Two Poets, One Moon:
A Comparison of Su Shi and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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Abstract:

Only a few decades ago, Western scholars of comparative literature tended to argue that any English-Chinese comparison was "futile or meaningless" (Yu, 162). As this discipline evolves, however, this previous notion is being replaced by the perspective that "a glimpse of the otherness of the other can produce new perspectives on our own faces in the great mirror of culture" (Hayot, 90). My thesis contributes to this stream of innovation by bringing into comparison the function of the moon in Su Shi's "Water Melody" and in Samuel Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode", finding that in both poems, the moon functions to foreground the poets' psychological experiences and acts as an agent in the resolution of emotional conflict in the poems and lives of the poets. The purpose of this work is to broaden the field in which both English and Chinese poetry are understood to exist by examining each through the lens of the other. Both "Water Melody" and "Dejection" have been examined to the point of exhaustion in each of their relative traditions, but bringing them into new light may reveal previously unseen angles. For example, this research finds that Susan Stewart's theory of eighteenth – century English nocturnes is highly compatible with twelfth-century Chinese nocturnes, and this foreign theory can breathe new life into an ossified conversation. In a dissonant example, the familiar Western associations of the moon as an evil omen, recalling vampires and werewolves, can feel bizarre when imagined from the perspective of Chinese associations of the moon with family reunion. This comparison, in addition to exploring these two poems and poets, ultimately creates a destabilizing

effect by which a reader may be induced to move beyond the traditions, to a point where Weltliteratur is no longer the goal, as it was for Goethe, but instead a starting point.

Keywords: Water Melody, Dejection: An Ode, Moon

Introduction

In the poem "To the Tune of Mu Lan Hua Man", the 12th-century Chinese poet Xin Qiji muses, "Ah, the moon tonight / Is veering away, / Where to, in the vast sky? / Is there another human world, / Where people can see its glow / On the east side?" (木兰花慢·可怜今夕月, lines 1-6). And of course, the moon has captivated poets in many other human worlds. The moon features centrally in Chinese poet Su Shi's "Water Melody" (水调歌头) written in 1076, and in English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" written in 1802. While the moon that each of these poets gazed upon is the same, their portrayals of the moon are different, reflecting not only the individual poets but also the literary traditions in which they existed. In this paper, I would like to use the moon as a point of contact between these two distant traditions, as a window through which each may more

deeply understand the other. The moon in each poem is linked with the poet's emotions and desires but it also facilitates a transcendence of time and space, allowing the poets to integrate historical moments from legends of centuries past seamlessly with the present moment. The moon is a perfect metaphor for taking an external vantage point on both Su and Coleridge, bringing "Water Melody" and "Dejection" within the same frame under that eternal orb which has calmly observed sleepless poets since time immemorial.

Before looking at these two poems, I would briefly like to address the question "why compare?" Only a few decades ago Western scholars of comparative literature tended to argue that any English-Chinese comparison was "futile or meaningless", as the two cultures were incommensurable (Yu, 2019, p. 162). This previous notion is now being replaced by the perspective that "a glimpse of the otherness of the other can produce new perspectives

on our own faces in the great mirror of culture" (Hayot, 2011, p. 90). This "glimpse of the otherness" is also what I experienced while teaching Chinese at John Carroll University in the United States, where I found that a deep exploration of how the moon is portrayed in Chinese poetry allowed my American students who had no experience with Chinese culture to grasp intimate and subtle details of Chinese culture. Likewise, exploring the poetry of Coleridge and Su can give English readers a window into understanding of Chinese poetry, and also broaden the field in which both English and Chinese poetry are understood by examining each through the lens of the other.

Indeed, Hayot argues that if Western literature wishes to reap the rewards of cross-cultural engagement, Chinese is the "purest possible comparative partner" (2011, p. 91) for English literature because Chinese literature evolved with virtually no interaction with English literature, yet "is nonetheless entirely coeval with the Western tradition in terms of its historical depth, philosophical complexity, literary output, and geographic range (and is often deeper, longer-lasting, more complex, and more continuous)" (p. 90). It is in this spirit that this paper not only brings the English reader across a bridge into a foreign world, but then takes a look back from the other side, making the familiar strange.

First, I will briefly introduce these two poets and poems, as while Chinese scholars are familiar with Su Shi, and English-speaking scholars are familiar with Coleridge, each may be unfamiliar with the poet from the foreign tradition. Then, I will examine how the moon is typically represented in the literary worlds of each poet, allowing for an initial comparison of the two traditions, as well as providing a basis for understanding how the moons of Coleridge and Su both accord with and depart from their respective traditions. This sets the stage for a closer examination of the two pieces in question: Su's "Water Melody" and Coleridge's "Dejection".

Chinese and English Lunar Traditions

Su Shi lived in 11th century China, and his poem "Water Melody" was written during Mid – Autumn festival, which takes place during a full moon and is a time for family reunions. Su Shi, however, is far from home, so when he looks upon the moon he feels longing for home and muses about the difficulties of life. On the other side we have Coleridge. Coleridge lived

in early nineteenth-century England. “Dejection: An Ode” was written at a time when he was suffering from drug addiction and heartbreak, and he looks upon the moon hoping that it will summon a storm which will shake him from his dejection and revitalize his ability to enjoy the beauty of the world. Each of these poets express their individual feelings through their poem’s moon-gazing, but they are guided nonetheless by the traditions in which they write.

In Chinese culture, one’s hometown is a spiritual world that exists in opposition to a bitter and lonely reality. This spiritual world is closely related to the image of the moon in poetry. In his classic poem, Li Bai writes: “I gaze at the moonlight with head uplifted; / Now my head droops, and my thoughts turn homeward” (静夜思, lines 3-4). Du Fu writes similarly: “Dew turns into frost since tonight; / The moon viewed at home is more bright” (月夜忆舍弟, lines 3-4). For wandering souls, the moon provides sustenance especially when homesickness is amplified during the Mid-Autumn Festival when families gather ‘round (团圆) like the roundness (圆月) of the full moon. This holiday of reunion becomes one of longing for those who cannot be reunited with family and gaze at the full moon from their solitary state.

In Chinese mythology, the moon, located in the celestial realm, is often associated with purity. For example, Hanshan writes of the moon: “Shining full like an unpolished mirror, / My heart leans upon the ethereal sky” (lines 3-4) and Su says, “My heart is clear as the lonely moon” (line 12). The moon is also a cold and desolate realm, home of the goddess Chang’e, who is lonely, helpless, and compassionate. Because of her isolation on the moon she is often described as sympathetically guarding family reunions on earth. Chinese poets often include this goddess of the moon, using her loneliness to represent their own loneliness, her sorrow to represent their own sorrow. For example, Li Shangyin sighs, “Chang'e must regret stealing the pill of longevity, / Now she mopes alone night after night in the sky blue” (嫦娥, lines 3-4). In “Water Melody”, Su Shi contrasts the beauty of the lunar realm with its coldness and desolation, an apt metaphor for Su’s own conflict between his lofty ideals and the suffering he must endure to attain them. In addition to this purity and desolation, the Chinese moon is also understood as existing beyond the human scale of time. In Zhang Ruoxu’s “Moonlit Night on the Spring River,” he writes, “Who by the river-side first saw the moon arise? / When did the moon first see a man by ri-verside? / Ah, generations have come and passed away; / From year to year

the moons look alike, old and new" (春江花月夜, lines 11-14). The moon is the eternal observer, having witnessed all human history. Perhaps because of the moon's place outside human space and time, both Su and Coleridge treat the moon as the sole witness to their poetic outpourings. Indeed the English tradition like the Chinese has a history of figuring the moon as a witness.

In British literature of the pre-Romantic and Romantic era,, the moon also figures as a witness, such as in Mary Wortley Montagu's "A Hymn to the Moon," where she confides her grief to the moon. Shelley converses with the moon as a fellow drifter in the universe, asking sincerely, "Tell me, moon, thou pale and grey / Pilgrim of heaven's homeless way / In what depth of night or day / Seekest thou repose now" (lines 5-8). Another common function of the moon is as an object of poetic inspiration. For example, in Luke Booker's "Hymn to the moon," when the poet sees the moon, his inspiration is stirred to make his "feeble pencil move" (line 4). The moon's beauty leads the poet's soul divine, as "contemplation spreads / Her heav'n-ascending wings / and sheds her magic influence o'er the mind" (lines 43-45). The nocturne tradition of English poetry starting in the eighteenth century frequently alludes to the moon as an inspiring goddess, an object of beauty, similar to the Chinese tradition, but very often the English moon is instead dark or ominous. The moon often appears in scenes that are terrifying or violent, and it is understood that the moon is often linked with dark magical forces. The very word 'lunatic' literally means 'moonstruck,' according to a belief that the moon can cause insanity. As Shakespeare's Othello declares, "It is the very error of the moon; She comes more nearer earth than she was wont, and makes men mad" (5.2.135). In her discussion of nocturnes in eighteenth-century poetry, Susan Stewart identifies two categories: sweet, tame, enchanted nights, and dark, treasonous, hellish nights (2002, p. 262). In silent darkness, alone with thought, despair, fear, and worry may easily come.

Taking this brief look at how the moon is represented in both Chinese and European literature, significant differences can already be noted, representing the differences in each cultural consciousness. For example, the Chinese moon often evokes nostalgic thoughts of home, while the English moon is often a source of evil magic. Although being bound by their traditions, however, each poet displays their own individual art through their moon. Su's "Water Melody" recalls both Li Bai and Du Fu, but is also clearly his own. Su's moon evokes nostalgia for home, is a refuge for idealists, and

symbolizes the vicissitudes of life, bearing witness and offering comfort in a capricious world. Although, as we will see below, Coleridge's moon in "Dejection" ultimately is optimistic, the process of rebirth is a violent one, and the moonlit scene of "Dejection" is reminiscent of the lurking darkness or many lunar scenes in English literature, a tradition where the moon is often linked with dark magical forces. Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" begins with darkness instead of light, anticipating the coming light which will rekindle his muse. The moon in "Dejection" is slightly different from this tradition, as it does not immediately grant inspiration, but instead heralds a storm, which jars the poet past his inability to see beauty.

"Water Melody" and "Dejection"

With these literary contexts in mind, the rest of this paper will be reading these poems together, understanding them within their own contexts as well as across contexts. In each of these poems, the moon serves a similar function in resolving the troubles of each poet. In "Water Melody", Su wishes that "we may have long life / That a thousand miles apart we may share her beauty" (但愿人长久，千里共婵娟; lines 18-19). Su accepts his difficulties and sends condolences to the many other people who are separated from loved ones. Failing to reunite with his brother during the Mid–Autumn Festival, he has moved through the realization of loneliness into a pragmatic decision to accept reality as gracefully as possible with as refined a philosophy as possible "since ever there has been no perfection" (此事古难全; line 17). He experiences the sorrows of not being able to reunite with family, and with the difficulties of being isolated at a remote post after being demoted, but instead of becoming mired in dejection like Coleridge, the moon that reminds him of his isolation also reminds him of the inconsequentiality of his brief human existence, and this perspective, which transcends human time and space, offers solace. Step by step, Su moves from the real predicament – failure to reunite with his brother – to the spiritual struggle, that is, his desire to serve and his inclination toward detachment., He finally obtains spiritual compromise and peace as even the moon has "foul weather and fair, waxing and waning" there is no perfection in life.

Coleridge also reaches a similar acceptance in his poem. While the moon is present throughout the poem, in the final lines, the moon is conspicuously absent, and the storm which the moon invited has dissipated.

The poem is no longer focused on Coleridge's internal struggles with his dejection. This simultaneous disappearance of the moon and of the poet's inner reflection implies a connection between the two. As the moon disappears, so does his inward reflection and his hope, and his thoughts turn from expectations of rebirth to a resigned prayer for the joy of Sara Hutchinson, the object of his unrequited love.

> May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling.
> Silent, as they watched the sleeping earth!
> With light heart may she rise,
> Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,
> Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice:
> To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
> Their life the eddying of her living soul!
> (2013, lines 130-136)

The poet becomes a detached audience, paying no attention to his own problem, in order to accept the darkness of depression and wish joy and peacefulness to the lady whom he loves. To her, he wishes "may all things live, from pole to pole, / Their life the eddying of her living soul!" (2012, p.135-136). He hopes that she, who herself intuitively possesses the joy, will never lose it and will let her living soul lead and influence all her experiences. Unable to overcome his dejection, the poet fails to regain his vital imagination, but instead embraces another kind of hope; a hope that he may be able to love someone and that he may "escape the prison of self and participate in other lives and modes of being" (Fogle, 1950, p. 77), traveling outward beyond the confines of self and "bring[ing] forward the potentials for seeing beyond single-point perspective's present-centered conditions" (Stewart, 2002, p. 257). The conceptual space in which the poem operates is here transcended. He departs from the previous space, completely separating from considerations of his own dejection, standing higher than himself to observe and reflect with love for another. Similar to Su in "Water Melody," he reconciles his struggle by seeing that there has been no perfection, wishing people can share the moon's beauty under the same sky, Coleridge finally discovers a way forward, releases himself from the prison of self-pity, and connects his private concerns with wider ones.

In both poems, the moon serves the purpose of allowing the poets to transcend their human circumstances. Su's transcendence is more thorough

and certain, but Coleridge also finds relief at the end. In both cases, the moon shifts the focus away from human activity, which is totally absent in the poems, allowing for a focus on the abstract and untouchable object within the poet's mind. Both poets transcend time by combining the present moments with the past and integrating feelings with myths and legends. Usually, time is considered a linear flow which can only move forward but not backward, as Confucius observing a stream remarked, "What passes away is, perhaps, like this. Day and night it never let up" (2007, 9.17). Instead of the typical narrator who watches the stream pass, the moon is beyond time. Thus, in the poet's contact with the moon, time no longer flows in one direction, but exists in all times simultaneously, with each moment intertwined. For the reader of these disparate lyrics, the images of Su under the moonlight in China and Coleridge under the moon in Britain are intertwined in their diminishment of human measure.

Not only is time transcended, but both poems also alter the spatial norms. Su's moon shines down upon his brother and upon all those who are able or unable to reunite on this Mid-Autumn Festival, bringing them together into a common consciousness across space. Coleridge's moon also shines down upon the house of the woman who he desires, connecting them across space as he sends her wishes through the sky. In "Water Melody" there is also free movement between the earth and the palaces of the moon, as Su travels from one to the other and back in only a few brief lines. In "Dejection" there is not so much movement, but in the darkness and storm, physical location becomes unclear and even meaningless. This spatial conceptualization recalls Henri Lefevre's distinctions between 'First space' and 'Second space', where First space is "fixed mainly on the concrete materiality of spatial forms" while Second space is "conceived in ideas about space, in thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms" (1996, p. 10).

The Second space which exists in the form of ideas expressed through language can be applied to the moon palace created by Su and the "luminous cloud" space created by Coleridge. The moon palace is beyond time and beyond the human physical realm, yet Su fully identifies with this ideated location. Similarly, when the storm comes, Coleridge's speaker is immersed in the wind, losing his physical coordinates. We do not know how long the storm lasted, as we do not know how long Su meditated under the moon. Through this suspension of time and ambiguity of space, traditional spatial

boundaries are forgotten in order to examine the poets' psychological space of solitude. From heaven to earth, from past to present, Su and Coleridge use the method of dislocation to deliberately disorganize the specific spatial order and time in reality, and organize the heaven and the human world, the past and present into the same space.

Conclusion

The two poems, "Water Melody" and "Dejection", are from completely separate worlds, yet there is value in building a bridge between them. As Haun Saussy argues, shared lineage is not necessary, as "the job of the comparatist is to invent new relations among literary works", not to find existing ones (2006, p. 60). Despite any previous connection between Su and Coleridge, this examination of "Water Melody" and "Dejection", the moon in both works leads to consolation because of the alteration of space and time. More broadly, it is striking that Susan Stewart's reading of eighteenth-century English nocturnes can apply to a twelfth-century Chinese nocturne, which begs the question of whether any literary theory can be extended beyond the bounds of one literary universe. Examining general portrayals of the moon in each culture functions to make the familiar feel strange, as the Western notion of the moon as an evil omen, recalling vampires and were-wolves, can feel bizarre when imagined from the perspective of Chinese associations of the moon with family reunions, as so many holiday gathe-rings take place under the full moon. Ultimately this comparison, in addition to exploring these two poems and poets, creates a destabilizing effect by which a reader may be induced to move beyond the traditions, to a point where Weltliteratur is no longer the goal, as it was for Goethe, but instead a starting point.

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