John Donne Journal
Vol. 32 (2013)

Donne's *Elegies* Betrayed

Kui Yan

Thomas Tseng, trans., *John Donne: The Elegies*, Taipei: Linkingbooks, 2011. 114 + 286 pp.

Thomas Tseng's new book is an impressive work, rendering John Donne's *Elegies* into a huge monograph of 400 pages. Even more inviting, however, is the volume's cover page, which promises to offer a trinity of "famous poetry, quality book, and sweet music." This promise is brilliantly confirmed with a declaration that *John Donne: The Elegies* is unanimously recommended by Tom Cain, John T. Shawcross, and Gary A. Stringer.[1] It is intimately reinforced, too, by the flyleaf announcement that the monograph is dedicated to the "great scholar and good friend Prof. John T. Shawcross."

Though lengthy and scholarly in appearance, *John Donne: The Elegies* is intended for the general reader, an intention which is made explicit first by Professor Yu Kuangchong's recommendation (pp. 3–4),[2] and then by Tseng himself who, in "The Translator's Preface," claims that this book can help "the general reader to be infected with the style and culture of Donne's early poetry" (p. 8). To achieve this, Tseng provides 694 footnotes and a kaleidoscopic "Guide to the Reader" which takes up more than 100 pages (pp. 13–114). This guide covers a wide range of

[1]Unfortunately, the testimonials are nowhere to be found in the book; in their stead is an explanation (at the end of the volume) that they will be placed online (p. 286). At the time of my writing this review, they had not yet been uploaded.

[2]Printed in Yu's handwriting, this testimonial is titled "Recommendation" (p. 3). But the contents page reads "recommendation and preface" (p. 1). It can be found that Tseng frequently plays with words rather subtly throughout the book.

information from a rough record of Donne's life (pp. 13–23), to an exposition of "elegy" as a genre (pp. 34–41), to a short rationale for Tseng's exclusion of "Julia" (pp. 113–114). It also includes a brief classification of Donne's other poetic works (pp. 23–25); a chronological description of and comments on the 11 editions of Donne's poetry since 1912 (pp. 25–34); and a passionate survey of Donne's presence in music, movies, and other works of art (pp. 103–113).

This volume's appeal to the general reader is indeed a timely contribution to Donne studies in China. By 2006, when Tseng began his translation, Donne had already become one of the heated topics in China's academic circles, with 100 or so papers, three monographs, one translation, and one National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science (NPOPSS) project devoted to the poet.[3] By 2011, when Tseng published his translation, another NPOPSS project had been funded, and another translation, three more books, and 131 new research papers had been published.[4] This means that, within this five-year period, Donne studies in China exceeded its achievements in all the previous years put together. None of these works, however, was solely devoted to Donne's elegies; indeed, the focus was still largely confined to *Songs and Sonnets*, and studies of those poems accounted for more than 80% of the publications. Up to now, Chinese Donne scholars have been mostly English majors, and not general readers who, despite their strong interest, cannot read Donne in the original. Although Professor Fu has

---

[3]As China's topmost scholarship for humanities, NPOPSS project funding is granted to the study of the most influential authors only. For Donne's growing popularity among Chinese literary scholars, see Kui Yan, "A Glory to Come: John Donne Studies in China," *John Donne Journal* 26 (2007): 313–332.

[4]The NPOPSS project is "A Critical History of Donne Studies" by Kui Yan, which, in 2011, was granted 150,000 *yuan* from the central government and 75,000 *yuan* from China's Southwest University. The translation is *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, rendered as *To Whom the Bell Tolls* by Lin Hesheng (Beijing: Newstar Press, 2009). The three books are *A Study of Donne's Love Poetry* by Lu Yuming (Shanghai: Academia Press, 2010); *A Study of the Poetry of John Donne* by Li Zhengshuan (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2011); and *John Donne and Modernity in his Poetry* by Xiong Yi (Xiangtan, Hunan: Xiangtan Univeristy Press, 2011). The 131 research papers, mostly written by students, can all be found online at and downloaded from the website for the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) at <http://epub.cnki.net>.

included Donne's 20 elegies in his translation, his version, as Tseng has properly observed, does not quite match the original in terms of prosody. Thus, Donne's elegies still await discoveries, appreciation, and critical responses in the Chinese context. To this end, a proper translation of Donne, including his elegies, is greatly needed, and Tseng's version is a welcome attempt.

But, as R. V. Young says of *John Donne: The Reformed Soul*, "it is difficult to see how such a book will appeal to the general reader,"[5] and Tseng's monograph, like John Stubbs's biography, may also be hard pressed to meet its stated goals. For one thing, the Chinese language Tseng employs in his translations is in the old fashion that is no longer used in mainland China. For another, *John Donne: The Elegies* contains resources that do not seem to fit into one single book, covering as they do such matters as the current state of literary translation, Donne studies in Taiwan, the Latin tradition of poetry, and twentieth-century pop cultures, as well as Tseng's personal stories about his love of rock 'n' roll, his happiness in teaching John Milton in a way that is always fun, and his friendship with Norwegian musicians. More disappointing, this lengthy monograph does not deliver on its promise to be a work of "famous poetry, quality book, and sweet music."

To be sure, Tseng has every reason to criticize Fu's earlier translation for its "irregular lengths of lines" (p. 91) and "surrender to rhymes" (p. 94). To rectify Fu's "prosaic paraphrase" (p. 2), Tseng determines "to restore the original beauty" (p. 93) by sticking to the rule of keeping 10–12 Chinese words in each line and of maintaining the original rhyme pattern. Since a Chinese word contains only one syllable, Tseng reasons that a 10-word line is a perfect correspondence to Donne's pentameter and the extra two words can help avoid "prosaic representation" (p. 93). Tseng therefore assumes it to be necessary to keep Donne's rhyme scheme. He takes his translation to be a rare success, and feels confident that he has thus given the first bilingual monograph able to follow Donne's "true sense of poetry" (p. 92).

While Tseng's attempts at producing a better translation than Fu's are welcome, they do not always succeed. Indeed, his approach can (and often does) lead to a simple game of matching the rhymes and the length

[5]Young, "A *Novel* Donne," *John Donne Journal* 26 (2007): 437–442, quotation from p. 438.

of lines, and it faces the danger of carrying no poetic sense at all in Chinese. Ever since *The Book of Songs*, it has been a convention of Chinese poetry that a poem is restricted to only one rhyme.[6] When Cyril Birch speaks of a single "indispensable rhyme," he is referring exactly to this feature unique to Chinese poetry.[7] Apart from blank verse, modern Chinese poems still follow this tradition for their sense of poetry, so that their lines may vary in length, but the indispensable rhyme stays. A song (or a "*ci* poem") may look irregular, yet it has a greater restriction both to the set pattern of rhyme and to the length of lines in accordance with the classification to which it belongs. Alternative rhyme patterns exist, but are seldom practiced. While the heroic couplet is "one of the commonest metrical forms in English poetry,"[8] it loses all its wonder and poetic inspiration in Chinese simply because it violates the expectation of both an indispensable rhyme and a set rhythm. To render Donne's elegies into Chinese as if they were still in English is a deliberate violation of the common sense of poetry in the target language.

For a random example, consider lines 15–22 of Tseng's version of Donne's "Change":

> 女人纠缠男人，却享自主：若人
> 受缚于船，船只仍是自由身。
> 有田一亩，播种于其上，
> 仍乐于接纳外来之谷糠；

---

[6]Chinese scholars consider *The Book of Songs* to be the origin of Chinese poetry. Its date of composition is untraceable, though it might go back to the beginning of the Chou Dynasty (1122–221 BC). The existing 305 poems within the *Book* are traditionally believed to have been compiled by Confucius (551–479 BC) for his disciples to study. In terms of prosody, it has initiated three basic rhyme patterns (here exemplified with a 4-line stanza): *aaaa, abcb,* and *aaba*, the first to be followed by what Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) termed "Bailiang Style," and the last two by the mainstream poets, "particularly by Tang Dynasty poets" as Xia Chuancai has observed (Preface, in *Pre-Qin Dynasty Poetry: An Appreciation Dictionary*, ed. Jiang Liangfu et al. [Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Press, 1996], p. 12).

[7]Birch, ed., *Anthology of Chinese Literature: Volume 1: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 3.

[8]J. A. Cuddon, ed., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 305.

纵使多瑙河势必入黑海没，
大洋亦吸纳莱茵、窝瓦与波。
这天赐之特权，这份自由
你珍爱，但！自由与我，孰先孰后？
(pp. 86–87)

Is this poetry? Many would say no. It looks like blank verse, reads like clumsy prose, and is very confusing. The length of lines is largely in accordance with Tseng's rule (except the third line with only 9 words), but is strikingly ragged, working against the basic requirement of a Chinese poem that each line has to produce a sense of its own. "若人" ("if men") in the first line and "你珍爱" ("you treasure") in the last are both odd expressions added to make up for the length of lines and for the required rhyme, but they break the flow of sense and fail to serve the supposed rhyme because Chinese is a tonal language and all the supposedly rhymed words, including these two, are different in tones. General readers would not recognize the entire extract as poetry because it is full of ragged lines and is devoid of an indispensable rhyme. Even if they pause after every two lines (which is very unlikely), they would still miss the hard-won rhyme because all the couplets are problematic, the end words having different tones in each couplet. Rhythmically, while the pattern of a two-syllable sense group is established in the first line, it is immediately broken in the second by an extra (but irrelevant) word "身" ("body"). While the second line reads as rather confusing due to its unreasonable repetition of the word "船" ("ship" or "boat"), the rest of the lines read like pure prose, with a strange mixture of clichés and colloquialisms, making the meter even more fragmented and chaotic.

To stick to his rule, Tseng frequently manipulates the text by breaking up original lines, adding images, wiping out implied significances, altering their aesthetic values, and making other changes (like shifts of subjects, tenses, and moods). "有田一亩" ("there is one *mu* of cropland"), for example, sounds like a cliché in Pre-Qin prose from 2200 years ago, but even that effect is immediately violated by "播种于其上" ("plant seeds over it"), which reads like Ming Dynasty prose from 500 years ago due to the use of set expressions (in this case, the words "于" and "其"), adding complications to the unjustified repetition of "船" in line 2 and the ambiguous "没" ("no more") and "波"

("wave") in lines 5 and 6, respectively.[9] The plain prose of "女人纠缠男人" ("women entangled men") in the first line is perplexing, and so is the last line, whose second half raises the abrupt question of "自由与我，孰先孰后?" ("Freedom and me, who is first and who last?"). The only reason for "身" to be there is because it sounds similar to "人," a sign of Tseng's attempt at rhyme. The same goes for "上" and "糠," "没"and "波," and "由" and "后," pairs that Tseng also intends to rhyme, although they are hardly regarded as doing so because of their difference in tones. When Tseng succeeds in having a rhymed pair, his success relies partly on the sacrifice of images, partly on mispronunciations, and partly on other tricks. Tseng's couplet or rhyme, in short, is the false product of words that are "yoked by violence together,"[10] and his effort an apparent attempt at "obtaining rhyme at the expense of sense," a common Chinese saying used to criticize any unskilled attempt at poetry.

If the lines quoted above were to be translated back into English, they would read like this:

> Women entangled men, yet enjoyed autonomy: if men
> Are chained to a ship, the ship is still a free body.
> There is one *mu* of cropland, plant seeds over it,
> Still it is willing to absorb other chaff;
> Even if Danube must enter the Black Sea no more,
> The ocean also inhales the Rhine, Volga and wave.
> The heaven sent privilege, this freedom
> You treasure, but! Freedom and me, who is first and who last?[11]

---

[9]Tseng's version gives no clue as to why this word "船" is deliberately repeated, because it is bad diction even in prose. The word "身" in the same line is problematic, too, since it does not go with "船" in this context. More problematic, however, is the use of "没" which means "no more" as is required by this very context in which it has to be read [mei]; yet Tseng's rhyme scheme requires us to read it [mo] meaning "to sink, confiscate, rise beyond, and last."

[10]Samuel Johnson, "The Life of Cowley," in *An Anthology of English Literature Annotated in Chinese*, ed. Wang Zuoliang et al. (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1987), p. 458.

[11]For comparison, here are lines 15-22 of "Change" as they appear in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 2, *The Elegies*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000):

Apparently, Tseng's version has very little to do with Donne's "original beauty" but quite a bit in common with Fu's "prosaic paraphrase." Even if everything else were poetic, the translation would still remain "prosaic" with the use of "之" alone in lines 4 and 7, because it is, by nature, an empty word, outdated and exclusively prosaic.[12] In effect, it looks like an ill ghost, haunting every piece of Tseng's translation, ruining the reputation of "famous poetry." Consider as well Tseng's translation of "The Bracelet." It sounds moderately good in the first four lines, but the translation becomes loose and strange from the fifth line, with that ghost of a word turning the entire poem into typical eighteenth-century prose deprived of its ancient artistic beauty and profundity. To use the empty "之" is a bad endeavor; to repeat it 23 times in a single poem is destructive to the already minimized aesthetic value; to rely on it for missing syllables at the risk of broken rhythm, plain diction, clumsy rhymes, and distorted images is a denial of poetry.

Such a denial abounds in Tseng's translations of Donne's elegies, all of which showcase his capacity for turning poetry into prose. A handy example is his use of colloquialism which, to borrow from William

---

They are our cloggs and their owne: if a man bee
Chayned to a Galley, yet the Galley is free.
Who hath a plowland casts all his seed corne there
And yet allows his ground more corne should beare.
Though Danuby into the Sea must flow
The Sea receaves the Rhene, Volga, and Po.
By Nature which gaue it, this libertee
Thou lov'st, but Oh, canst thou love it and mee?

All future quotations of Donne's verse in English are cited from the *Variorum*.

[12]Outdated, prosaic, and empty in nature, the word "之" might refer to apostrophe-*s*, or to "of," "to," or similar prepositions. It might refer to an object, a destination, or something already mentioned. Furthermore, it might function as any noun or pronoun. It may also function as part of the rhythm by its mere existence as an added syllable as does *y* in *yclad* in Spencer's *The Fairie Queene*. There are people who still use this word in songs, but not in poetry. Such usage is a continuation of the ancient tradition of *The Book of Songs*. Tseng, however, does not follow that tradition because he uses it mostly to make up a missing syllable or to reverse the word order for rhyme within a couplet.

Wordsworth, sounds rather "humble and rustic."[13] When Tseng renders "comparisons are odious" ("The Comparison," 54) into "人比人气死人," for example, he seems especially proud of having found this as an equivalent to Donne's line as he deliberately refers to it as a convincing instance for his "improved version" over Fu's "incorrect translation" (pp. 102–103). Tseng seems to forget, however, that this is a purely colloquial expression used almost exclusively by the illiterate in poverty-stricken mountain areas and never expected to appear even in poor prose. Moreover, it is too plain an oral expression and, due to its two three-syllable components, sounds strikingly odd, strikingly between half modern, half ancient expressions. Consider lines 53–54 of Donne's "The Comparison," which I quote here followed by Tseng's version and then, in brackets, its literal back translation:

> Leaue her, and I will leaue comparing thus
> She, and comparisons are odious.
>
> 甩开她，我就不再东比西凑，
> 人比人气死人，她亦令人呕。
> (p. 26)
>
> [Throw her away, and I shall no more scrabble east and west,
> Comparing people is killing with anger, she too is disgusting]

T. S. Eliot reminds us that "the language of [Metaphysical] poets is as a rule simple and pure."[14] Tseng seems to have misunderstood that rule since, in his translation, what is simple becomes colloquial and sexual and what is pure becomes complicated and artificial. For another random example, consider lines 9–10 of Donne's "Variety," again followed here by Tseng's version and, in brackets, its literal back translation:

> All things doe willingly in *Change* delight
> (The fruitfull mother of our appetite).

---

[13]Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," in *The Theory of Criticism*, ed. Raman Selden (London and New York: Longman, 1998), p. 86.

[14]T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *An Anthology of English Literature Annotated in Chinese*, ed. Wang Luoliang et al. (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1987), p. 1229.

> 天下万物无不喜好变化，
> 变化乃你我欲念的丰饶亲妈。
> (p. 194)
>
> [None of all things under heaven dislikes change,
> Change is the plenteous biological mama of your and my lust.]

Full of dead clichés and colloquialisms, these lines exemplify all the poems in Tseng's monograph, and are closest to his endeavor both for rhyme and for length of lines. But again these lines read as more prosaic than poetic. An expression like "亲妈" ("biological mama") no longer strikes us as particularly odd, yet it remains strangely colloquial and hard to perceive with "丰饶" ("plenteous") as its direct modifier. The same is true of "欲念" ("lust"), which sounds less outdated than "乃" ("is"),[15] but is as perplexing as "没" in "Change" and more ambiguous than "appetite" in the original.

Tseng offers no famous poetry but clumsy prose; he offers no quality book, either, except for the actual paper, print, and binding. He betrays the Chinese notion of a quality book, and presents instead a volume of *Playboy* stories. The translated titles of the elegies are sometimes highly sexualized, almost pornographic, in Chinese; consider, for example, Tseng's rendering of "Loves War" as "床战" ("Sexual War in Bed") or his rendering of "To his Mistress going to Bed" as "劝女宽衣" ("Persuade Women to Loose Themselves"). Plainly depicted sex abounds in all the translated versions, working against the general Chinese perception of "famous poetry" and "quality books." Donne's elegies are amorous, but Tseng's translations are pointedly sexual. Where Donne says, for example, "Is not your last act harsh and violent" ("The Comparison," 47), Tseng's version reads "你近来的床功岂不粗鄙" ("Is not your recent sexual intercourse scurvy," p. 26). Similarly, Tseng turns the line "as loth to touch as Ioseph was" ("The Anagram," 54) into "如约翰拒上淫妇床" ("as Joseph refused to mount the bed of a lecherous woman," p. 99).

---

[15] This can be a content word meaning "to be" as it is used by Tseng in this very case, but it can also be an empty word to emphasize any content word that immediately follows.

Love is an archetypal theme. In the Chinese literary tradition, the most controversial work on love, and the text that is supposed to be the most erotic, is *Jin Ping Mei* or *The Golden Lotus*. But even that book is nuanced and suggestive when compared with Tseng's deliberate endeavor to turn Donne's elegies into pornography. To a large extent, Tseng does not translate, he recreates; and his version works against his own proclamation to be faithful to Donne's art: it is a betrayal both of the poet and of the reader.

Consider lines 103–104 of "The Bracelet" (again with Donne's original first, followed by Tseng's translation and, in brackets, its literal back translation):

> Lust bred diseases rott thee'and dwell with thee
> Itchy desyre, and no abilitee.
>
> 愿色欲之恶疾腐蚀你，久缠不放，
> 要你情欲挠身，且无力行房。
> (p. 14)
>
> [May the foul disease of sexual desire rot you, entangling you for good,
> Making you scratching with sexual drive, and yet unable to perform sexual intercourse.]

Or lines 1–2 of "To his Mistress going to bed":

> Come Madame, come; All rest my powers defy;
> Vntil I labor, I in labor ly.
>
> 来，夫人，来，我那雄风不容怠惰；
> 非要奋力挺进，傻等叫人难过。
> (p. 71)
>
> [Come, madam, come, my phallic power must not be left indolent;
> It has to push forward, waiting foolishly makes me rather painful.]

Or lines 33–35 of "On his Mistris":

> Men of France, changeable Cameleons
> Spittles of diseases, Shops of fashions
> Lives fuellers and the rightest Companee
>
> 法国佬，性情善变的色徒，
> 十足花柳院，流行时尚店铺，
> 煽情动欲的卢工，当之无愧
> (pp. 109–111)
> [The French, capricious erotomania,
> Sheer whorehouse, fashion stores,
> Seductive and erotogenic stove heater, worthy of all]

Or, finally, lines 37–42 of "Variety":

> How happy were our *Syres* in antient tymes
> Who held plurality of *Loues* noe cryme.
> With them it was accounted charitye
> To stirre vp race of all indifferently,
> Kindred were not exempted from the bands
> Which with the *Persian* still in visage stands.
>
> 远古祖先何止百般快活，
> 三妻四妾也算不上罪过！
> 先祖将其视为大方慷慨，
> 胡乱杂交只为繁衍后代。
> 宗亲家族亦属交媾对象，
> 波斯人至今仍习以为常。
> (p. 197)
>
> [How very happy were our distance ancestors,
> Who wouldn't see it a crime to take as many wives and concubines!
> Our ancestors took it as a great generosity,
> To produce their children by indulging in promiscuous sex.
> Any family member and relative can be the object of their coition,
> And Persians today still take this as their common practice.]

Such examples abound in Tseng's book, and again they demonstrate the highly sexualized nature of the translation Tseng gives his readers.

In addition to these problems with the translations of the poems, I also find that Tseng has perhaps placed too much value on the number and comprehensiveness of the footnotes in his *John Donne: Elegies*. He praises Herbert J. C. Grierson, Helen Gardner, John T. Shawcross, A. J. Smith, Roger and T. W. Craik, and Robin Robbins for their inclusion of a large quantity of footnotes in their Donne editions. He criticizes John Hayward and John Carey for their "small use to readers" (p. 31) because he thinks their footnotes are too brief and simple. Tseng's 694 footnotes take up a significant portion of the pages,[16] posing a sharp contrast to Fu's 125 endnotes, which, one supposes, Tseng would consider useless in light of their brevity and simplicity.[17] But Tseng's footnotes are mostly focused on explicating the sexual puns and other erotic references in the poems, and the descriptions they contain are often far more pornographic than the translations of the elegies themselves. Consider, for example, Tseng's footnote to "the right true end of loue" ("Loues Progresse," 2):

> It is a pun, because *end* may refer to purpose, and may also refer to a man's "tail end" which is *penis*, since in Latin the word *penis* means *tail*, or a man's tail, and can imply carnal love as Donne says in "Farewell to Love": "'Tis but applying worm-seed to the tail." In addition, Shakespeare uses "tail" to replace "end" (so end=tail=penis) as in his *Othello*: "O, thereby

[16]From the first to the last, the number of footnotes in each elegy are, respectively, 66, 31, 32, 16, 27, 23, 27, 39, 24, 39, 38, 16, 32, 57, 62, 35, 53, 32, and 45. Many pages contain fewer than 5 lines from the poem, and 27 pages (4, 22, 47, 63, 75–76, 79, 85, 91–92, 98, 110, 111–113, 125–126, 131, 134–135, 144, 148–159, 162, 168, 207, 222) have only 4 lines of poetry, with the rest of these pages occupied by footnotes. Pages 110 and 126 have only 1 line of poetry, and the longest footnote runs 2 pages (pp. 125–126).

[17]See Fu Hao, trans., *Amorous and Divine Poems of John Donne* (Beijing: China Translation Company, 1999), pp. 121–190. Tseng even finds fault with John Hayward's *The Nonesuch Donne* (1923) because its footnotes cover "only 35 pages" (p. 280).

> hangs a tail." Therefore, "the right true end of love" is sexual intercourse.
>
> (p. 139)[18]

Tseng's conclusion is not wrong, of course, but his footnote undermines the wonder of Donne's poetry.

Worse still, Tseng prefers to push his footnotes to the point of vulgarity. Take again the same poem, when he glosses "Bear-whelp," "shapes," "lumpe," and "Monster" in "And Loue is a Bear-whelp borne, if wee ouer-lick / Our loue, and force it newe strange shapes to take, / Wee erre, and of a lumpe a Monster make" ("Loues Progress," 4–6). After saying a bear-whelp is a baby bear, Tseng goes on to say that, in Donne's poem,

> "*bear-whelp*" also refers to penis before it erects when it is not in shape, and "*lick*" means that the woman is fucking the man with her mouth. . . . "*Shapes*" is equivalent to "*forms*" or "*positions*," and refers to the postures when copulating; the line wherein this word is means that they take all sorts of bold postures to copulate. . . . "*Lump*" is a huge meatball formed by human pyramid in sexual intercourse, and "*monster*" means that such a lump of meatball looks like a monster.
>
> (pp. 139–140)

Often, Tseng faces the problem of choosing from among many readings of a particular word or line, and his decision is always to present the sexual interpretation. Consider his annotation of "I shall ebbe on, with them whoe homeward goe" ("The Autumnall," 50):

> This line opens with "*ebb on*" in *The Variorum* (and Robbins' Longman edition as well), but "*ebb out*" in Grierson, Shawcross, and Smith, and my translation follows the latter since it is more reasonable. The poet does pant, partly because the heroines are no longer "*growing beauties*," partly because the word "*descend*" in line 48 already indicates that he himself is no more a strong man, instead he is descending in his sexual

[18]I have translated this footnote from Tseng's *John Donne: Elegies*, as well as the other two footnotes that I quote below. In each case, the italic words refer to those in English in Tseng's text.

> capacity, so that he does not, cannot, and should not pant while having sex. If we are to accept "*ebb out*," then to "*ebb out*" means to ejaculate or to discharge semen in orgasm, "*them*" means "*sperms*," and "*homeward go*" means that both the penis and the sperms return back into the womb which, being where life begins, justifies the use of "*homeward*," and therefore the significance of the line would be "I prefer to make love to middle aged women." If we are to accept "*ebb on*," then to "*ebb on*" means to descend constantly in body and energy, "*them*" means "young beauties," and "*homeward go*" means "death" (or "go home" as in The Book of Sermons which says "*because man goeth to his long home*" with "*home*" referring to "*grave*") and therefore the significance of the line would be "My body shall decay with young beauties, descending to eventual death. My translation follows the significance of "ebb out." Readers must note that the last four lines of the poem are extremely erotic. . . .
>
> (p. 135)

Thus, reading from titles to poems to footnotes in Tseng's *John Donne: Elegies* is much like peeping into a pornographic studio in which a playboy is having his wild, chaotic, intensified sex—and that reduces the edition's claim to being, at least by contemporary Chinese scholarly standards, "quality book."

Tseng promises to offer sweet music, too; and yet that sweet music never materializes except on a CD, in a documentary list of musical compositions by Ketil Bjørnstad (pp. 265–269), and in Tseng's passionate recollection of his love of rock 'n' roll (p. 5). The CD, titled *The Shadow: Poems of John Donne*, is nicely packaged within a cellophane bag glued to the back cover of the book. It looks rather appealing, but it contains more photos (22 in all) than musical pieces (4 all together).[19] Tseng seems a profound lover of music, showing himself with a guitar on the cover page and concluding his book with a tribute to Norwegian musicians who have helped him "'hear' Donne's poems" (p. 285). But, as discussed earlier, he demonstrates no music in his translations of Donne's verse. By "sweet music," Tseng probably refers first to the appended CD,

[19]These photos of scenic spots can be helpful to those who have never been to London. The four poems are "A Lecture upon the Shadow," "The Good-morrow," "Go, and catch a falling star," and "The Paradox."

then to the bibliography of audio-visual materials and websites he puts into the book for music fans (pp. 263–265).[20]

But these external references are outside readers' expectation of what music means. Fully aware of this, Tseng attempts to preserve the sound effect of the original by using the couplet and keeping his lines ranging from 10 to 12 syllables. He has successfully justified this attempt by his criticism of Fu (pp. 93–97) and faithfully applied it to his own translation (pp. 1–227). But the result actually works against his attempt, as the translated poems all read prosaically, having no rhythm, no melody, no lyrical smoothness, nothing to show the "massive music of Donne," as Eliot would say.[21] When rhythm sometimes does appear, it is frequently broken up by strange combinations of ancient and contemporary codes of the Chinese tongue, giving the impression that they indeed are "yoked by violence together."

Despite its limitations, Tseng's huge monograph nevertheless forces us to ponder several basic questions: What is poetry? How should one translate a poem? What should one put into footnotes? Tseng seems to have thought of these questions (as is indicated by his long introduction, with its severe criticism of Fu); unfortunately, however, his translation itself displays no positive answers.

Southwest University, China

[20]There are, all together, 21 entries for audio-visual materials (including CDs, musicals, and movies), as well as 11 entries for websites.

[21]Eliot, p. 1235.