CHAPTER FOUR

RETREAT

“THE BRIGHT MOON”

The poems by Ho that can be assigned to the summer and fall of 1506 come close to equaling in number all that survive from the years before his trip to Yunnan, but the early stages of Wu-tsung’s history are only occasionally visible in them. They are generally unremarkable, recording visits, farewells, and messages to absent friends. The following is an example:

江南思四首寄曹毅之

燈下雨鳴秋舫，浦口潮迴暮鍾。何處鄉思不見，江南開遍芙蓉。

Thoughts of the South: Sent to Ts’ao Yi-chih [Hung] (first of four poems)

Below a lamp the voice of rain on an autumn boat;
At the mouth of a cove as the tide turns back, an evening bell.
Is there a place where longing thoughts do not appear?
South of the River, lotus blossoms blooming everywhere . . .

Poems on the theme of “Thoughts of the South” go back at least to the pair by Hsiao Kang 蕭綱, Emperor of the Liang dynasty. The third line is reminiscent of a line in the T’ang poet Chang Jo-hsü’s 張若虛 well-known “An Evening of Blossoms and Moonlight on a River in Spring” 春江花月夜, “Is there a place of longing thoughts in a moon-bright pavilion?”

1 HTFC 28.10b (506; 364:001). For Ts’ao Hung 曹弘 (t. Yi-chih 毅之), see HY 2/276, MST 36.28a, TK 144. Ho wrote another poem for Ts’ao in the fall, see “Missing Ts’ao Yi-chih [Hung] on an Autumn Evening” 秋夕懷曹毅之, HTFC 19.12a (324; 352:144). The Ts’ao Hung of all historical records, though a southerner, did not pass the provincial examination until 1516, and the chin-shih only in 1517. Although the set of poems from which the one translated comes could possibly be much later in date, the autumn poem “missing” Ts’ao is part of a block of poems that are clearly no later than 1507 (see TK 308-09). It is thus possible that the Ts’ao Yi-chih whom Ho addresses is a different person.

2 Lu Ch’in-li, p.1912. The phrase 浦口 ‘mouth of a cove’ occurs in the second of Hsiao’s poems.

3 CTS 117.1184; K. 05577.
One work from this period, however, “The Bright Moon,” is of special importance, for it provides a sense of how seriously the ‘historical’ study of poetry was taken in Ho’s circle. Ho’s preface to this long and self-consciously literary composition, one of his longest poems and one perhaps best understood as a kind of ‘graduation exercise’, marks a culmination of his poetic studies.

When I first read the heptasyllabic songs of Tu Fu, I admired the precision of their disposition of material and their deeply telling use of words. Inadequate as was my intellect, I did try to imitate them in my humble way, for it seemed to me that long poems attained sageliness

---

4 HTFC 14.14b (210: 371:009). There is a Japanese translation of the poem in Yoshikawa Kōjirō 吉川幸次郎, Gen Min Shi Gaisetsu 元明詩概說 (Introduction to Yuan and Ming Poetry), Chūgoku Shiin Senshū, second series 2 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1963), pp.185-189. John Timothy Wixted, in his excellent translation of Yoshikawa’s book, includes only part of the poem, Five Hundred Years of Chinese Poetry, 1150-1650: The Chin, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p.150, explaining in his preface that, “as the poem is a long pastiche of allusions that make little or no sense without lengthy explication, I decided that the present excerpts adequately suggest the nature of the piece” (p.xvi). Having criticised Wixted’s failure to translate the entire poem, in my published review of his translation (CLEAR 13 [1991]: 154-60), I must now concede that there is something to be said for his decision. Not only is the poem long and difficult, it is a very early work and no more representative of Ho’s mature style than the “Gurrelieder” is of Schönberg’s. There is a quite remarkably similar work with the same title, though without a preface, by Wang T’ing-hsiang; see Wang Shih Chia-ts’ang Chi 王氏家藏集 (Mr. Wang’s Collected Works Stored at Home) (Chia-ching edition; repr. Taipei: Wei-wen, 1976) 13.2b (476), Wang T’ing-hsiang Chi 王廷相集 (Collected Works of Wang T’ing-hsiang) (Peking: Chung-hua, 1981) 13.188. Some specific parallels are pointed out below in a separate note. The expression ‘flowing light’ 流景 most commonly refers to the light of the setting sun, but the moon is probably meant here. The Ssu-k’u Chüan-shu actually emends 景 to 影, probably with this in mind. Coincidentally, in the third line of the sixth stanza, 影 is again part of a textual problem. The ending of this line, 行憐影, is emended in the later, ‘no carvers names’, family of the Standard recension to the easier 憐行影. See TK 279. In line 59, the first of the penultimate stanza, the Shen recension reads 視蛾 ‘moth eyebrows’ in place of 視蛾 ‘moth eyebrows’. This is a puzzling reading given that “moth eyebrows” continues a pattern of double anadiplosis after a rhyme change seen earlier in the poem, but it might be pointed out that in the next line “wrapped-up longing” is a repeated phrase but “harboured love”, prosodically parallel to “moth eyebrows” or “scarlet cheeks,” is not. The significance of the textual echo of Emperor Wu (see text) is uncertain. No doubt it supports the reading “harboured love”; the question is whether it supported it for Ho Ching-ming or only for his later editors. What is significant is that the Yuan recension, which generally follows the Shen closely, differs here, and so I follow the majority in my translation.