirable women, and while this is not unusual in Chinese poetry, the sensual, personal way he deals with the subject matter is slightly scandalous to the conservative tradition. On the other hand, Li Shangyin's poetry is also unlike the decadent, Palace-style poetry that deals exclusively with amorous tales of love affairs, peppered with ostentatious language and embellished beyond plausibility for the sake of art. Liu describes Li Shangyin's character as affectionate, imaginative, and sensitive,²⁸ and these traits carry over in his poetry, creating a sense of intimacy, despondency, and endearing earnestness that, when combined with his ambiguous subject matter and oblique imagery, often make Li Shangyin's poetry an unforgettable experience. It can also be an uncomfortable experience, however, as many of his poems relate a sense of conflict that the reader may be unsure how to interpret. Most aggravating of all, however, is the way Li Shangyin's poetry frustrates biographical or sociological accounts of it. It is possible to appreciate the subtleties of Li Shangyin's allusions, the elegance of his rhyme, and even the intimacy of connection he establishes between himself and the reader without going further and attempting to make coherent meaning from his verses, except that Chinese poetry, above all, is traditionally supposed to be an act of communication—"an articulation of what is on the mind intently."²⁹ If, after reading the poem, the reader cannot say what was communicated, can the poem still be considered a great example of its kind? This is the most important question a literary critique of Li Shangyin's poetry must grapple with, and it is the various answers to this question that best distinguish the most noteworthy of his critics.

²⁸ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin* pp 25-26.

²⁹ Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, p 26.

Chapter Two: Literary Exposition of Li Shangyin's Poetry

Historically, Li Shangyin's poetry has been conceptualized differently depending on the literary agenda of the commentator. This is particularly true of the earlier commentaries on his work, the most distinct of which will be introduced briefly, to give a sense of the immense diversity of understandings that Li Shangyin's poetry has inspired over the years. The most enlightening literature on his poems are probably those of the latter half of the twentieth century, however, and it is those commentaries that will comprise the focus of this literary review.

An overview of the major divergent understandings of Li Shangyin's poetry must begin with the formation of Zhu Heling's (朱鶴齡) (1606-1683) school of thought in the early Qing dynasty. Zhu Heling compiled the first annotated edition of Li Shangyin's poetry in 1659, and while there were earlier critiques of Li Shangyin's work, Zhu was the first to attempt to fit Shangyin's poetry into a cohesive theoretical mold.³⁰ Zhu contended that Li Shangyin was in essence a biographical poet, who used the guise of romantic encounters to express a critical outlook on his own situation and on the events of his lifetime.³¹ There are many reasons why taking Li Shangyin to be a biographical poet would be to a commentator's advantage. If the unusual allusions and ambiguities in Li Shangyin's poems can be explained as metaphors for the rather ordinary desires of any minor official for career advancement or the complaints common to those living in a time of political uncertainty, Li Shangyin's poems become less threatening in their oddity and easier to account for within the standard mode of poetry—that of poetry as an exquisite expression of common sentiment. The biographical account is also very appealing in that it allows the reader to look outside of Li Shangyin's confusing verses in order to make sense

³⁰ Li Zeng, "Ambiguous and Amiss: Li Shangyin's Poetry and Its Interpretations," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 30 (2008): pp137-150, p 144.

³¹ Li Zeng, "Ambiguous and Amiss," p 144.

of them—no longer trapped by the dense, obscure imagery of the poem, the reader can look at Shangyin's biography, attempt to date the poem accordingly, and thus come to some educated guess about what might have been on Li Shangyin's mind at the time he wrote it. It is important to note that this rather roundabout way of coming at the meaning of a poem is denounced as a disservice to the poem itself in more modern commentaries, but this contention will be further discussed shortly.

Feng Hao (馮浩) (1719-1801) developed Zhu's biographical school of thought further, compiling what is, according to James Liu, still the definitive edition of Li Shangyin's poetry to date.³² Feng Hao in particular viewed Li Shangyin's descriptions of romantic desire to be an embodiment of his own desire for the patronage of Linghu Chu's son, who some historians believe abandoned his direct support and patronage of Shangyin's talents after the poet married into the Wang family.³³ To return to the example used in the previous section, Feng Hao says of the untitled poem, "Finding Time to Meet," that it describes not a forlorn man separated from his lover, but a poet separated from his patron, longing for his favor.³⁴ In this view, the spinning silkworm becomes the poet working assiduously for his patron's recognition, the flower of his talent withering with disuse and age, and the tears of the candle are tears of frustration for working so hard in vain. Other poems are interpreted by Feng Hao in similar ways, as treatises on the disappointment and disenchantment the poet experienced at failing to achieve a prominent government post. His work was continued by Zhang Ertian (張爾田) (1874-1945), who compiled a painstaking biography of Li Shangyin's admittedly dull and restless career, and, in line with Feng Hao's school of thought, extrapolates deeply into the hidden world behind Shangyin's

³² Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 27.

³³ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 27.

³⁴ Feng Hao (馮浩), *Yuxisheng shi ji jian zhu*, pp 398-399, and Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 27.

hermetic poems, teasing out connections and searching for clues in what is known about the poet's life.³⁵

A second, though similar, school of thought, advocated for by Su Xuelin (蘇雪林) (1897-1999), believes that the ambiguous poems, particularly the untitled ones, represent “various clandestine love affairs that the poet had with certain Daosit nuns and court ladies.”³⁶ In this school of interpretation, the ambiguities in Li Shangyin's poetry represent secret, coded references to actual scenarios and private events in Li Shangyin's love life. This school, too, relies on biographical evidence, rather than textual evidence found within the poems themselves, to speak to their possible subject matter.

By the twentieth century, a third school arose, represented by Gu Yiqun (顧翊羣) and Sun Zhentao (孫甄陶).³⁷ To this school, Li Shangyin is a sardonic political commentator. The love affairs his poems seem to depict are satirical in nature, not autobiographical, and represent Shangyin's own negative view of the social and cultural commonalities of his time. These commentators seek to find social, historical, and political markers in Li Shangyin's poetry that will reveal the subject of Shangyin's presumed criticism.³⁸

Finally, there are a few scholars, such as Lu Kunzeng (陸崑曾) and Qu Fu (屈復) of the Qing dynasty, who, instead of attempting a biographical or historical interpretation, take the view that Li Shangyin's poetry should be understood subjectively, based on what it does to its reader, not what it is about or that which it refers to.³⁹ They contend that one should understand a hermetic poem in terms of the reader's reaction to it, because the original event or emotion that

³⁵ Li Zeng, “Ambiguous and Amiss,” p 144.

³⁶ Li Zeng, “Ambiguous and Amiss,” p 145.

³⁷ Li Zeng, “Ambiguous and Amiss,” p 145.

³⁸ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 28.

³⁹ Li Zeng, “Ambiguous and Amiss,” p 145.

inspired the poem is unknowable to the reader except through the medium of the poem itself. This school could be called the aesthetic school, in which “one can appreciate the beauty of Li Shangyin’s poetry without understanding what it means,”⁴⁰ grounding one’s appreciation not in what the poem is trying to say, but in how it makes the reader feel. While it may be the case that a poem can be appreciated without complete comprehension of it, most modern commentators agree that “an adequate understanding of poetry will enhance and not detract from one’s enjoyment of it.”⁴¹

James Liu, who provided the first comprehensive collection of English translations of Li Shangyin’s poetry, notes early on that while the traditional schools “have some justification in the light of Li Shangyin’s life and of Chinese literary history...none of them is entirely convincing.”⁴² The biographical and historical schools tend towards exaggerating one facet of the poet’s character and attempting to define the majority of his works by that single trait, instead of recognizing that not only can one man have a myriad of different motivations and intentions politically, romantically, and socially throughout his lifetime, but it is also the case that “the poet’s external intention or motive is not necessarily the same as the artistic intention of the poem.”⁴³ Liu argues that useful poetic criticism concerns the latter, not the former. Li Zeng, author of “Ambiguous and Amiss: Li Shangyin’s Poetry and Its Interpretations,” says of the biographical and historical accounts of Li Shangyin’s poetry that “in each case they are biased toward certain characteristics of the man known to history.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, he says, “they ignore

⁴⁰ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 31.

⁴¹ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 32.

⁴² Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 28.

⁴³ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 31.

⁴⁴ Li Zeng, “Ambiguous and Amiss,” pp 145-146.

intrinsic, artistic mechanisms of Li Shangyin's textual composition."⁴⁵ These objections illustrate the difference between traditional accounts of Li Shangyin's poetry and more contemporary accounts. In the later half of the twentieth century, commentators are much more likely to interpret Shangyin's poetry based on the poems themselves, rather than information gleaned from either biography or history. However, despite turning away from grasping, biographical explanations, major commentators of Li Shangyin's poetry still must make a convincing theoretical account of his hermetic poems if they are to canonize him as a major poet of the Chinese tradition.

It is useful to begin with James Liu's account of Li Shangyin's hermetic poems. In *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (1969), Liu says of Li Shangyin that he "is one of the most ambiguous, if not *the* most ambiguous, of Chinese poets,"⁴⁶ and yet, Liu holds that Li Shangyin's character is not so exaggerated or radical as he appears according to the historical schools of interpretation. Liu sees Shangyin as an ordinary man of his times, with "consciously held views"⁴⁷ that were a mix of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism common to the Late Tang period. He embodied contradictions and inconsistencies, and so, it comes as no surprise, do his poems. In Liu we see a moving away from the tendency toward generalizing a poet's body of work for the sake of historical neatness.

Liu considers Li Shangyin to be a "worthy successor to Du Fu" in his use of language,⁴⁸ with artistry more conscious than the effortless grace of Li Bai, and more obvious than the subtleties of Wang Wei. Li Shangyin, by Liu's account, is neither a detached cynic nor a diligent craftsman, but rather uses language passionately to convey his engagement with the world on all

⁴⁵ Li Zeng, "Ambiguous and Amiss," p 146.

⁴⁶ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 27.

⁴⁷ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 31.

⁴⁸ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 251.

levels. He is not distant from the real world, as Wang Wei or Li Bai both are in different ways, but neither does he take the ups and downs of reality in determined good humor as Du Fu does, nor in the persistent pessimism that Li He employs; instead, he is diversely responsive to life, a quality that is embodied in his poetry, which is as ambiguous and complicated as life itself.

Liu does not agree that Li Shangyin's poems should be appreciated for their own aesthetic sake, but he also takes objection to the idea that a poem has a singular meaning that can be pinned down once it is 'figured out.' According to Liu's poetic theory, the reader need only construct (and indeed it is a *construction* on the reader's part) a "dramatic situation" that fits the poem and furthers understanding of it, without requiring an understanding of the complete, exact circumstances under which it was written. Li Shangyin's poems for Liu, then, are neither meaningless art, nor are they a diary entry. Liu advises a balanced approach between these two extremes, and looks toward understanding Li Shangyin's poems both textually and contextually, regarding a poem's content and form to be interrelated components to a poetic 'world' that need not correspond to any historical or biographical account.

Liu's overarching critical lens is discussed in his earlier book, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, but it can be summarized as follows: poetry is an art of exploration and of fusing. It involves binding external objects, through the use of words as signifiers, to internal emotions, memories, and events. The value of a poem, then, is how successful it is in creating its own discoverable world. That is, the poet must capture an internal event, and link it to external events in such a way that a reader can use those external events to get at the internal event. In his theory, Liu rejects outright the ideas of form and content as sufficient in themselves to explain or evaluate a poem. The only real standard of critique is the effectiveness of a poem at portraying the poem's "world."

His account of poetry is a holistic one, then, in that he believes that each poem is coherent to itself, comprising its own little world, and does not ‘rely’ on anything else. Liu seems to say that a poem is not to be ‘decoded’ as it does not contain a ‘message’ but rather a range of possibilities, all of which can be understood through the poem, and none of which are more right than any other. In this way, the poet offers “the potentialities of language as he seeks to embody a world in a poem, and the reader, by following the development of the verbal structure of the poem, repeats the process and recreates the world.”⁴⁹

In some ways, this theory of poetry gets at what the very essence of Chinese poetry is purported to be—an expression of a mental state, inspired by an external event, that the reader recreates through the act of reading. This theory also, however, skirts the edges of rigorous critique by moving the creation-extrapolation process out of the reach of concreteness, and this is especially detrimental to a critique of Li Shangyin’s poetry, because his ambiguity is not an ambiguity of detail, as one might find in Wang Wei’s nature poetry, but rather often an ambiguity of reference and meaning. Li Shangyin’s poetic mode relies heavily on allusions and contradictions, so it is initially difficult to see how his poems might be considered self-contained. Furthermore, it is arguable that the act of creating ambiguity of meaning in a poem is in fact a way of closing the poem’s ‘world’ to the reader. If the reader is unable to successfully ‘re-create’ the world, is it still good poetry according to Liu’s model?

Liu also speaks to the timelessness of poetry, arguing that the event of reading a poem forges a connection through time to the event that inspired the poem.⁵⁰ It is possible, of course, to see the poem itself as a connection across time (this is the purpose of written language, after all), but what is less certain is whether it is fair to give a poem the burden of that connection—that is,

⁴⁹ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 202.

⁵⁰ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 203.

to judge a poem for how effectively it spans that gap and communicates the past to the present. In this way, Liu seems to want to establish poetry as a method both of intertextual world-building and extratextual world-*communicating*. Liu claims that a poem should be judged by how well it creates a world, or how well it encapsulates a moment that can be experienced by the reader, in other words, but experience is in essence subjective. To judge a poem by what we read into it is, in some ways, to judge ourselves. To put it differently, the poetic ideal of recreating a moment of artistic inspiration via readership depends heavily on the quality of the reader, not only the skill of the poet. This is not necessarily problematic in itself, as poetry is admittedly intended for a certain kind of audience, but it poses difficulties to the task of critiquing a poem on its own merits.

In his commentary, Liu also teases out what we mean by ambiguity in Li Shangyin's poetry. According to Liu's account, ambiguity in Shangyin's poetry occurs in several different ways, each distinct from the other. First there is what Liu calls "ambiguity of reference," which simply means the reader is unsure what is being alluded to. There is also ambiguity of referent application, where the reader is unsure how a known allusion is being used to make a particular point. "Ambiguity in attitude" suggests the poet himself might be ambiguous about a topic, and convey confused feelings clearly, and finally there are times when the poet simply uses ambiguous language, so that what he conveys is, itself, unclear.⁵¹ These different kinds of ambiguities come together in Li Shangyin's poetry, and Liu's admiration for Li Shangyin lies in the poet's ability to convey subtleties and complexities in a way that leaves room for more than one strict interpretation. This is how Liu reconciles Li Shangyin's poetry within Liu's own theory of poetic mode; he argues that Li Shangyin's ambiguity is a way for the poet to

⁵¹ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, pp 252-253.

communicate not one world in his poems, but a range of possible worlds that the skilled reader is simultaneously aware of.

To some extent, Liu's account of poetry is echoed later in Stephen Owen's poetic theory. Owen is considered by many one of the foremost experts in the field of Chinese poetry, and his 2006 book *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827-860)* devotes enormous attention to the poet whose work he calls "the single most memorable cultural achievement of his era."⁵² Owen's poetic theory, too, involves what may be called a signal-noise system of referents that connects the poem—the noise—to the "world" behind it—the signal, the event or emotion that inspired its creation and the "point" that the poem is trying to communicate. Although the reader only has direct contact with the poem, the world is what the reader really tries to get at, and the poem is only the map of a larger territory, suggestive and impressionistic in many ways. In Li Shangyin's poetry, the signal-to-noise ratio is somewhat low, meaning that it can be difficult to tell which parts of the poem are directly related to the essence of the poem, derived from the original signal, and which are somewhat extraneous aspects of the poem's form, the background noise through which the signal passes.

Owen begins his account of Li Shangyin by explaining what makes this poet different from other great Chinese poets and why people regard his figurative language as so extraordinary. Allusion, ambiguity, and figurativeness were all common features in Chinese poetry, particularly in the hyper-aesthetic atmosphere of the Late Tang, so what makes Li Shangyin's style so unusual and hard to reconcile in canonical tradition? Strikingly, the first poem Owen discusses is the notorious "Refining Elixir," (*Yao Zhuan* 藥轉), the meaning of which many an embarrassed commentator has hesitated to unravel.

⁵² Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 356.

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North of the cassia hall, east of the painted house,
The divine prescription for changing bone and supreme drug for release.
The dewy vapors secretly reach to the green cassia court,
The sound of wind blows through clumps of purple orchids.
The toilet-paper holder need not yield to Sun Hao,
For fragrant dates, what need to ask Shi Chong?
Remembering something, thinking of someone, each have their lines,
Returning to the silken covers within embroidered hangings.⁵³

For those readers not familiar with ancient Chinese privy stories, Sun Hao put a statue of Buddha in his privy to hold the bamboo strips he used for toilet paper.⁵⁴ As punishment, his privates were most painfully afflicted until he converted and repented. As for Shi Chong, his bathroom was so extravagant that he kept dates in it to keep the odor at bay.⁵⁵ In an amusing anecdote, one of his guests ate the dates, not knowing what they were for. Even understanding these allusions, however, this poem is still troubling on many levels if it is to be taken seriously by its critics. Ideas about its meaning have ranged from it being a poem about the simple pleasures of defecation to it describing the refining of an elixir of immortality. Feng Hao and several other commentators believe this poem to be about a clandestine, drug-induced abortion. For commentators like Feng Hao, the dewy vapors secretly traveling through the wind is a metaphor for the act being committed unseen in the dead of night, and the two allusions about the privy are a veiled reference to abortion because of the location.⁵⁶ To more literal commentators, like Ye Congqi, the drug is some kind of laxative; the dewy vapors are more probably related to the foul stench, the sound of wind the audio to the poet's activities, and the

⁵³ Feng Hao, *Yuxisheng shi ji jian zhu*, p 560. My translation, with reference to Owen and Wu.

⁵⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 343.

⁵⁵ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 179.

⁵⁶ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 180.

clumps of purple orchids perhaps the results of his bowel's eventual relaxation. Other theories have ranged from an assassin cleverly hiding in the privy to the poet fondly spying on his beloved while going to the bathroom.⁵⁷

This poem, with all its embarrassing and unorthodox ambiguities, is a good example of what makes Li Shangyin's poetry strange. As Owen points out, figurative use of language, besides being ubiquitous in the late Tang, was also rather specific.⁵⁸ The allusions used by poets of the age were common ones, which everyone used to more or less the same effect, and any subtle ambiguities were used in specific contexts and for familiar purposes, such as gently criticizing the government, asking for patronage, or lauding the beauty of a woman indirectly. Li Shangyin's toilet verse has no place in elite Tang poetry, and yet there it is.

Owen also notes previous commentators' almost frantic attempts to contain this kind of verse, to see it as a veiled reference to something else, *anything* other than a line about actually just using the toilet. The attempts to make sense of it, however, often fail to be convincing. On the one hand, there's no good precedent to draw on in interpreting such unusual references, but on the other hand it cannot be dismissed as mere vulgarity because of the last couplet. In the seventh line of the poem, Li Shangyin writes, "remembering something, thinking of someone, each have their lines," but despite being told that something and someone are at turns remembered in the poem, the reader does not know what or who it is or which lines refer to it. Li Shangyin is telling us that there is something more to this poem, but at the same time refusing to tell us what it is. The only concrete details the reader has are about the privy.

⁵⁷ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 343.

⁵⁸ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 344.

This kind of deliberately frustrating verse, Owen says, is quite beyond the pale for most Chinese figurative language of the time.⁵⁹ Li Shangyin is not using allusions to the same effect that his contemporaries do. He does not include illustrious references as a way to elevate his subject matter, and neither does he use them to add credence to a moral diatribe. Rather, he repurposes the rules of ambiguity seemingly in order to taunt his reader with the idea of a secret they can never uncover. As Owen says, this “raises the issue of figuration as concealment to a whole new level,”⁶⁰ one of *genuine* concealment, not just a veiling gesture of politeness or genteelness that the reader nevertheless sees through.

Some might suggest that such a poem is a code, and is only intended to be read by someone who understands it, but Owen does not think so.⁶¹ A truly clandestine message would not be kept and circulated, though of course there is always the possibility that Li Shangyin didn't intend for such poems to be circulated—we have no evidence that he ever edited or compiled his own poetry, after all.⁶² If such a poem was intended for a private audience, however, why would the poet include the almost taunting line, which would mean nothing to a reader who already knew what it was about, but everything to a reader in the dark? For the boast of something concealed within the poem to have meaning means that Li Shangyin *intentionally* writes concealed poetry. This flies in the face of what traditional Chinese poetic theory says about poetry always being a means of uncovering, of communicating, however, so the commentators still have a bit of work to do in reconciling Li Shangyin's carefully concealed poetics with the ideal of expression that Chinese poetry supposedly represents.

⁵⁹ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 345.

⁶⁰ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 344-345.

⁶¹ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 346-347.

⁶² Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 346.

Owen does this in part by arguing that Li Shangyin is “engaging in poetic action rather than encoding meaning.”⁶³ In other words, Owen attributes the ambiguity in the poem to the poet’s craft, not to the reader’s inability to understand. Li Shangyin sometimes hints at an event that the poem was inspired from or refers to, but sometimes denies completely that there was anything real behind the referent at all—a dangerous notion for the classical understanding of Chinese poetry, which relies on the surety that the original referent is in some way authentic. Owen quotes the famous line from Li Shangyin’s letter refusing his patron’s gift of a sing-song girl,⁶⁴ in which he claims that though he writes of love affairs often (validating the reading of his poems as referring to love affairs), he does not actually have much connection to that sort of lifestyle (thus invalidating biographical understandings of his love poems). This game is double-layered, Owen notes, because his biographers don’t know that this claim is true,⁶⁵ only that Li Shangyin makes it, adding another vector of ambiguity to the murky waters surrounding Li Shangyin’s poetic character.

Because of Li Shangyin’s purposefully hermetic nature, a biographical reading of his poems is not terribly useful, except for the ones in which he makes specific, verifiable reference to some historical event. Instead of getting bogged down in biographical details, we are advised by Owen, who agrees with Liu in this, to consider that the poet’s actual “truth” is in many ways less important than the poem’s “truth.” In some cases poems are written with a certain scenario or role in mind, projecting an image of the poet that is entirely constructed for the purposes of the poem, such as a poem intended to curry favor with a certain government official. It is

⁶³ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 379.

⁶⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 352.

⁶⁵ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 352.

impossible to know for certain which poems are truths derived from a poet's experiences and which poems are derived merely from the poet's imaginative processes.

In light of this impossibility, Owen's approach to Li Shangyin's work is to understand his poems as "a process of meaning-formation, bracketing the question of some ultimate experiential referent."⁶⁶ Owen is concerned with how meaning is hinted at and concealed in Li Shangyin's poems, without making an ultimate judgment as to which specific interpretation of a poem is biographically correct. Owen recognizes that "the poet plays with interpretive habits, drawing the reader to the margin of making sense and then pushing him or her over the edge,"⁶⁷ and so he approaches each poem with deliberate patience, balancing different potential narrative scenarios and leaving the question of meaning open-ended.

Instead of looking for specific meaning in individual poems, Owen instead takes a more general approach, identifying themes and other commonalities in Li Shangyin's poetry that might act as triggers for the attentive reader, signaling the most frequent and vital of Li Shangyin's poetic nuances. Owen flags all of Li Shangyin's favorite devices: using final couplets that overturn the meaning of the poem, setting the poem immediately after the focus event has occurred, employing mixed metaphors that refer to multiple contradictory images at once, and displacing the true subject onto an unspecified object in a silent metaphor. Owen also identifies many of the themes that run through Li Shangyin's hermetic poems in particular, including blockage, intimacy, frustration, obsession, yearning, and fragility. Because of his adeptness in recognizing the patterns of poetic devices that constitute a deliberate interruption in communication on the poet's behalf, Owen is perhaps the most skilled commentator to date at

⁶⁶ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 365.

⁶⁷ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 379.

identifying Li Shangyin's hermetic poems, as opposed to his historical or occasional poems, and critiquing them for what they are, rather than what an interpreter might wish they could be.

Similar to Owen, Li Zeng, mentioned earlier for his complete dismissal of all forms of biographical or historical interpretation of Li Shangyin's hermetic poetry, also attempts to explain the ambiguity in Li Shangyin's hermetic poems by giving an explanation in terms of craft. Zeng notes that most interpretive traditions fall prey to one of two fallacies: believing that knowing a man's biography means you know him, and thinking that knowing your own world will allow you to know someone else's. In this way, Zeng argues against either an objective or a subjective reading of a poem. The poem for Zeng is not about the poet and it is not about the reader—it has meaning only relative to itself, and the devices and strategies at work therein. Zeng is most interested in the artistry of the poem, the way devices, like allusion and abstract imagery in the case of Li Shangyin, are put to use within its form. Zeng treats the ambiguities in Li Shangyin's poetry as an artistic effect, rather than a failing on either the poet or the reader's side, and reads into the poet's motive only what he can glean from the effects to which his poetic conventions are put.

Some commentators think that explaining Li Shangyin means removing the ambiguity from his writing, assuming that ambiguity is not an irremovable *feature* of his writing, but a veil that needs to be pierced through to get at the "real" poem. Zeng, however, points out that to really understand Li Shangyin's poetry is to recognize his ambiguity as an artistic tool, used and leveraged to create a certain effect or message (though what the message is, ironically, remains unclear). Zeng argues that the thematic emotions of purposelessness, uncertainty, and melancholy permeate Li Shangyin's poetry, and while these emotions can apply to any number

of specific events, applying them to a particular scenario is not necessary to an understanding of the poetry itself and what it's trying to do.

Even more than Owen, and certainly more than Liu, Zeng sees the poem as separate from what it refers to. Rather than being merely a referent, a window through which one looks, for Zeng the poem is more like a painting—connected to an outside subject in some ways, but distinct and present in its own right in other ways. Zeng's account of poetry might not work as well for the poems of Wang Wei, whose quatrains are as crystal clear as any windowpane into the past, but for the opaque frames of Li Shangyin, this account holds a credible amount of water. Most importantly, Zeng is against a reductionalist account of Li Shangyin's poetry, and in this he is like Liu and Owen. None of these commentators seek to settle on particular meaning at the expense of the poem's possibilities, as Liu might say, but Zeng is the most adamantly against losing the complexities and ambiguities of Li Shangyin's poetry, which, rather than being a feature of the reader's ignorance, are in fact a vital part of the poems' strategic form.⁶⁸

Zeng claims that, due to Li Shangyin's strong reliance on allusion and enigma, enjoyment of his poems is largely intuitive, not limited by a lack of complete comprehension.⁶⁹ He concludes that Li Shangyin's poetry (and, if we are to believe Owen's *Poetry and its Historical Grounds*, perhaps all poetry) should be understood typologically, that is, in terms of its similarity to other poems of its kind rather than just by its individual particularities, by which he means that a poem can be understood in different contexts simultaneously, depending on the body of work it exists within, the person reading it, and the level of that person's familiarity with the poem's context.⁷⁰ This multifacetedness is the core and strength of a poem, and not something to be

⁶⁸ Li Zeng, "Ambiguous and Amiss," p 148.

⁶⁹ Li Zeng, "Ambiguous and Amiss," p 138.

⁷⁰ Li Zeng, "Ambiguous and Amiss," p 149.

explained away or reduced. It is in the unspoken connections between points of reference that Li Shangyin's poetry truly works as a system of meaning making. To choose one particular meaning would be limiting in the way that drawing lines between the stars to make meaningful constellations at once erases all the other possible combinations of star constellations that might have been.

The argument that the beauty of Li Shangyin's poetry lies in its unvoiced connections is not unique to Zeng, as several other commentators also point out that Li Shangyin's use of imagery is such that the human mind naturally suggests connections between them—for instance, the connection between the image of a moon and that of a pearl; both round, shiny, and pale, both associated in some way with water and softness and beauty, both shrouded in mystery, and so on. This particular image-making technique is not unique to Li Shangyin, however; one of the most appealing facets of Chinese poetry in general is its ability to suggest connections between images rather than state them outright. It therefore does not make a convincing account of Li Shangyin's hermetic poetry in particular to say that one can enjoy its imagery without understanding it fully.

In fact, saying the imagery can be appreciated without complete comprehension of its particulars does not make a convincing account of any other poem, either. Western interpreters are particularly prone to falling into the trap of aestheticism when interpreting Chinese poetry. It is easy for non-Chinese speakers to see Chinese poetry as impressionistic, rather than narratological, because the connections between verbs, nouns, and objects are not always clear, but it is a mistake to assume that a lack of connectives indicates a lack of narrative potential. It is common for Western readers to read a *je ne sais quoi* quality into Chinese poetry, attempting to give it a special, indefinable air of exotic mystery instead of doing a truly careful examination.

On the other hand, it is equally dangerous for a Western reader to impose temporal-logical constraints arbitrarily onto a Chinese poem, as there is a certain extent to which the poetry thrives on the open-endedness of its language.

With the understanding that multifacetedness in Chinese poetry is a vital part to the meaning-making process, it becomes clear why the next argument about Li Shangyin's poetry is both seductive and dangerous in its potential for reconciling the contradiction of uncommunicative Chinese poetry. The alternative hypothesis to Li Shangyin's poetry being uncommunicative is that it communicates exactly what it means to. Proponents of this view, including Liu, Zeng, and to a certain extent Owen as well, argue that the reason Li Shangyin's poetry seems ambiguous may be because the poet is successfully communicating ambiguity—that is, the poem recreates in the reader the ambiguous feelings that the poet had while writing it. This explanation is entirely neat, in that it tidily encompasses Li Shangyin's confusing poetry into the tradition of Chinese poetry as a mode of clear expression—it turns out, Li Shangyin was clearly expressing confusion.

This theory makes the poem on one level immediately understandable. The reader “gets” the poem, because he feels confused, which was the poet's intention, which means the poem is validated as a communicative process. The poem is no longer an intimidating message to be decoded, and the reader does not feel like an outsider to the poet's world. While it could indeed be the case that at times the poet wants to relay an indistinct or contradictory experience to the reader, the point is not to confuse the reader—it's to share with the reader. If we approach the poem with the idea that the poet is only trying to confuse us, we don't actually gain anything from reading it, except a hollow sort of satisfaction that we “got” the point. The poem, while technically fitting into the traditional mode of Chinese poetics, has become merely mechanical, a

parlor trick that neither furthers the reader's emotional range nor exercises his imaginative faculties.

The idea that a poem could successfully communicate what is essentially meaningless, then, still does not truly encompass Li Shangyin's poetry within the classical canon, because ideally poetry communicates a *meaningful* (and presumably articulatable) event. At this point it is useful to turn to Fusheng Wu, author of *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods*. Wu begins his examination of Palace-style poetry with a discussion of the expectations of traditional Chinese poetics. The canonic expectation is that poetry arises from genuine feeling—that it is a natural process of expression, and ought to be the medium only of the highest of sentiments and ideas. This expectation intrinsically sets up a dichotomy between genuine and artificial poetry, and gives rise to the idea that poetry can be judged on its authenticity of reference. In the Chinese poetic ideal, there is a delicate balance between form and content that hinges on the genuineness of feeling and the morality of intent. As Confucius says, “when substance overwhelms the form, it is vulgar, when form overwhelms substance, it is extravagant.”⁷¹ In this way, while poetry is recognized as an artistic construction, it is generally placed in the realm of the authentic and the natural, and the discerning Chinese critic can differentiate between what is embellished and what is merely sophisticated in terms of both form and content.

Because canonically speaking poetry must spring from a natural source, biography is an important and entirely valid tool for traditional poetic extrapolation. Li Shangyin's poetry defies biographic contextualization, however, and Wu argues that the ‘decadence’ of his poetry is a means of deliberately tipping the balance between form and content so that his poetry falls

⁷¹ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 13 (in reference to *The Analects* 6.16).

outside of the canonical range of appropriate convention. Wu, then, is one of the few scholars to emphasize the poet's agency, arguing that in some instances the purposeful ambiguity of Li Shangyin's imagery is a way of drawing attention to the poem's mechanisms in lieu of its meaning, thus resisting certain moralistic implications of a content-oriented understanding of art.⁷²

Wu argues that Li Shangyin's poetry would not be unusual were it to be deliberately subversive to the canonical ideal, because for the same time that there has existed an overarching poetic ideal for Chinese poetry, there has also existed a tradition of literary deviance both beneath and beside that poetic archetype. This is a natural, cyclical process, Wu claims; whenever a norm is established, it is also worked against and undermined. The necessity of this deviance might be due in part to another pervasive tradition of Chinese literature—the trope of decline. In general, each great literary work is regarded with the bias that it is necessarily less than the greatness of those that came before. Mencius cannot quite live up to Confucius, and even the great Zhuge Liang is not regarded as highly as Sunzi. Working in and under the exaltation of the past, resistance can become a means of re-setting the standard against which one's work is judged.

Decadent poetry is one example of this kind of literary resistance, and Wu attempts to place Li Shangyin's poetry directly within this subversive tradition. When Wu talks of decadent poetry, he does not just mean the kind of poetry that drips with rich, material-oriented adjectives and objects and paints a scene of indulgence and irreverence. Though Li Shangyin does write a bit of the former kind of decadent poetry, his hermetic poetry also represents a different, though equally discredited canonically, kind of decadence—that of a concentration of form over

⁷² Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 14.

substance. Wu argues that Li Shangyin is purposely resisting the meaning-making process in his poetry. His subjects are often either irreverent or unclear, his versification overwhelmed with allusion and imagery. His poems are splendidly crafted, but because their meaning is hazy and truncated at times, his verses become demoted to products of craftsmanship, not artistry—that is, they lack the genuine character that distinguishes exercises of craft from the expression of literary genius.

Li Shangyin is aware that his verses invite precisely this sort of criticism, and Wu argues that the poet intended for his work to be “deviant” in this regard. Canonically speaking, this demotive move toward discrediting Li Shangyin’s poetry must be made, because if good poetry can be crafted artificially, it opens the door for its misuse—the idea that poetry could be, in essence, a *lie* invalidates its use in Chinese society as a means of preserving present values and communicating them into an uncertain future. Poetry is meant to be a genuine method of emotional and intellectual communication;⁷³ to treat poetry casually, as mere artistic display, as decadent poetry is said to do, offends that model at its deepest level.⁷⁴ Little wonder that the first derisive critics of Li Shangyin’s poetry compared him to a craftsman, nor that so many commentators worked to remove the decadent stigma from Shangyin’s work before admitting him into the annals of great Chinese poets.

In addition to the moral stigma of being frivolous, disingenuous, and anti-Confucian, decadent poetry also has historical implications, as it is often connected chronologically to the highly dramatized periods of cultural history that generally precede the fall or decline of a dynasty and the loss of social morality and political stability that come therewith.⁷⁵ In the

⁷³ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, pp 26-27.

⁷⁴ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 30.

⁷⁵ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 33.

immediate context of Li Shangyin's poetry, the late Southern Dynasties (circa 420-589), which preceded the Tang, had flourished with 'decadent' poetry. This kind of deviant poetry was viewed as a hallmark of a crumbling system of social values, the symptom of a dying age, and the ever-lauded moralistic and exemplary poetry of the High Tang was in part a critical response to the decadence of the previous dynasty. Late Tang poetry, in turn, can be generally seen as a push back toward "decadence" once more in a necessary resistance to the unattainable expectations set by the High Tang a few generations before.⁷⁶ To its critics, the decadence of Late Tang poetry usually involved a selfish turning inwards, as in Li He's profoundly personal poetry, and a decreased interest in properly Confucian critiques of the political and social sphere. For its creators, decadent poetry is an alternative, perhaps more forgiving, outlet for poetic expression, but more importantly, according to Wu, it is an open critique of canonical poetic standards.⁷⁷

Following Li He, Li Shangyin works against the idea that poetry is something biographic. Wu notes that Li Shangyin, after Li He, was concerned with re-negotiating the standards of poetry in his time. Owen, too, says that "there were other competing ideas of 'poetry' in the first half of the ninth century," one of which claimed that "'poetry' was creating a world of words in which biography was secondary—if even relevant."⁷⁸ Because of this, Wu advises us to read poems like Li Shangyin's hermetic ones, "not as a record of the poet's personal experience, as we would in dealing with a canonical piece, but as a verbal play that derives its meaning and significance mostly from the pleasures and frustrations created by its highly crafted and

⁷⁶ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 33.

⁷⁷ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 39.

⁷⁸ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 349.

deliberately baffling textual strategies.”⁷⁹ The expertly crafted word play and obscure, even paradoxical allusions are an important part of his poetic mode, but by paying attention to the recurring themes in his poems, we can see that he does not pursue ambiguity for its own sake, but as a component of a larger agenda, a tool for exposing the truths of his worldview.

The trouble with this theory comes in showing that Li Shangyin’s poetry is an example of purposeful resistance, intentionally and subversively ambiguous, instead of being ambiguous in attitude or containing references that non-contemporary readers find ambiguous, as Liu noted earlier could be the case. Wu strongly feels that Li Shangyin is attempting to change, and, indeed, improve upon the decadent modes of the past, however.⁸⁰ The very fact that Li Shangyin’s work is so fiercely debated is for Wu a sign that the poet succeeded in fusing decadence with canon, effectively resisting both labels simultaneously, and creating a new style of poetry to emulate. The style Wu describes is defined by its “elusive meanings and lingering tones,”⁸¹ and by the paradoxes Li Shangyin evokes between steadfastness and frustration, agitated suspense and tranquil melancholy. Wu’s criticism is useful in that he is one of the few critics to touch on the “why” of Li Shangyin’s ambiguities in a way that speaks to a specific artistic motive, rather than to biographical motivation or purely vague artistic sentiment.

Liu and Owen both try to fit Li Shangyin into their mold of poetry as an act of communication, as the map to a territory that will be explored, but I am not convinced they are entirely successful. There is something in Li Shangyin’s poetry that works actively against this communicative mold, though whether that is in deference to a motive like Wu suggests or is simply indicative of Shangyin’s own artistic temperament is harder to say. He disguises his

⁷⁹ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 191.

⁸⁰ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 158

⁸¹ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 153.

subject matter, makes figurative his interpretations of both the past and present, resists biographical extrapolation, and frustrates narratological framing. It is not enough to say that he successfully communicates ambiguity; in many ways he is unsuccessful in communicating—but purposely so. There could be any number of “real” motives for the kinds of ambiguities in Li Shangyin’s poetry. He could be acting defensively, protecting the event or emotion that inspired his poetry by relating it ambiguously, or he could be acting playfully, writing frustratingly obtuse poems about the privy just for the sake of it. Li Shangyin’s motivation is something that will probably never be clear to his posterity, but when reading Li Shangyin it is most important to realize that even in the absence of clarity, there is still work to be done.

Li Shangyin’s abortive moves toward and away from communication are deliberate aspects of his poems that cannot be written off as merely indicating a lack of necessary tools on the reader’s part, as something lost in translation, or even as the communication of ambiguity itself. Once the ambiguities are taken to be a meaningful part of Li Shangyin’s craft, we must decide what to make of them. We could go further into the poet’s motive, like Wu does, and argue that these gestures of concealment and revealment be read as acts of resistance and defense, or we could see them as strategic embodiments of certain themes that run throughout his poetry, specifically the themes of frustration, impermanence, and loss.

For my part, I believe the latter approach to be the best; that is, I think it most interesting to read Li Shangyin’s resistance to transparency and communicative meaning in light of the other themes he seems preoccupied with. I argue that there is a connection between his hermetic mode and his fixation on tropes such as frustration and fragility, destruction and relief. The connection may not be explicit, but when form and content are merged as perfectly as they are in Chinese poetry, any relation between the two is noteworthy. I do not necessarily consider Li Shangyin’s

poetry to be canonically deviant, although I do agree that finding a coherent world in his poetry is no easy task. Because a poet is an artist of emotions as much as he is subject to them, Li Shangyin's biography is of secondary importance in my readings of his poetry. What an artist expresses may not have necessarily happened, but if it communicates something meaningful to the audience, it can nevertheless be considered intrinsically real and true. Li Shangyin's poetry, of course, goes beyond communication as traditional Chinese poetics understands it. His poetry resists attempts to trap it into a narrative form, biographical or otherwise. It raises questions about the genuineness of crafted emotion, and it critiques the very act of attempting to read truth from fiction. The task at hand is to discover whether Li Shangyin's poetry, for all its captivating imagery and intriguing contradictions, can communicate through the fog of ambiguity a world worth experiencing.

Chapter Three: Close Reading of Selected Poems

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen a few of Li Shangyin's most notoriously difficult hermetic poems: "Heyang," "Walls of Sapphire," and "The Brocade Zither," as well as several of his most famous ones: "Last Night's Stars," "Coming Was Empty Words," "Yesterday," "The East Wind Sighs," "Double Curtains," and "The Travel-Loving Plateau." Via meticulous analysis, I intend to show that the difficulties in "reading through" and "exploring" the worlds of his most hermetic poems are a result of purposeful strategies Li Shangyin employs as a tactical scrambling of the poems' narrative signals, and perhaps as a resistance to the idea of communication itself as a poetic ideal. By connecting the use of ambiguities to the themes Li Shangyin is predominately preoccupied with, I also aim to show how Li Shangyin's unusual hermetic mode relates to an underlying obsession with frustration, impermanence, and loss, and how his hermetic model contributes to the exploration of these themes in his poetry's form and content.

This analysis begins, as many analyses of Li Shangyin might, with "The Brocade Zither," one of the best known and most contested of Li Shangyin's poems. The arguments, suggestions, and pet theories from commentators on this one poem are legion in number and markedly diverse in supposition. James Liu, who titles it, "The Ornamented Zither," details five major schools of interpretation, which various commentators support, combine, or deny. The first maintains that it is a love poem for a woman Li Shangyin had an affair with. The second that the poem is simply about music played on a zither. The third calls it a tribute to Li Shangyin's deceased wife, while the fourth sees it as a lament on frustrated ambitions. The fifth school simply designates it a functional introduction to Li Shangyin's collected poetic works.⁸² In a cursory reading of the

⁸² Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, pp 52-52.

text, it is difficult to see the justification these past commentators found for their competing narratives. While undeniably beautiful, to a literal reading the poem poses serious narrative questions. “The Brocade Zither” (*jin se* 錦瑟) reads as follows:

錦瑟無端五十弦，一弦一柱思華年。
庄生曉夢迷蝴蝶，望帝春心托杜鵑。
滄海月明珠有淚，藍田日暖玉生煙。
此情可待成追憶，隻是當時已惘然。⁸³

It just happens that the brocade zither has fifty strings,
Each string, each peg turns thoughts to the flowering years.
Zhuang Zhou’s morning dream lost in a butterfly,
Emperor Wang’s spring heart lodged in a cuckoo.
The moon grows bright on the gray sea, the pearls have tears,
The sun warms Indigo Fields, the jade gives off mist.
I could wait until these feelings become remembrance,
It’s just that at the moment I was already in a daze.⁸⁴

Liu readily acknowledges that the popular, narrative-based accounts of the poem are unconvincing, saying of the five major schools that “none of the above-mentioned theories is completely satisfactory,” and arguing for a more general, and yet more nuanced, understanding of the poem as “a variation on the common theme that life is a dream.”⁸⁵ For Liu, the poem’s imagery, while dissociative on the literal level, prompts an elaborate rumination on illusion and remembrance on the reader’s part, provoking him into sharing with the poet a “wistful recollection of the past.”⁸⁶ In this way, Liu takes the poem to be communicative, in that it inspires the reader toward a certain understanding of life. The myriad *different* understandings of the poem are not, Liu argues, evidence of the poem’s confusing, mysterious nature, but rather a compliment to the poem’s ability to instill a variety of reactions in its readers by working on

⁸³ Feng Hao, *Yuxisheng shi ji jian zhu* p 493.

⁸⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 393-394 (with modifications in lines five, six, and eight by me; original reading is: “When the moon grows bright on the gray sea, there are tears in pearl; / when the sun warms Indigo fields the jade gives off a mist” and “One should” rather than I could”).

⁸⁵ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, pp 54, 56.

⁸⁶ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 57.

multiple levels at once.⁸⁷ For Owen, however, the vast range of interpretations reflect not Li Shangyin's gift for providing open-ended poetic possibilities, but the effects of a conditioned tradition of Chinese poetic sensibilities. The "exegetical process" of Chinese scholarship, Owen notes, typically involves an immediate turn toward a biographic explanation in the event of a reader's uncertainty.⁸⁸ In this way, while Liu is not shy in positing that the zither is a metaphor for the arbitrariness of life, with the strings as analogous to the memories (or poems) left behind once life (the music) has ended,⁸⁹ Owen maintains that "we cannot know what the 'brocade zither' represents" and can only "describe how it is represented."⁹⁰

How is it represented? On that the commentators often agree. The implications of many of the images and themes in this poem are, in themselves, easily understood, largely because they can be connected intuitively to a human understanding of the world, even while the poem refuses to connect them explicitly. For example, the beautiful zither that invokes memories of "flowering years" also automatically invokes the auditory impression of fading music. These impressions of bygone sweetness echo to the final couplet in the idea of remembrance being something hazy and uncertain, but longed for. This in turn connects to the image of steam released from warm jade, disappearing into the atmosphere, and the idea of the moon as an unfixed (waxing and waning) gaze, like memory itself, looking down on its reflection in the calm-yet-ever-moving sea and the melancholy pearls underneath.

The themes of haze and memory are tied to ideas about life as transient by the allusion to Zhuangzi's butterfly. Zhuangzi was a Daoist thinker who, when he dreamed he was a butterfly, woke confused, unsure whether he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly

⁸⁷ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 208.

⁸⁸ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 393.

⁸⁹ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, pp 56-57.

⁹⁰ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 396.

dreaming he was a man. The mention of the emperor who became a cuckoo through a process of soul transmigration adds yet another layer of transformative melancholy to the canvas. The difficulty, as Fusheng Wu puts it, “is that it is nearly impossible to assign a meaningful structure to the poem’s beautiful, sensual images and allusions.”⁹¹ The connections can be drawn intuitively, but as they are not guided explicitly by the form of the poem, they don’t mean anything concrete, and it is difficult for a reader to express what, exactly, the poem is saying.

To some, Li Shangyin’s poetry may seem no more extraordinary than the work of Wang Wei, another Chinese poet who also uses impressionistic imagery to great effect in his nature poems. In Wang Wei’s verse, the scene is set through a series of images that are connected only in the reader’s imagination, leaving it up to the reader to juxtapose the different images into a coherent narrative. Unlike Wang Wei, however, Li Shangyin’s poem does not contain a scene at all, even an evolving one. The images don’t relate geographically or temporally, as Wang Wei’s usually do, so instead of getting multiple, specific impressions of a single backdrop ‘world,’ the reader of “The Brocade Zither” receives a handful of disconnected images, and is asked to draw a scene that, with the collection of images given, seems logistically impossible without excessive extrapolation and improvisation on the interpreter’s part. Is it any wonder the commentators’ accounts are so noticeably diverse in range?

Owen accounts for the lack of explicit connectivity in the poem by calling it “poetics of blurriness,” and suggests that the fragments of imagery “draw their intensity from the implied whole”⁹² of the world behind the poem. He agrees, however, that the reader does not know *what* the implied whole is, so it seems to me that the poem works not in relation to a particular whole, or even to a range of possible wholes, as Liu argues, and as the communication theory of poetry

⁹¹ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 168.

⁹² Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 396.

requires, but to the idea of wholeness generally. As Wu says, “We are lured into believing that there must be something in the poem that can serve as a key to unlock the poem. Yet the ongoing, unresolved debate about ‘Patterned Zither’ proves that what Li Shangyin offers is only a possibility.”⁹³ Owen attempts to draw the poem into a theory of communication by arguing that “the poem reproduces the state of mind it describes.”⁹⁴ In this understanding, the poem’s effect on the reader—making him confused—successfully satisfies the poem’s goals, and is made possible by Li Shangyin’s deft poetic manipulation. The individual images are ultimately unimportant in this poem. They are merely structurally analogous to the strings on the overarching, metaphorical zither, and though they make a song when played together, they have no intrinsic connection to one another when taken alone.⁹⁵

This makes a fairly good account of the poem, and it is tempting to stop here, accepting the poem as a means toward the end of communicating the ambiguity of the poet’s mindset. This stops at what the poem is and does, however, and does not consider at what (and how and why) the poem fails in the canonical sense of what a poem is expected to do. As much as the poem is a singular entity, standing in relation only to itself, it also exists within the Chinese poetic tradition, and by analyzing it in that context we can see how Li Shangyin’s poems deviate from the expected poetic norms of his time. For instance, Wu points out that according to proper poetic convention in the Tang, the poet should have better presented the connection between the two allusions in lines three and four, particularly as they are juxtaposed (and their relatedness therefore suggested) by their parallel positions in the couplet.⁹⁶ Unexplained allusions are the hallmark of Li Shangyin’s hermetic poems, and it is tempting to shrug and suggest that as

⁹³ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 170.

⁹⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 396.

⁹⁵ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 396.

⁹⁶ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 168.

readers we may simply have lost the tools to interpret them properly. Owen cautions against this self-deprecating ducking, however, and reminds us that Li Shangyin's allusions are not typical of his times. Just as in "Refining the Elixir," Li Shangyin often uses allusions and analogies in ways that deliberately muddy the waters of accepted understandings. Even when the allusion is clear, what Li Shangyin means by it is often not, with the result that "we don't even know how to construe the lines" that contain it.⁹⁷

It is not only in his use of allusions that Li Shangyin is considered unusual. In narration, too, he shirks the traditional mold. When reading one of Li Shangyin's poems, it is easy to get the sense that the poet is referring to multiple things at once. The imagery of blatantly different scenes is juxtaposed, with only an intuitive connection supporting a relation between them. Moreover, precisely because the poet avoids any kind of explicit connection between images, any allusions in the poem stand out as possible handholds, focused referents that pop against a backdrop of hazy impressions. The allusions ultimately prove useless in fostering a cohesive narrative, however, as it is usually just as difficult to relate them clearly to the rest of the images. So even though there are points of seeming clarity in the poem, like stars in a blanket of darkness, they aren't arranged in familiar constellations. The imagery means something intuitively to the reader, but he is hard-pressed to explain what is *happening* in the poem. In some poems, like "Heyang" and "Walls of Sapphire," the narrative issues are further complicated by what seems to be a series of evolving scenes, none of which are explicitly connected to one another.

While it is not the case in all of Li Shangyin's poetry, for his hermetic poems, the lack of cohesive narrative, the use of impressionistic imagery (beyond what is usual of Chinese poetry in general), and the ambiguous use of allusions are characteristic. I argue that the ambiguity of his

⁹⁷ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 343.

poetry's form not only achieves an ambiguous emotional effect in his readers, but is analogous to broader themes that run throughout his hermetic poetry. It is difficult to see, or, indeed, to argue this point without having analyzed a representative sample of Li Shangyin's work, however. In order to understand what meaning individual hermetic poems allude to, then, it is useful to first analyze the hermetic poems as a whole. We will therefore return to "The Brocade Zither" later, with a larger survey of Li Shangyin's hermetic poems under our belts, to see what can be made thematically of its ambiguous form.

"Heyang" (河陽) is another poem that has long frustrated those commentators who probed for literal coherence amidst its choppy, disconnected narrative form. According to Owen, most Chinese poetry can be read in terms of conventional situations; references to named places and archetypal scenes were generally kept within a certain arena of possibilities that poetic scholarship had canonized. "Such a reading practice is contingent on a circumscribed and habitual range of variation around conventional situations," Owen says, "'Heyang' has no such conventional situation behind it."⁹⁸ In the absence of a familiar referent scene, commentators have attempted to write new scenarios that fit the text in some way or another, but all of them fall short of providing a convincingly coherent narrative. "Heyang," simply put, defies the narrative mode. The text is as follows:

黃河搖溶天上來，玉樓影近中天台。
龍頭瀉酒客壽杯，主人淺笑紅玫瑰。

梓澤東來七十裡，長溝復塹埋雲子。
可惜秋眸一嚮光，漢陵走馬黃塵起。

南浦老魚腥古涎，真珠密字芙蓉篇。
湘中寄到夢不到，衰容自去拋涼天。

⁹⁸ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 369.

憶得蛟絲裁小卓，蛺蝶飛回木綿薄。
綠繡笙囊不見人，一口紅霞夜深嚼。

幽蘭泣露新香死，畫圖淺縹鬆溪水。
楚絲微覺竹枝高，半曲新辭寫綿紙。

巴西夜市紅守宮，后房點臂斑斑紅。
堤南渴雁自飛久，蘆花一夜吹西風。

曉帘串斷蜻蜓翼，羅屏但有空青色。
玉灣不釣三千年，蓮房暗被蛟龍惜。

濕銀注鏡井口平，鸞釵映月寒錚錚。
不知桂樹在何處，仙人不下雙金莖。

百尺相風插重屋，側近嫣紅伴柔綠。
百勞不識對月郎，湘竹千條為一束。⁹⁹

The Yellow River heaves churning, coming down from Heaven,
The reflections of jade mansions near the Terrace That Strikes Heaven.
Dragon heads spill forth the ale, the guests offer toasts,
The hostess lightly smiles a red carnelian.

Coming from Catalpa Marsh to east, seventy leagues,
Long channels and double moats bury the child of cloud.
Alas for those sweet morsels, the glint of autumn eye pupils,
From a galloping horse at Hanling the brown dust rose.

At Southbank the aged fish reek with ancient slime,
Pearls, the secret words written, the poem, a lotus-bloom.
Sent all the way to the Xiang region, dreams reach not so far,
The wasted visage goes off by itself, leaving cool skies behind.

I recall the merman silk being cut on the small table,
Butterflies turning in flight, kapok fibers thin.
Green embroidered pouch for the pipes, the person is not seen,
A mouthful of red tendrils of mist chewed deep in the night.

The hidden orchid sheds tears of dew, its recent fragrance dies,
The picture, pale celadon green, waters of Song Creek.
From Chu silk one faintly notices the Bamboo Branch songs loud,
New lyrics for half a song written out on cotton paper.

⁹⁹ Feng Hao, *Yuxisheng shi ji jian zhu*, p 669.

In Baling at night they market red poultice, “Chamber-Guard,”
In the back rooms it dots the arm, streak on streak of red.
South of the embankment the thirsty goose long has flown on its own,
Reed flowers all night long blown by the west wind.

The morning curtain pierces and breaks wings of the dragonfly,
The gossamer screen has only the bare color green.
The jade bay is unfished for three thousand years,
Unseen in darkness the lotus pod wins the pity of dragons.

Damp silver pours in the mirror, flat mouth of a well,
Simurgh hairpins glint in moonlight, cold and clinking.
I know not of the cassia tree, where it may be found.
The immortals do not come down from the paired metal columns.

A hundred feet up the weather vane set on a tiered roof,
Close beside the vivid red companion to frail green.
The shrike does not recognize facing the Moon Lad,
A thousand stalks of Xiang bamboo make one bundle.¹⁰⁰

“Heyang” can be divided into nine stanzas of four lines apiece. The topic of each stanza is markedly different from the ones before and after it, making the reading process disorienting and disconnected. The first stanza locates the reader in the midst of a grand feast, drinking ale in a lush mansion, watching the hostess smile secretively. These lines are a straightforward drawing in of the reader’s attention, but, as Owen says, “the relative clarity of the first stanza is immediately lost in the second.”¹⁰¹ The second stanza whisks the reader off on a long journey, galloping across the countryside, eyes glinting. The mood surges upward from the relaxed, indulgent air of the first stanza, into a sense of vastness and motion. The third stanza, however, brings us back to a standstill. Southbank is a traditional place of parting,¹⁰² but the gentle melancholy expected of a parting poem is twisted uncomfortably by the image of old, slimy fish at the site of parting. Together with the “wasted visage” in the last line of the stanza, the old fish

¹⁰⁰ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 365-367.

¹⁰¹ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 372.

¹⁰² Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 373.

and the ancient slime produce an air of rotteness and stagnancy—how long would a fish have to lie undisturbed to gather slime? It is as though the scene has been frozen in a state of degenerative ennui. Immediately after the grotesque image of slimy fish, the poet draws a comparison between pearls, secret words, and a blooming lotus. If the pearls represent the words of the poem or a letter, as Owen suggests, then they represent the hope that some literary effort, like a poem or a letter sent after the goodbye, may prove useful in disrupting the stagnancy of the goodbye scene. They are the lotus blooming, bringing life and change to the old bank. Yet, in the third line, the poet laments that though the words may travel to Xiang, “dreams reach not that far.” The ineffectiveness of words, and by extension poetry, in crossing distances of the mind and heart is one that appears often in Li Shangyin’s poetry, and will turn up again when we revisit “The Brocade Zither.”

The fourth stanza turns inward, back in time to a remembered scene including a woman doing ordinary things like cutting silk and chewing something red. The mood is strongly peaceful, the setting domestic, and the remembrance fond. The fifth stanza looks away from such a warm, living scene, and instead features a painting of a green orchid,¹⁰³ and someone composing new lyrics to an overheard song. The mood contrasts sharply with the fourth stanza. Instead of quiet and domestic, the scene is noisy and sterile—the music dissatisfying and the painting a mere lifeless imitation of a real flower, bearing none of its scent. The two instances of craft in this stanza, the painting and the composing of song lyrics, give the scene an artificial feel, as well. We are reminded that the poem, too, is something crafted, rather than something close to nature.

¹⁰³ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 376.

The sixth stanza emphasizes the artificiality of the fifth when it drags the point of view away from that of a detached observer and invests a sense of danger and immediate uncertainty into the new scene. Owen explains that Chamber-guard was a means of ensuring a woman's fidelity, in that it "was supposed to leave a mark that was indelible, unless a woman was unfaithful, in which case the mark would disappear."¹⁰⁴ The mood of this stanza is charged with urgent emotion; it is suspicious and defensive, taut with anxiety, and the idea of the woman being protected and guarded is set in direct opposition to the image of the freely migrating geese and the flowers drifting in the wind.¹⁰⁵ That restless anxiety soon fades as the seventh stanza unfolds into a series of unclear images that hint at emptiness and sober loneliness. The unfished bay, the unseen lotus pod, the morning curtain, and the faded screen all suggest abandonment, something dormant or forgotten. The eighth stanza crystallizes into a woman sitting at the lip of a well in the moonlight, gazing into its surface as one would a mirror. There is an air of innocence, bound to the impressions of isolation and ignorance—she does not know of the cassia tree, and has not been visited by immortals. The round imagery of the moon and the well suggest completeness, and yet the woman sits at the lip alone in the dead of night. The last stanza gives a new, relatively simple scene—a lone weathervane atop a roof, and a shrike, the herald of spring's ending, seeing but not recognizing the "Moon Lad," who may or may not be the poet.¹⁰⁶ At the end, we understand no more than we did at the beginning. As Owen says, "associations crisscross everywhere, but do not cohere."¹⁰⁷

If taken separately, it would be easy to imagine each stanza as its own poem, with a vague but simple subject and a distinct mood. In fact, Owen points out, "each stanza of 'Heyang'

¹⁰⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 376-377.

¹⁰⁵ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 377.

¹⁰⁶ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 379.

¹⁰⁷ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 378.

has a separate rhyme and exists as a formally distinct unit.”¹⁰⁸ Together, the different stanzas conflict in nearly every way. The transformation of scene is not clear between stanzas, so it is difficult to know if one is moving forward or backward temporally, if the subject is the same or different, and if the images in the previous stanza relate to the current scene or not. The emotional charge for each scene differs, as well, and because the change is so abrupt, the poem does not lead the reader through each emotion naturally—rather, the often contradictory emotions are tossed at the reader one after the other, seemingly at random. What are we to make of the shameless juxtaposition of these provokingly discordant stanzas?

Owen’s argument about this poem is that it “enacts the clandestine,” and that “the moment we ‘decode’ it, we have lost it.”¹⁰⁹ He believes the poem (and, indeed, many of Li Shangyin’s hermetic poems) should be read in terms of how it gestures to a scenario, but, because that scenario is not one traditional readers of Chinese poetry are able to ‘recognize,’ still conceals it.¹¹⁰ What purpose this simultaneous revealing and concealing works toward, Owen does not claim to know, preferring to limit his phenomenally detailed critique to “what the community of readers could share.”¹¹¹ Wu, however, suggests that Li Shangyin’s penchant for ambiguity is a way of “disarming the critics,”¹¹² and might be working either as a defensive attempt to conceal his private life from voyeurs (if his poems are even biographical), or as a preemptive strike against those who would denounce his poetry (as indeed many did) as merely aesthetic. What is clear is that despite retroactive attempts by commentators to read a cohesive

¹⁰⁸ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 372.

¹⁰⁹ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 369.

¹¹⁰ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 364-365.

¹¹¹ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 369.

¹¹² Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 158.

whole into the narrative layout of this poem, there was no attempt by Li Shangyin to *communicate* a cohesive whole.

The poem is a study in transformation, not only of literal scene, but of subject and mood, as well. Owen says, “The poem enacts a process of confusion, which the poet will often tell us is the ‘blur’ or confusion of passion and memory,”¹¹³ but he also warns that Li Shangyin is not likely as confused as he pretends. There is the possibility that this is merely an example of what Owen calls “engaging in poetic action rather than encoding meaning.”¹¹⁴ If this is the case, Li Shangyin juxtaposes these incongruous images because of the confusion they cause, rather than because of the meaning they make together. Watson, too, admits that Li Shangyin “is a poet who often trembles on the brink of meaning”¹¹⁵ without actually leading the reader to a place where the meaning becomes evident. Wu claims that Li Shangyin’s way of alternatively revealing and concealing the world of his poetry is his attempt at negotiating with poetic tradition, teasing out a place for Palace Style poetry among the canonic,¹¹⁶ and whether or not this is the case, the poet certainly seems to be openly manipulating traditional poetics. He includes just enough suggested connections between images to tease his readers with the frustrated possibility of understanding.

If “Heyang” frustrates all attempts to de-code it, what is the reader to take away from the poem, beyond an appreciation for and deep sympathy with the feelings of ambiguity it invokes? Should the reader accept the shifting, frustrating narrative quality of the poem as the denial of cohesive meaning, or could the few connective elements that tie the poem loosely together—not unlike the bundle of bamboo stalks the poet refers to—be explored for their thematic purposes? Owen notices several threads of imagery that seem to run through the very different scenes, such

¹¹³ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 379.

¹¹⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 379.

¹¹⁵ Watson, *Chinese Lyricism*, p 192.

¹¹⁶ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 167.

as the use of small, red splashes of color to focus the eye.¹¹⁷ The streaks of red chamber guard, the tendrils of red chew, and the red lips and mouths in various stanzas seem to link the women in the different scenes together in some way. These points of redness are all in some way sensual, and all draw the reader's eye to the female body, embodied in a single crimson image. In opposition to the color red, there is the color green that appears several times over in the many stanzas. The green silk pouch, the pale green picture, and the faded green screen all stand in opposition to the vibrant red of the women, and in the final stanza the poet describes the weather vane atop the tiered roof, the "vivid red companion to frail green."

It is not clear what the green represents. If it is the natural opposition to a woman, a man (presumably the poet), why is the red always so vivid while the green is so pale? The red is embodied by animated images, as well—a woman's lips, the chew in her mouth, the marks on her guarded body—while the green is embodied in sterile, inanimate images like the painting, the piper cover, and the gossamer screen. Even the weathervane is more animate than the roof it sits upon. The green seems to be a passive backdrop against which the red stands out all the more brilliantly, but what does that mean in terms of what the red and green represent? It may have something to do with the theme of remembrance that Owen describes; perhaps in the poet's memory the woman's vibrancy makes all backdrops seem sterile in comparison. Indeed, the scenes in which a woman is not explicitly referred to—stanzas three, five, and seven—are all characterized by emptiness and stagnancy. When the woman is present, the scene is alive and the emotions are deeply felt, whether they are gaiety, contentment, or protectiveness, but when she is absent the poem describes scenes of loneliness, abandonment, and despair. The trouble with this sort of interpretation is that the scenes are so distinct from one another that it is difficult to argue

¹¹⁷ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 377.

that the same woman is being referred to in each one. How could the hostess at the feast in the beginning be the innocent sitting by the well at the end? Can the affectionate scene of domesticity in stanza four be inspired by the same woman as the suspicion and anxiety in scene six? It is possible that the relationship between the poet and the woman evolved so dramatically over time, but implausible, especially considering the various place names that geographically contradict certain stanzas.

There are other points of connectivity that might be explored for meaning, however. The shrike in stanza nine, which harkens the end of spring, echoes the “autumn eye pupils” in the second stanza and the “aged fish” and “wasted visage” of the third stanza; the ending of springtime means the onset of aging and slow decay. This theme of something young and vibrant fading over time is common to Li Shangyin’s hermetic poems, and may have something to do with the recurrence of pale green imagery as well. The pearls in the third stanza also spark an automatic association with the moon in the eighth, both being round and white and carrying positive connotations of togetherness and beauty. With these elements, it is as though Li Shangyin gives the reader a line to hold onto, to follow through the progression of each scenario, and yet, although the connections are there, they don’t further our understanding of what the poem means—they are merely extrapolations that the different stanzas have in common. They could mean something profound, but they could also be evidence of craft, not communicated meaning.

There may be a hint at an overarching theme, however, in the very last couplet of the poem. Particularly in his lengthy or dense poems, Li Shangyin’s ending couplet seems to apologize for the ambiguities ubiquitous in the rest of the poem. We saw this in “Refining the Elixir,” in which the last couplet saved the poem from being dismissed as irreverent nonsense by

intimating that it was a poem that alluded to something else, and again in “The Brocade Zither,” when the final two lines suggested that the poem was about the transience of memory. Owen describes this technique thus: “Li Shangyin’s endings often address someone or seem to share a personal confidence with the reader, creating an intimacy that is in many ways the counterpart of the sense of a secret truth in the obscurity of the inner couplets.”¹¹⁸ If there is a sense of intimacy created by Li Shangyin’s endings, however, it is a false one. After letting the reader wade through densely impressionistic couplets that play at obscurity and suggestion, the poet throws a lifeline—a relatively straightforward observation or impartment that makes the reader feel relieved and almost grateful to the poet. This sense of gratitude, and the idea that the reader is in the poet’s confidence, does indeed foster intimacy, but it is only one more act in the revealing-concealing performance Li Shangyin puts on throughout his hermetic poetry.

In “Heyang,” for instance, the last line reads: “a thousand stalks of Xiang bamboo make one bundle.” In the context of the wildly independent stanzas that make up “Heyang,” this line feels like it makes sense. All the stanzas are like individual stalks of bamboo—together they make a bundle! And yet, this sort of realization does not actually tell us anything new about the poem or about Li Shangyin’s intentions. We can say that the poem is meant to be like a collection of bamboo stalks, tied together in a bundle, each remaining distinct, yet connected by the poem’s form, but we don’t know why Li Shangyin chooses these sticks to tie together, nor what the purpose of having a bundle of poem segments rolled together into one illogical narrative whole would be. We can see certain similarities in some of the stanzas that might validate their inclusion, but those similarities are still at odds with the contradictions and dissimilarities between the scenes.

¹¹⁸ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 391.

Perhaps instead of looking for what is similar within the poem, the answer is to turn to that which is recurrent in Li Shangyin's poetry in general, to try to devise the poem's meaning from what Li Shangyin seems most preoccupied with expressing in other poems. The characteristic themes of impermanence, loss, and frustration are easy to find running through this poem, revealed in its content and reinforced in its form, but spotting them requires stepping back from the details of the narrative and seeing the forest beyond the trees.

The poem flits from frame to frame, turning over pieces of sharply reflected worlds, showing the reader scenes that together make up a range of emotions and experiences that are all in some way related to romantic love and loss, but which don't fit coherently into a single, overarching narrative. Because very little is constant in the details (even the identity of the female object seems to evolve over the course of the poem), the pattern of movement between narrative scenes and the recursive feelings of engagement and detachment that the reader experiences become clearer in comparison. This is a familiar tactic of Li Shangyin's; he draws the reader into a scene and then tears him away and plunges him into a different, equally baffling one. In reading his poem, the reader experiences the impermanence and illusory nature of the world Li Shangyin perceives.

Other common themes are present in "Heyang" as well. A sense of intimacy in the poem is recreated each time the poet touches upon a red pair of lips, and disrupted each time he dunks the reader into a new, unfamiliar stream of impressions and emotions. In this way, the theme of loss is compounded even as it is explored in each markedly different scene, felt keenly in each instance, whether it be the loss of youth, loss of a lover, loss of innocence, or the loss of time. This feeling of loss is echoed unconsciously by the reader's own experience as he wanders lost through the disconnected dreamscape, with the poet's words as the reader's only guide. The

theme of frustration is present in this poem too—it is in the rider in stanza two who never reaches his destination, in the lonely heart separated by distance or memory from its love, and in the reader as he looks each stanza over and ponders their relation to one another. Li Shangyin’s ambiguous words are meant to frustrate the reader’s search for meaning, and the fact that he only pretends to relieve that frustration in the end says something about what Li Shangyin is ultimately getting across. The reader must understand that life *is* frustration; even the most vibrant parts of it are impermanent, and, inevitably, are lost.

Another poem in which Li Shangyin’s unique poetic mode inspires ambiguous interpretation is “Walls of Sapphire,” also translated as “Walls of Emerald.” As A.C. Graham puts it, “Walls of Sapphire” “is an extraordinary example of a constellation of images which holds its irrational spell a thousand years after its meaning has been lost.”¹¹⁹ If anything, Graham is optimistic in thinking there was ever a fixed meaning to which the poem could be bound. “Walls of Sapphire” is properly a *wuti* poem, one without a title, but like many *wuti* poems, it is conventionally referred to by the first few characters in the first line, much as “The Brocade Zither” is. From the outset, then, the reader does not have even the dubious help of a place name, as with “Heyang,” to use as a locality for meaning-making. To read a *wuti* is to begin in blackness, groping your way in an unknown direction, stumbling from word to word and waiting for a light to go on somewhere. It is no surprise, then, that so many of Li Shangyin’s hermetic poems share this titleless distinction.

“Walls of Sapphire” (*bi cheng* 碧城) is broken into three parts:

碧城十二曲闌干，犀辟塵埃玉辟寒。
閨苑有書多附鶴，女床無樹不棲鸞。
星沈海底當窗見，雨過河源隔座看。

¹¹⁹ Graham, A.C., *Poems of the Late T'ang* (New York: New York Review Books, 1977), p168.

若是曉珠明又定，一生長對水晶盤。

對影聞聲已可憐，玉池荷葉正田田。
不逢蕭史休回首，莫見洪崖又拍肩。
紫鳳放嬌銜楚佩，赤鱗狂舞撥湘弦。
鄂君悵望舟中夜，繡被焚香獨自眠。

七夕來時先有期，洞房帘箔至今垂。
玉輪顧兔初生魄，鐵網珊瑚未有枝。
檢與神方教駐景，收將鳳紙寫相思。
武皇內傳分明在，莫道人間總不知。¹²⁰

Walls of sapphire, railings in twelve bends,
Narwhale tusk wards off the dust, jade wards off the cold.
In Lang Park there are letters, often sent by crane;
On Maidensbed Mountain no tree without perching simurghs.
Stars sinking to sea's bottom are at its windows seen,
Rain passing the Yellow River's source is watched across from one's seat.
If only morning's pearl would be bright and also still,
I would spend my whole life facing the bowl of crystal.

Facing her outline, hearing her voice, already lovable,
The lotus leaves on Jade Pool just now spreading.
Unless meeting Xiaoshi, she will not turn her head;
She never sees Hongyai and again claps him on the shoulder.
The lavender phoenix shows its charm, holding Chu pendants in its beak;
Crimson scales dance madly, to the strumming of Xiang strings.
The Lord of E looks in despair to that night in the boat;
Embroidered blanket and burning incense, he sleeps all alone.

When she came on the Seventh Eve, the date had been set before,
The curtains of the inner chamber hang down to this day.
The gazing hare in the jade orb when the moon's dark first appears,
The coral in the iron net had no branches yet.
Inspecting the divine technique, make the daylight halt,
Gathering up the phoenix paper, write out longing.
The "Secret History of Emperor Wu" survives for all to see—
Don't say that in the mortal world it is not generally known.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 382-387.

¹²¹ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 382-387.

The narrative logic in this poem is no more consistent than in “Heyang,” but the thematic elements have a stronger, more constant presence, and the connections between juxtaposed scenes may be more confidently supposed. The first part of the poem establishes a precedent of permanence that becomes a foil as the rest of the poem unfolds. It describes a scene of immortality: a grand palace in Heaven, and an impossible view of everything in the world, high and low. The narwhale tusk wards off dust, and the jade wards off the cold; both are examples of Heavenly materials impervious to the usual concerns of time and decay.¹²² The last couplet establishes this immortal point of view as the preferred ideal. If only the sun would stay bright in the sky forever, the poet laments. The stilling of the sun could mean multiple things. If the sun does not move, time does not pass, so this could be an expression of the desire for immortality, never growing old or dying—this would be strange, however, as the heavenly viewpoint suggests that the speaker is already immortal. It could also be as simple as wanting to preserve a perfect moment as it is, unchanging, for eternity. The sun is specifically described as bright, however, and paired with the next line about using the sun’s presence to facilitate watching someone else in a bowl of crystal, it should also be taken to mean that the poet wishes for the kind of illumination that always allows him to see what he is looking at, without having to deal with pesky interruptions like nighttime to distract him from his view. This idea of wishing to preserve something in stillness, to never let it change, and to be like the immortals, who see all, comes into sharp relief as the poem evolves.

In the second section, the reader is treated to an indirect portrait of the lovable woman, who is once again gazed upon. It is a distant, unreaching gaze, Owen notes,¹²³ a frustrated gaze seated in regret, which wishes things could be different—that the sun might stop, that his gaze

¹²² Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 384.

¹²³ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 386-387.

might never be interrupted—but knows, ultimately, that they cannot. The bulk of this section is riddled with intertwining allusions. These allusions all pertain to a loved one in some way, but together they give a mixed, by-proxy account of the actual loved one being described. Xiaoshi in line three refers to the story of the lovers Nongyu (a Qin dynasty princess) and Xiaoshi, both of whom were talented musicians. Their music called a dragon and a phoenix to carry them up to heaven,¹²⁴ and the invocation of their story implies an eternity of love. This is supported by the poet saying that the woman in the poem (presumably the one the poet wishes to gaze at through the crystal) has eyes for no one except her true love.

This seems to describe a faithful, steadfast woman, but this archetypal figure is complicated by the next allusion, which puts a more tragic light on her character. According to the fourth line, even as she looks to none besides her love, she will never see him again. Hongya is an immortal,¹²⁵ also named “The Master of the Edge of the Vastness,” and references to him are generally an analogy for keeping illustrious company. To “clap Hongya on the shoulder” is to stand next to someone you hold in high esteem.¹²⁶ The lover who is compared to Hongya, then, is presumably out of reach for this female mortal, and we might go so far as to presume that she felt honored by his attentions. Together the two allusions seem to say that a mortal woman pines faithfully for the male immortal just as he gazes at her longingly from the heavens.

The third allusion about the Lord of E somewhat complicates this picture of distant lovers. The Lord of E once wrapped a blanket around a boatman in Yue who sang him a love song. His story does not imply the sort of togetherness and belonging that the first two allusions do, instead

¹²⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 385.

¹²⁵ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 385.

¹²⁶ Campany, Robert Ford, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p 273.

giving the lovers (now both male) a brief, fleeting moment of connection that gives way to longing and pining later on, at least on one party's behalf. The wistful, lonely remembrances of the Lord of E are not truly comparable to the heart-rending longing of a pair of established lovers torn apart, but the idea of the lord's frustrated gaze reaching back through memory while he lies alone does echo the distant gaze of the immortal through his bowl of crystal and the longing of the mortal woman for her impossible love. All three are examples of a blocked longing, an impossible gaze. One cannot look into the past any more than one can see earth from heaven or heaven from earth. The Lord of E's story gives the lovers a new degree of separation—that of memory—and their story a greater range of implication. The poem is not just about two people anymore, it's about all forms of frustrated, interrupted love. The sense of regret the Lord of E feels as he gazes at the blanket that once covered his loved one only intensifies the distant gaze of the immortal from earlier in the poem, as the poet once again looks at something unreachable, a moment in the past that can never be recaptured. This sense of rupture, of the frustration and helplessness that color any attempt to re-live bygone days, is captured as well in the poem's form, the narrative of which juxtaposes incongruous worlds—immortal and mortal—in order to emphasize the distance between them.

The dark reality of frustrated separation, contrasted implicitly with the idealized, immortalized vision of a world where the gaze toward the lover (and into the past) is never disrupted, continues to build in the last section of the poem. The moon begins to darken, its light, contrasted with the steadiness of the sun's light in the first section, starting its slow fade away into nothingness as it wanes. The coral has been harvested, but it still lacks branches, suggesting something taken before its time, destroyed while in the flowering stage of its youth. This echoes hauntingly the description of the beloved in stanza two that associates her with lotus leaves that

have just begun to bloom. She represents youth, hope, and new beginnings, but the image of coral being plucked prematurely casts a foreboding shadow over this description. In the next two lines, and perhaps in response to the beloved's implied destruction, a fervent search for the immortal techniques of making the sun stand still ensues, culminating with the poet writing his longings on phoenix paper in prayer for some immortal to do what he cannot. This contradicts the idea that the speaker himself is immortal, but recalls with new meaning and depth of desperation the original desire to stay the sun in the first stanza. Then, when the possibility of the poet achieving his desires seems to be slipping away, even as the moon, symbolic of reunions and togetherness, slips into shadow, the poet tosses out the final couplet.

Compared to the deeply dramatic motions of the rest of the poem, the last two lines seem jarringly colloquial. The poet casually mentions that everyone knows something, takes pains to draw attention to how obvious and known it is by all, and then leaves the reader in complete suspense by not saying what it is that everyone apparently knows. As Owen says, due to the fact that generations of commentators can find no convincing referent for the poet's reference, "we must take this claim of public knowledge as somehow belied by the cryptic lines."¹²⁷ In other words, this is a blatant taunt on Li Shangyin's part. He dangles the explicit promise of an evident truth in front of us, even acts as though he has already told us what it is, and then we writhe in unfulfilled curiosity for eternity. In terms of form, then, this poem is the ultimate embodiment of a frustrated, interrupted gaze. The reader never finds out whether the immortal's gaze remains distant or not, though we can perhaps infer that it does if we assume that the poet is mirroring form and content. If this is the case, Li Shangyin uses the final couplet to throw the parallels between the poem's themes and the reader's experience into sudden, sharp relief.

¹²⁷ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 388.

Making sense of both “Heyang” and “Walls of Sapphire” relies on an understanding of how Li Shangyin’s hermetic themes might tie otherwise impressionistic images together. To further explore these themes, it is important to examine some of his shorter, better known poems as well. An untitled poem I will call “Coming Was an Empty Promise” (*lai shi kong yan* 来是空言) is a commonly cited poem that embodies the simple, yet contradictory, narrative structure many of Li Shangyin’s eight-line (regulated verse) poems are known for.

來是空言去絕蹤，月斜樓上五更鐘。
 夢為遠別啼難喚，書被催成墨未濃。
 蠟照半籠金翡翠，麝薰微度繡芙蓉。
 劉郎已恨蓬山遠，更隔蓬山一萬重。¹²⁸

Coming was an empty promise, you have gone, and left no footprint:
 The moonlight slants above the roof, already the fifth watch sounds.
 Dreaming of remote partings, cries which cannot summon,
 Hurrying to finish the letter, ink which will not thicken.
 The light of the candle half encloses kingfishers threaded with gold,
 The smell of musk comes faintly through embroidered water-lilies.
 Young Liu complained that Fairy Hill is far.
 Past Fairy Hill, range above range, ten thousand mountains rise.¹²⁹

The narrative problems in this poem can be summarized in a single question: has the lover come or has she not? The first line begins the contradiction, and each line afterwards only muddles the situation further. The poet says that she promised to come but didn’t, then immediately following that claims that she has gone (implying she had come at some point), but somehow left no trace of her presence. If there are no footprints, then perhaps the lover has not come, and her presence was only imagined, or she was there so briefly it is as though she was not there at all, so while the poet can say she came, the word is devoid of its usual meaning, because

¹²⁸ Feng Hao, *Yuxisheng shi ji jian zhu*, p 376.

¹²⁹ Translation from Graham, *Poems of the Late T’ang*, p 145.

she didn't stay. It is early morning, dawn to be precise,¹³⁰ and the use of "already" implies that the poet has been up all night, either with his lover or in wait for her, and yet if he has been awake, when was he "dreaming?"

The reference to partings in line three makes the reader think the lover might have come for a final goodbye, bringing memories of other partings to the surface of the poet's thoughts. In the fourth line, however, the poet is urgently writing to her, so impatient that he does not bother to wait for the ink to thicken first. This rushed urgency would be strange if the woman had just been there—what else could the poet have to say so soon? If the lady stood him up, however, he might be writing an impatient or concerned inquiry. The scent of musk still permeates the bed curtains, however, so she might have been there not long ago. It is impossible to decide whether she was there or not, but in this case the narratological issues barely detract from the thematic clarity of the scene.

Whether she has come or not, the poem is one of parting. The theme of the separated lovers is prominent, particularly in the final couplet, which contains an allusion that, while concrete, gives no insight into the poem's narrative purpose. Young Liu is in reference to Emperor Wu of Han, who sought immortality at Penglai mountain, translated here as Fairy Hill.¹³¹ As readers might recall, Penglai mountain is the mountain mentioned in "Finding Time to Meet," as being not-so-far away, so it is interesting to note that in this poem the distance to Penglai mountain is indeed daunting. The end of this poem has none of the hopeful or anticipatory tone that the ending of "Finding Time to Meet" has, in large part due to the different use to which the allusion of Penglai mountain is put. The allusion here is one of immense, uncrossable distance, but what exactly is so far away? It might be the lover, which is perhaps why

¹³⁰ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 62.

¹³¹ Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang*, p 145.

“cries cannot summon” and the poet must rely on a hastily worded letter to reach her. If the lover were so far away, however, the poet would not have expected her to come that night. Liu presumes that the lady was meant to meet with the poet one final time before undertaking a long journey, and takes the last couplet to be a complaint that meeting up with the lover was already a difficult task; now that she is going away, it will be many times more impossible.¹³²

Owen reads a metaphor for the experience of reading ambiguous poetry itself into this poem; he sees that the poem’s form perfectly enacts the rhetorical situation the reader is presented with by the poem’s narrative scene. In this “poetry of barriers and partially legible traces or uncertainties,”¹³³ the experience of the poet and the reader are mirrored—or at least the constructed experience of the presumed subject of the poem mirrors the reader’s. The uncertainty in the speaker’s heart about why his lover did or didn’t come to say goodbye is doubly communicated to the reader; on one level the reader is told of the conflicting emotions in the dramatic situation, and on another level the reader is prevented from completely understanding the situation, thereby reconstructing the poet’s state of mind in the reader’s own confusion. This is what Owen means when he says that “the uncertainties presented to the reader re-enact the uncertainties of the speaker.”¹³⁴

Using hermetic poetics in order to re-create the poet’s own dramatic situation is more than a little ironic. It involves concealing something about the poem in order to reveal something about the poet. What the poet conceals is not what the poet does not know; the speaker in “Coming Was an Empty Promise” knows whether or not his beloved came. The poet is confused by something else, though—her feelings, her reasons, or her whereabouts, perhaps—and instead

¹³² Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 64.

¹³³ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 407-8.

¹³⁴ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 407.

of communicating that confusion directly, he displaces it. This displacement transforms the poem from a narrative into an experience, and fosters in the reader a similar state to the one that inspired the poem. In this explanation, one need not worry about the inconsistencies of the narrative, because it is presumably inconsistent on purpose as a means of communicating ambiguity. The drawback to stopping at this explanation of the poem is that what is communicated in ambiguity is not a judgment or an observation about the world, but a raw state of mind. The reader has not learned anything about the poet or the world, he has only been forced to feel confused. It is arguably enough for a poem to encapsulate a moment of emotion, but I argue that Li Shangyin's poetry seems to do more than that. Despite the difficulties of the narration, the world of the poem usually corresponds beautifully with the general themes of Li Shangyin's hermetic poetry, themes that go beyond a mere sense of uncertainty or ambiguity. That sense is certainly a part of the poetry's craft, and some of what characterizes his genius, but it does not amount to the whole of Li Shangyin's poetic mode—that is, Li Shangyin does not stop at communicating ambiguity, and so neither should our analysis.

Another poem that deals explicitly with the idea of separation and distance between lovers is “Yesterday” (*zuo ri* 昨日), which reads as follows:

昨日紫姑神去也，今朝青鳥使來賒。
 未容言語還分散，少得團圓足怨嗟。
 二八月輪蟾影破，十三弦柱雁行斜。
 平明鐘后更何事，笑倚牆邊梅樹花。¹³⁵

Yesterday the goddess the Violet Maid left.
 This morning the bluebird messenger delays to come.
 No chance for words to be spoken, we divided again,
 Rarely reaching union supplies reproachful sighs.
 On the sixteenth in the moon's orb the Toad's outline is broken,
 The thirteen string pegs are a line of geese aslant.

¹³⁵ Ou Lijuan 歐麗娟, *Li Shang-yin shige* 李商隱詩歌, (Taipei: Wunan chuban gong, 2003), p 138.

After the bell of daybreak, what further occurred?
Smiling she rested against plumb blossoms by the wall.¹³⁶

The poem begins with an irreverent juxtaposition of two allusions—one to the Violet Maid, goddess of the privy, and the other to the Queen Mother of the West (implied by the bluebird), perhaps the most revered female in Chinese mythology; as usual for Li Shangyin, we don't know what the two allusions amount to, only that they don't traditionally mean anything in relation to one another.¹³⁷ The now-common theme of lovers separated by distance is easily recognizable, however, and many of the images can be plausibly linked to this subject. The lovers here are in close enough proximity that they occasionally see one another, and perhaps even meet, but whether because of a lack of privacy or awkward timing there is “no chance for words to be spoken.”

The frustration of being separated by a distance that is not physical so much as social echoes in the image of the thirteen zither pegs likened to a string of geese in flight; both resemble the Chinese character one (*yi* 一), and Owen takes the image to be suggestive of loneliness and unhappy solitude.¹³⁸ At the end of the poem the loved one, too, is depicted standing alone, leaning against a garden wall, but unlike the sighing poet, she is smiling. Perhaps what occurred after the bell of daybreak was that they finally found time to meet, and the woman smiling by the plum flowers is the sight that greets the poet when he arrives there. In a different scenario, the poet may have caught a glimpse of the woman unawares as she admired the flowers that symbolize the Violet Maid's festival.

In the similar vein of embodying figurative distance together with literal separation, there is an untitled poem called “Last Night's Stars,” (*zuo ye xing chen* 昨夜星辰) which reads:

¹³⁶ Owen, *The Late Tang*, pp 397-398.

¹³⁷ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 398.

¹³⁸ Owen, *The Late Tang*, p 398.

昨夜星辰昨夜風， 畫樓西畔桂堂東。
 身無彩鳳雙飛翼， 心有靈犀一點通。
 隔座送鉤春酒暖， 分曹射覆蠟燈紅。
 嗟余聽鼓應官去， 走馬蘭臺類轉蓬。¹³⁹

Last night's stars, last night's wind,
 West of the painted house, east of the cassia hall.
 Our bodies have no colorful phoenix-wings to fly side by side,
 Our hearts are linked by the line in the magic horn.
 From seat to seat the hook is passed, the spring wine is warm,
 Under the red candle's light we guess at riddles in divided teams.
 Alas, when the drum sounded I had to answer duty's call,
 I ride my horse to Orchid Terrace as tumbleweed in the wind.¹⁴⁰

Interestingly, this poem begins in a familiar setting—that of “Refining the Elixir,” except instead of “north of the cassia hall, east of the painted house,” we are west of the house and east of the hall. The familiarity of reference suggests both poems take place in the Wang household, where Li Shangyin lived for some time, though Wu notes that the painted house (*hualou*) and the cassia hall (*guitang*) are common tropes in Palace Style poetry.¹⁴¹ The woman in the poem could be anyone from the poet's wife to a concubine, but as the poem is not necessarily autobiographical, her exact identity is secondary to the poem's agenda. From the last couplet we can infer that the first six lines are a flashback to the night before, remembered as the poet sets off on his journey away from the painted house and cassia hall. Before he departs, the poet engages in friendly drinking games and other frivolities with his friends, as a last hurrah before he leaves on official duty.

This poem might have been a straightforward poem of parting—and indeed some, like Liu, do not credit it with great depths of emotion¹⁴²—were it not for the second couplet. The idea of two paired phoenixes in flight reveals that it is not his friends in general that the poet laments

¹³⁹ Feng Hao, *Yuxisheng shi ji jian zhu*, p 133.

¹⁴⁰ My translation, with particular indebtedness to Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 86.

¹⁴¹ Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 154.

¹⁴² Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 87.

leaving, but a woman in particular. Their hearts are connected in a way that is so inexplicable it is likened to magic, but they have not the wings of phoenixes, which might take them away together. Their hearts are set in deliberate opposition to their bodies; their hearts are one, but their bodies are like two separate, flightless birds—unable to come together as their hearts tell them they should. This frustrated union in couplet two foreshadows the physical separation of the pair in couplet four. Despite the gay mood of couplet three, in which a group of people is together, mingling and having fun, a sense of fruitless sorrow underscores the scene.

This sense of sorrow in Li Shangyin's depictions of love sometimes takes an even darker turn into bitterness and despair. The untitled poem that begins "The East Wind Sighs" (*sa sa dong feng* 颯颯東風) is one example:

颯颯東風細雨來，芙蓉塘外有輕雷。
 金蟾嚙鎖燒香入，玉虎牽絲汲井回。
 賈氏窺帘韓掾少，宓妃留枕魏王才。
 春心莫共花爭發，一寸相思一寸灰。¹⁴³

The East wind sighs, the fine rains come:
 Beyond the pool of water-lilies, the noise of faint thunder.
 A gold toad gnaws the lock. Open it, burn the incense.
 A jade tiger pulls the rope. Draw from the well and escape.
 Chia's daughter peeped through the screen when Han the clerk was young,
 The goddess of the river left her pillow for the great Prince of Wei.
 Never let your heart vie with the spring flowers:
 One inch of love is an inch of ashes.¹⁴⁴

The atmosphere of this poem is overcast from the start; a storm is brewing, rain starts to fall, and thunder approaches from the distance. The second couplet's images are plainly

¹⁴³ Chen Bohai (陈伯海), *Li Shangyin shi xuan zhu* 李商隐诗选注 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1982), p 104.

¹⁴⁴ Translation Graham, 146, with modifications in lines four and seven by me. Line four originally reads: "a tiger of jade pulls the rope." I have changed it to reflect parallel structure. Line seven is re-translated from: "never let your heart open with the spring flowers." I changed it to better reflect the verb *zheng* (爭), meaning "to compete with."

inexplicable, for all that they are a marvel of parallel form. Most commentators suppose that the gold toad and jade tiger are ornaments made to decorate a locked box of incense and a well-pull respectively, but none can say what the incense box or the well rope have to do with the approaching storm. The allusions in the third couplet are better understood, but mutually contradictory. The first alludes to a young woman who has an affair with her father's secretary.¹⁴⁵ Upon discovery, the two are wed. The second allusion is much more tragic; the Prince of Wei falls in love with a woman, but she is married to his elder brother, the emperor. He pines from afar for years, unsuccessfully hiding his inappropriate love, and after the lady's death, the emperor gives the prince the lady's pillow to remember her by.¹⁴⁶ One allusion ends in fulfillment, the other in disappointment; one rewards an illicit affair, the other praises distant, pure affection. The only thing these stories have in common is the forbidden and dangerous nature of the love in question.

The final couplet reveals completely the poet's fatalistic stance on either kind of love. After a stern warning against letting the heart aspire to flowers in bloom, the poet compares love to a burning candle—every inch of love means another inch of ash. In this poem, love is a slow, inevitable destruction of its bearer. The candle metaphor is used similarly to the candle in “Finding Time to Meet,” but the meaning infused within the analogy is completely different. In “Finding Time to Meet,” the candle continues to burn until the last drop of wax melts down. The candle is the same there—burning until there is nothing left but ash—but while in the former case this was a admirable symbol of the perseverance of love, in this poem the candle represents only the foredoomed nature of love.

¹⁴⁵ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 64.

¹⁴⁶ Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin*, p 64.

It is somewhat unusual to see a poem by Li Shangyin that is so decisive on the theme of love's impermanence. Generally, Li Shangyin presents us with an ambiguous account of love's fragility, but here he actively advises against the reckless blooming of the heart, implying that all love amounts to, in the end, is ashes. Another poem that seems to dwell almost completely on the dark side of frustration and loss is "Double Curtains," (*zhong wei* 重幃) also a *wuti*:

重幃深下莫愁堂，臥後秘宵細細長。
 神女生涯原是夢，小姑居處本無郎。
 風波不信菱枝弱，月露誰教桂葉香。
 直道相思了無益，未妨惆悵是清狂。¹⁴⁷

Double curtains hang deep in the room of Never Grieve,
 She lies down, and moment by moment the cool evening lengthens.
 The lifetime he shared with the goddess was always a dream:
 No young man ever in the little maid's house.
 The wind and waves know no pity for the frail pond-chestnut's branches,
 In the moon and the dew who can sweeten the scentless cassia leaves?
 We tell ourselves all love is foolishness—
 And still disappointment is a lucid madness.¹⁴⁸

Never Grieve refers to a woman who, despite being married to a prominent, wealthy husband, longs for the heart of another.¹⁴⁹ The allusion implies a state of continued dissatisfaction, no matter the circumstances. As she lies down to sleep in the first couplet, the poem transitions smoothly into the image of a lifetime spent in dream by suggesting that reality is itself a dream. The allusion in the second couplet is about a man who supposedly stumbled across the "little maid's house," where the goddess of the Blue Brook lived, and fell in love with her. In the story, they parted the next morning, and he was never to find her again.¹⁵⁰ In Li Shangyin's poem, however, it was not a day the man spent with the goddess, but a lifetime, and

¹⁴⁷ Peng Dingqiu (彭定求), *Quan Tang shi* (全唐詩), (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), p 6203.

¹⁴⁸ Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang*, p 152.

¹⁴⁹ Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang*, p 152.

¹⁵⁰ Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang*, p 152.

it was all an illusion. This brings to mind “The Brocade Zither,” where we began our journey into Li Shangyin’s verses, and Liu’s theory that “The Brocade Zither,” considered by many to be the quintessential Li Shangyin poem, expresses at its deepest level the idea that life itself is but a dream. In the case of “Double Curtains,” however, it is love that is the dream.

The frail branches of the pond tree that are tossed mercilessly about by the wind and waves might be the poet, his heart, or love itself, exposed figuratively to the elements of life, destroyed callously by circumstances and forces as arbitrary and purposeless as the weather. The poem speaks to the impossibility of guarding one’s heart or bracing it for the blows of life, and unlike “The East Wind Sighs,” which warns against opening the heart to such devastation, “Double Curtains” seems to say—why bother? The heart will get hurt either way. The difficulty the poet recognizes is that the encompassing madness of love is greater than the mind’s ability to rationalize it. No matter that “we tell ourselves all love is foolishness;” the heart wants what it wants, and even if love is a dream the heart invents, the mind is a slave to its machinations. Disappointment is “a lucid madness” because love is a waking dream that is doomed to be interrupted.

If, at this point, Li Shangyin’s poetry seems as melancholy in theme as Li He’s, it is necessary to look at one more poem, which simply, yet elegantly, underscores the way Li Shangyin thematically reconciles the paradox of steadfastness in the face of inevitable destruction, and the dichotomy of beauty and loss: “Enjoying Traveling the Plateau” (*Le You Yuan* 樂遊原).

向晚意不適，驅車登古原。
夕陽無限好，隻是近黃昏。¹⁵¹

Late during the day I feel disconsolate,

¹⁵¹ Feng Hao, *Yuxisheng shi ji jian zhu*, p 749.

I take a chariot to the ancient plateau.
The setting sun is infinitely beautiful,
Only it is too close to the dusk.¹⁵²

This poem relies on neither allusions nor complex imagery to make its point, and as such its analysis may be brief. The disconsolate poet seeks out something beautiful to cure his melancholy, and in the setting sun he finds both comfort and anxiety. The evening sun is undoubtedly beautiful, but its implications are troubling for the poet. It is just about to set, to disappear, to be eaten by the darkness of the night. Its last moments of life are its most spectacular, though, and the sun's rare vulnerability in this moment is part of what makes it magnificent. Its splendor is indelibly bound to its tragedy. The very nature of a sunset presumes the inevitability of its dissolution, and in this wonderful, doomed moment the poet sees beauty itself defined as exquisite only insofar as it is at the cusp of its own destruction.

Far from advising against the destructive forces of beauty and love, here Li Shangyin is embracing them. This poem represents the entirety of Li Shangyin's poetic ideal—it laments the impossibility and impermanence of love and life while at the same time admiring the fleeting yet determined perfection within its grasp. This poem reveals clearly the relationship Li Shangyin sees between beauty and decay. The images in previous poems of flowers wilting, candles melting, and silkworms spinning out their essence in the slow march to self-destruction are all different manifestations of this same relationship, and the ambiguities and complexities of Li Shangyin's hermetic mode are also ultimately employed in service to the poetic embodiment of this idea. This final poem serves to show that this idea of the fleetingness of reality's most beautiful moments, while bittersweet, is not ultimately seen negatively by Li Shangyin, despite the ambiguity and frustration his hermetic verses often convey.

¹⁵² Wu trans, *The Poetics of Decadence*, p 188.

Although I have tried to make a convincing account of narrative and meaning in Li Shangyin's hermetic poetry, it should be noted that most of the connections I have drawn between the various scenes and images are purely intuitive, and largely unsupported by clear textual evidence. This characterizes the majority of interpretations of Li Shangyin's poetry. One can make sense of the discordant images by slowly piecing them together with perceived connections, but it will always be impossible to know how close one comes to the actual world of the poem, the true inspiration behind the poet's creation. Despite this uncertainty, the reader still has the obligation—and, indeed, the pleasure—of creating meaning in the world of the poem, and I hold that we are best served by understanding Li Shangyin's particular, individual images and allusions in relation to the wider world of his hermetic poetry, which is in many ways self-referential in terms of both themes and created-meanings.

With a better idea of what Li Shangyin's hermetic poetry entails thematically, then, we can now return to "The Brocade Zither" and try to understand how this poem goes beyond merely communicating a feeling of ambiguity and speaks to the essential elements of Li Shangyin's hermetic mode. The zither recalls the poet's youth as the strings are plucked, the music triggering and shaping the memories that come forth and the feelings they evoke. The association between music and memory is already intuitive, because both are subjective experiences that individual brains process uniquely, and both are extremely difficult to articulate in other mediums with objective accuracy. This intuitive relationship is made metaphorical by Li Shangyin's use of the zither to connect not just music to memory, but also poetry to reality. The arbitrariness of the number of the zither's strings is like both the unconscious selectivity of memory, and the conscious selectiveness of representation in a poem. Reality cannot be recaptured in memory any more than it can be transmitted through poetry. The whole of reality is

too changeable, too contradictory to be offered up as though it were narratologically comprehensible. Memory is a crossroads of impressions and emotions, in the same way that poetry is inspired by the intersection of reality with a poet's character and experiences. The mind reacts to reality to create memory, and the poet interacts with reality and memory to create a poem, but if memory is an imperfect afterimage of reality, how much more removed is poetry from its source in the real world? To offer a cohesive narrative when representing the world, then, is in many ways an artistic conceit, one which Li Shangyin seems to be working against in his hermetic verses.

The allusions to Zhuangzi and Wang Di further expand the distance between reality and imagination. If life is a dream, to be shucked and abandoned as the soul moves on to the next cycle, then what is memory? Memory becomes but the shadow of a dream, a blurred recollection of something that may never have happened or meant anything. Waiting for it to crystallize is futile—even as life occurs it is lost in dream. Even as the poet plucks the strings of his memory in an attempt to recall the feeling of the days of his youth, he knows it is hopeless. Memories capture nothing of the beauty and goodness of the past, because the beauty of life is not something that can be grasped and conferred, just as steam rising from warm jade disappears if you get too close. If words are akin to the pearls in this poem, as was the case in “Heyang,” then poetry, too, is useless in capturing beauty or meaning of any kind. As the pearl has tears, the poem has truths it seeks to impart, but just as the tears of the pearl are indistinguishable from the saltwater all around it, the truths of the poem are indistinguishable from the illusion of life's lucid dream.

Music, memories, dreams, and, if we believe the metaphor, *poetry* are all understood intuitively, on the basis of impressions, not complete understanding, because they are all merely

representations of reality, not, in themselves, complete. Each is fleeting, like all beauty in Li Shangyin's poetry, and once each begins to fade, it is impossible to preserve or recapture. This futility in conveying reality, this grasping, frustrated process of making meaning out of intense but disjointed, half-comprehended images, is precisely that which is represented in Li Shangyin's hermetic verse. By putting "The Brocade Zither" in the context of his other hermetic poems, we see not only that Li Shangyin uses his poetic mode to communicate confusion and ambiguity, but what preoccupation of theme might drive such an artistic end as well.

Thematically we have seen that all beautiful things in Li Shangyin's poetic mode, including the poems themselves, carry the implications of their own eventual destruction. In Li Shangyin's hermetic poetry, love is doomed to fail, lovers destined to remain apart, flowers to wilt, women to age, candles to burn, and silkworms to die. Equally, in Li Shangyin's hermetic verses, the narratives of his poems will inevitably be interrupted, the allusions truncated, and the meaning frustrated. The hermetic form of his poetry is intimately related to the themes he explores; his poems unravel themselves as much as they hold themselves together. His verses are beautiful only insofar as they rest on the precipice of meaning and madness, as the sunset rides the horizon until it tips over the edge into oblivion.

Conclusion

Li Shangyin's hermetic poems are literarily important not only for their sublime technical execution and fascinating juxtaposition of paradoxical narratives—these are just the reasons commentators are inspired to include Li Shangyin's hermetic verse among the canonical. His hermetic poems also represent that rare but special occurrence of poetry that is without immediate, obvious external inspiration. These poems are closer to representing an artistic impetus that largely comes from within, rather than focusing on the inspiration from without, as do occasional poems, poems on things, poems of parting, historical poems, socially critical poems, poems for patrons, and many other clearly-externally-motivated forms of poetry that are common to Chinese poetics in particular. Although Li Shangyin wrote upwards of 600 poems in his life, most of which fall neatly into the canonical expectation of good Chinese poetry, his hermetic poems are among his most famous and best-loved, precisely because they speak to the soul of the poet rather than any preconceived notion of what good, Confucian poetry ought to be like.

If Li Shangyin's hermetic verses do in fact represent a metaphor for the futility of transmitting reality through a medium as impressionistic as language, then Li Shangyin's hermetic poetry stands apart from traditional accounts of Chinese poetry, and a different understanding of his poetic mode is warranted. It is not enough to say that his poems are an example of craft, the elegant fusing of form and function—they are, but the impetus behind such an exercise in craft should also be considered part of its meaning. I believe in order to fully understand Li Shangyin's hermetic poems, they should be taken as a group—not only because of stylistic similarities such as disjointed imagery, confused narratives, or a lack of title, but because of the thematic similarity that emerges across these poems when they are juxtaposed.

The idea that Li Shangyin's frustrating hermetic verses are a stylistic representation of the futility of communication through art implies a breaking from—or at least a resisting from within—the canonical tradition of expected Chinese poetics. It renders the account of poetry as communication incomplete by suggesting that “詩言志(*shi yan zhi*)” is itself an artistic myth. The reality of trying to convey an array of impressions across time and space with a handful of words falls short. Too much has slipped away by the time the moment of inspiration is translated from reality to the mind of the poet and into verse. Any attempt at such an idealized form of meta-communication between poet and reader can only end in failure.

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