

THE POET'S ACHIEVEMENT, SEPARATE FROM TIME

It was T S Eliot who gave me the title of this essay. Eliot, whose first lyric poem, "The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock" the American poet John Berryman described as "our first modern poem," held that "The Wasteland" had left "deep tracks in poetic tradition." When, in 1948, the Nobel Academy awarded him that year's Literature Prize, referring to his "exceptional work to renew poetry," Eliot replied to their encomium by saying that "for a poet, to receive the Nobel Prize confirms the value of poetry to human civilisation. Because of this, it is necessary always to reward poets. I view the award of this Nobel Prize not as an award for my own gifts, but for the achievement of poetry."



Eliot had studied Sanskrit and Buddhism at Harvard and had subsequently begun to write in an avant-garde style, graduating to the ranks of the school of New Criticism at Cambridge. He received literary awards in Germany, France the United States and Great Britain, including academic recognition from sixteen universities. He declared himself a royalist, and an Anglo-Catholic by religious persuasion, and became a British national. For Eliot, moreover, the question of faith was central to his poetry, his spiritual life being at every moment as much a part of his existence in the world as of his own personal existence.

From the 1980s onwards, while the economies of the Soviet bloc nations were blinded by a hysteria which intended to preserve communism, a crisis was fomenting among the higher echelons as much as among the ordinary people. Mongolia too was touched by this and, following the democratic revolution of 1990, the

problematic of communist theory having been responsible for the destruction of socialism, many and various ideologies developed beneath the standard of freedom, and thus the crisis of theory grew ever deeper.

Mongol letters is today subject to a problem similar to that which affected the European tradition during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The advocates of modernism and postmodernism tend to deny the older forms without even considering the implications of their approach, and so here the torrent flows along, gathering to itself the detritus from the gullies surrounding the writers' encampment. But among those writers of what is called new poetry, who prefer not to associate with the old ideas, there are some who have forged for themselves a fruitful path. One group has sought to plant in Mongol soil the roots of European and American postmodernism, while another has sought to renew and support the pre-existing traditions.

T S Eliot may not be familiar to Mongol readers, but in choosing not to deny tradition, even as he moved from the avant-garde to classicism, he placed the new literature together with the classics. He desired that each might exercise its own influence, and so brought together the works of European literature, starting with Homer, and including myth and epic and oral poetry, which thus constituted the culture as a whole. Critics regard "The Lovesong of J Alfred Profrock," published in 1915, as Eliot's poetic response to writers such as the French symbolist Jules Laforgue, such as the seventeenth century English metaphysical poets, such as Shakespeare and Tennyson, while the complex allegories and myths of "The Wasteland" call forth extensive critical analysis. Thus we can see that for Eliot, innovation and excellence should come together in the same work. Eliot saw that literature, like society itself, developed over time, but that tradition remained unaffected by both time and society. Thus Eliot was constantly seeking to understand the past, for which reason he needed always to deny his individuality.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the poet who has been pursuing in Mongolia a path similar to Eliot's has been Gombojavyn Mend-Ooyo. But Eliot and Mend-Ooyo were not of the same breed. And although Mend-Ooyo is an oriental, although he wears a tattered old sheepskin deel, still he wraps his books in the finest silks, he is a child of Mongolia, its ancestral wisdom, religion,

culture and customs preserved in its songs and prayers and stories and epic poems.

Mend-Ooyo wrote his first poems under the influence of a famous translator and poet named Dorjiin Gombojav, whilst he was studying at middle school in Dariganga, in the area around the famous sacred site of Golden Hill. His father was also named Gombojav and was a famous local horse trainer.

Some people say that the horse trainer shown in Dagdani Amgalan's well-known picture "The Country of the Little Sharga" is Mend-Ooyo's father. Mend-Ooyo's mother was a storyteller, a woman full of ancient wisdom. And, beneath the powerful wings of Golden Hill, these four – the wide and blue-mist country of Dariganga, the horse-trainer, the storyteller and the translator-poet – exercised their influence over Mend-Ooyo's mind as it grew and developed. The lovely country of Dariganga selflessly offered beautiful sights to his eyes and beautiful sounds to his ears, and his father and mother passed down to him their popular wisdom. And his teacher, the poet Gombojav, extended what they had given by introducing to his young student the very best of world literature.

By the end of the 1970s, the divide between capitalism and communism had grown more pronounced. The international détente came to a head, with both sides aiming nuclear missiles at one another, with some poets publishing work to promote mutual hatred. But at this moment, the young poet Mend-Ooyo wrote a verse called "Mother Earth," which a composer set to music, and it was sung throughout Mongolia to the ringing sound of guitars:

We love the natural world,
our lord's golden storehouse,
we love humanity's precious work,
a shining candle through a thousand eons.
You birth humanity from your womb,
you hold us, childlike, to your heart.
Mother Earth, I love you –
and since I love you, Mother Earth, my
Mother Earth, you'll live forever!

Deep in his heart, this young poet had felt the danger, not that these two contrary worlds would eliminate one another, but that they would destroy human civilisation, and he called upon them not to threaten one another, but to make peace.

If we look at the history of world literature, poets from ancient times have not felt hatred for one another, but have loved one another, they have not destroyed the natural world, but have made peace with it. It was T S Eliot's view that poetry should not divide ancient from modern, but that it should privilege unity and tradition. The seventeenth century English poet John Donne (1572-1631) wrote that "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. Therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee." John Donne was one of the poets for whom Eliot felt the greatest debt of honor. In truth, human society is one, and so poetry is one. For this reason, poetry has the burden to illumine what is valuable in human society.

And this is what Mend-Ooyo speaks of in his poetry. He follows his mother, watching the nomads moving along the horizon, boiling up tea and serving out plates of food, and later he would write how, "in my childhood, I saw the meaning of mutuality, of how we all live together in the world, extending generosity and kindness to those who undertake distant journeys. These were the experiences which became the essence of my poetry."

Mongolia is a land of four seasons. For this reason, Mongol poets throughout history have written about the four seasons. The theme of the four seasons has come to be recognised as characteristic to Mongol poetry. Mend-Ooyo, too, in his lyric poem "The Wheel of Time," speaks of the elegance, brightness and beauty of the four seasons and shows how one body can stand out from another through the rhythm of its headlong rush:

The time goes flying, flying by,
the time is gone, is gone.

And so, with this level rhythm, like the pulse of time, the past and the present and the future are strung together, and it is only the past and the future which are to be spoken, and we join these two times together through our experience and our feeling and our thinking and our happiness and our suffering:

Quite unexpectedly, the time flies, rushing by.
The sun's eyelids freeze in the endless mandala.
The piercing cold is tamed beneath the best fur hats.
The birds fly off, abandoning the skies.
The sun's rays burnish the silver steppes.
Frozen lanterns, glistening in the camp,
sway with Orion, hanging in the high heavens.

Earth's satellites flash and fade away, the time flies by and is gone.

The heat from the winter campsite rises up and freezes in the clear sky.

The turning tentpole shows the hand of night.

Around the children, covered by mother's *deel*, listening to stories

of *Once upon a time*, the time goes flying, flying by.

The horses whinny, echoing their bodies between the hills and mountains.

Sound flows, absorbed into snowflakes, and

the spine of the world relaxes in the four directions.

And, *Happily ever after*, the time flies by and is gone.

It is the poets who proclaim the wisdom that the world is in the beauty of the bitter winter cold, when the eyelids of the lifegiving sun are iced over. The images in this lyric are the world of the Mongol nomad, of human civilisation as seen by Mend-Ooyo, who since his youth has been trying in his work to speak about what is of common value to humanity.

Mend-Ooyo once wrote that "a gentle melody is my poetic nature," and it should be understood that this "gentle melody" is what we might call a patient heart, or a virtuous activity. Mend-Ooyo's poetry, in fact, takes pleasure in the loveliness of this earth, it strives to endure wickedness, to add the light of the mind to the light of the sun, to shine in the darkness. This is the great wisdom of the east. In order to help the six classes of beings, our teacher the Buddha initially taught his students how they should live. So how might one do this without a patient heart, without virtuous activity?

This "gentle melody" is like the manifestation of the teaching, its rebirth perhaps. This rebirth comes to life in Mend-Ooyo's poetry. As he has himself written, "The fundamental character of the nomad is a gentle heart, such as looks upon all things from the aspect of light, unhurriedly and forever in motion, inquisitive, and searching with a distant softness and a dreamy intuition. And I honor the character of the nomad, I cherish the soft and gentle melody, and the more I relish it the longer I am absorbed by it." Such is the tradition. And the tradition is the tradition of ideas.

Mongols today worship our teacher the Buddha, but they don't investigate the nature of his teaching. Thus they pray to the Buddha and then they go off and behave as badly as other people.

Then, when they have tasted the result of their wickedness, back they go to pray for salvation from the Buddha.

The most important part of the tradition is the tradition of ideas. And Mend-Ooyo has preserved this superior tradition, which seems so to be lacking from Mongol poetry in this present century.

I look to the light for what is passed by,
I love all that is joyous.
The drunkard slams the door in anger against autumn's mist,
and holds his friend's flowers to his proud heart.

The years paint life in all its colors,
and now we each rule our own space.
The grass of many autumns fades, we were not neighbors
then,
and there is peace in every district.
(from "I look to the light for what is passed")

For every moment of happiness,
there will be a time of worry, the mind will feel no ease.
So many years I've sat in pleasure,
not seeing that the stars were rushing from the sky.

I think of the time, coming like bright birds,
and of the flowering forth, like starwort seeds,
and I stand, holding my horse, on the pass of my forty years,
my skirts flapping by the puffs of white wind.
(from "Tattered Rainclouds")

The sadness of the world is hidden in melismas,
and wonders dwell in the everyday.
Once the mists have cleared, the eye of wisdom
cares not for rainbows, but sees the earth.
(from "When Autumn Births the Pleiades")

Why is it that poetry is said to be an untranslatable artform? Poetry absorbs into itself all that is beautiful in the language in which it is created, but it is not possible to convey the true and appropriate feeling of these specific words through the medium of another language.

Mend-Ooyo's poetry is a case in point. If someone expresses Mend-Ooyo's work using another language, they will think about his art from their own viewpoint, so how could someone really manage fully to translate a poem? According to the scholar D

Tserensodnom, "Mend-Ooyo's poems are like the pieces of silverwork forged by smiths in Dariganga." These smiths roll out silver into fine threadlike patterns on silver drinking vessels, they braid them like girths, and to watch these works of art being filled with crystal clear wine, it might seem as though their bowls have been finely wrought with proud galloping horses, flashing their tails and manes, tossing their heads and whinnying, while the vessels' outer bases are as though wrought with silver serpents at play with the clouds in the sky. But this is not all, for the smiths also strike the silver clasps and saddle-studs for the famous Dariganga saddles.

Similarly, how Mend-Ooyo is able to transform this fine work into poetry is not easy for some people to comprehend, and they fail clearly to understand the process. But Mend-Ooyo's poetry is not only an art to be declaimed from the stage, but it is also to be understood by its readers through their own discussion. Today's readers are always in a hurry for easy things, they search for simplicity, irritated by that which requires thought and concentration.

When Mend-Ooyo published the collection *Crystal Temple of Meaning* in 1997, it was recognised that he had scaled new heights of literary skill. The collection included "When the River Runs Clear:"

There are birds in every branch of the willow on the riverbank,
and there is light between its leaves.
In autumn, when the powerful waters clear,
the Tuul's joyous waves slide along its banks!
...to see the grasses, they have the shades of song,
to watch the clouds, they have the myriad colors of horses.
When I swallow the waters of the Tuul, afloat with copper
leaves,
my body is cleansed of its sadness and its grime.
As the waters of the Tuul are purified in autumn,
so in the flow of time is my poetry purified.
And the Tuul watches how young men are born
of such ability, and come to greet the gods of poetry.

In 1995, when Mend-Ooyo wrote this poem, Mongol poetry was in a period of profound crisis. It was like when the rivers are made clear by a rich autumn, where all the leaves are bright after torrential rain and mud, his poetry was melodic, it was lovely to the human mind, it was bright and pleasant, and it restored one's faith.

These three qualities – to clear the rivers, to make human beings shine, to improve the poets – came together as one.

This was the time when Mend-Ooyo improved the situation of poets. As wisdom became clear and the power of the mind grew, did not this poem seem to show how, in the future not only of his own poetry, but of Mongol poetry too, we would wearily emerge onto the mountain-pass of life? We could say that the wisdom which came from this improvement was responsible for the benefit which followed. Again and again Mend-Ooyo would return to this theme. In 2007, he wrote a poem called "The Clear Herlen:"

The elegant cranes comb their whiskers with white
feathergrass,
they circle, calling their return.
The Herlen and I wander the mists of autumn,
and meet in a thousand distances.

For a thousand years, has her velveteen surface
silently borne a multitude?
She has healed the hillocks, sliced through
by the sword of history.

More than a thousand times I have thought about her waters,
I have grasped only her voice as it leapt the wall.
The waters flow out in long patterns,
and wait a thousandfold in clarity.

The earth is rotting and going to seed,
only the Herlen flows clearly on.

This poem reinforces the message of the poem quoted earlier, "When the Waters Turn Clear," and it raises the conjecture that, over thousands and thousands of years, all impure things which came into contact with the river have been made pure and clear. This wise poet does not cease from improving either himself or the human world, and the aspiration to think in this way is concealed within him. Thus the Clear Herlen is Mend-Ooyo himself.

Once more, in 2008, in his sonnet "The Song of the Charged Cup," Mend-Ooyo sung:

When I visited my dear friend, the fire god was smiling,
and the seven gods of the Plough were in the north.
The mountains far away came to sit cross-legged with us,
and Heaven's eye peered in through the roofing.

When prayerful people meet, the world feels good,
when generous words are spoken, the flowers smile.
We celebrate when what is scattered is whole again,
and we await the renewal of the ancients' ways.

Your kingly seat without is like a peak -
is the brilliance of Shambhala, the world mountain.
Your queenly peace within is like a voice -
is the divine Buddha's rebirth in human destiny.

It will change returning sadness into coming smiles,
it will transmute ignorance into brilliance.

These animals called human beings come quite alone, quite naked,
into this world. They are come all in one mass. And these people,
enjoying themselves all in one mass, are happy and joyful. With
their joy and happiness and enjoyment, these people disperse the
world's gloom.

The world is pleased, and the sun smiles clearly. The human mind
is cleansed, and poets have a purity of wisdom.

It is brightness which prevails in Mend-Ooyo's philosophy. He
seeks to discover brightness in every aspect of this world. In 1982,
he wrote:

The lark sings, praising the rays of morning,
and sunshards float in knots upon the spring waters...
The moon's rays polish the silver steppe,
and icy lanterns measure springtime, glinting on the earth...
Sunlight and moonrays extend the path,
the ancient ways in leaf and flower are gathered and strung
together...

In 1996, he was still writing,

I look to the light for what is passed,
I love all that is joyous.

In a poem written in 1990, "Mankind and Light," we read:

When the world had not found its form,
when the sun had not risen in the sky,
ancient people emitted
from their bodies precious light.
The trees bore branches of shining fruit,

and minds bore shining thoughts,
the shining people turned the darkness white
and lived without error.

However, the problem of human greed took the light from all people, and everywhere was overwhelmed by darkness. After a million years, the sun rose and the world grew bright, but although the people had the brightness, their greed was such that they imagined the sunlight to be but slight, and though they added various different forms of light,

The light grew dimmer
in themselves ...
Their flawless faces lacked
the light of human thought,
for an aeon, they lacked
even myths.

And it is with myth, of course, that we can judge the decline of human society.

Over the years that followed, Mend-Ooyo deepened his contemplation of the light, his position being that all good things take part in the light. In another poem, "The Moon Rising Over an Ancient Temple" (2003), he writes:

The moon rises over the old temple,
its transfigured light shining in every heart.
A bamboo flute carries me beyond my grief,
calls upon the Buddha's distant light.

The shadow of the temple casts its meaning,
like words fading into ancient ink.
Upon the shadow of the human heart,
no light is cast by the candle of mind.

And in "Every Shining Moment 1" (2005), he expands upon this theme:

The brightest light shines even in the darkness,
and a woman seems more lovely in the dusk.
A sound is heard, the mind's dusk gleams,
and people shine the brightest when they love.

At the beginning of his career as a poet, Mend-Ooyo's friend used to call him the Moon Poet, and now, years later, poets from many countries know him as the Bright Songster. Most significantly, he is the Bright Songster of the human heart, and the brightness of the heart arises from love, from the love which one person feels for another.

A sound is heard, the mind's dusk gleams,
and people shine the brightest when they love.

Great love is Brightness, great Brightness is Divine Love,

...is the brilliance of Shambhala, the world mountain...
...is the divine Buddha's rebirth in human destiny...

As he moved from avant-gardism to classicism, Eliot paid little regard for Shakespeare's renaissance humanism, and while he strongly criticised the romantics such as Byron and Milton, he considered how such a one as Shakespeare could have fully grasped that Power which had eroded the totality of Time. We have seen how those poets were able to flee their destiny, to improve over time what they had created with the common mindset of human civilisation, and to develop accordingly. Eliot's denial of individuality had previously been generally understood by poets, and it is to this end that Mend-Ooyo's poetry aspires.

But for what ideal should the mind of human civilisation be struggling? The finest intellects are those people who love others, those who love the natural world which is at the root of being. And Shakespeare, on his stone plinth, has firmly withstood the paper-borne storms of time. In one of his famous sonnets, he writes that not even the soot of time will remain with him. And this is Mend-Ooyo's assertion too.

With poems like stars, glistening and glistening across the night of the full moon, which hangs over the Mongol steppe, the work of Yavuuhulan's student Mend-Ooyo is a gently-flowing river. Like the great Herlen, I trust that it will flow and cleanse the earth for a thousand thousand years. I should like to conclude this little essay with these lines from Shakespeare's 55th Sonnet, about how the poetry of love is able to counter the storms of time.

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
□Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
□But you shall shine more bright in these contents
□Than unswept stone besmear'd with sluttish time.
□When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
□And broils root out the work of masonry,
□Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
□The living record of your memory.
□'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
□Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
□Even in the eyes of all posterity
□That wear this world out to the ending doom.
□So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
□You live in this, and dwell in lover's eyes.

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