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White Egret by Li Bai

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Hyacinthus Meredith
White Egret

Li Bai
白鷺鷥

An egret skims over autumn waters,
floating down singly, a flake of frost;
its mind untroubled, it need not race,
and stands alone by a sand-isle.

Commentary

Li Bai (or, in an older Romanisation, Li Po) 李白 (701–762) is considered by many (though not me) to be the greatest of all Chinese poets. Knowledge of several of his shorter poems is nearly universal among the literate Chinese population. Though “White Egret” is not among these most famous poems, it shares some of their characteristics: brevity, tonal and rhythmic regularity, vividness of image and adept use of figurative language. A great difficulty of translating traditional Chinese poetry in general, and the *jueju* (the form of this poem, four lines of five or seven syllables with the second and fourth lines rhymed) in particular, is that of conveying the compressed, often symbolic images while maintaining an easily flowing rhythm. I have been helped by the simplicity of “White Egret,” which is concerned principally with capturing a viewed moment in time and nature and is largely free of both abstruse allusions and meditations on contemporary or universal problems, though it may reflect the equanimity and eremitism that Li Bai sometimes achieved, or sometimes wanted to achieve, away from the ignoble strife of the imperial court. Nonetheless, my translation process was tortuous. I planned initially to render “White Egret” as a shape poem, emulating an egret floating down, but various attempts yielded no meaningful shape and detracted from the faithfulness and vividness of the translation. With inward relief, I returned to more familiar forms. That the poem has not (to my knowledge) been previously translated allowed me to forgo conscious innovation. The resulting translation was relatively spontaneous and conveys, I think, both the meaning and the sentiment of the original without being pedestrian. It is, however, not without craft. While I have not replicated the rhyme or the tonal and syllabic metre, I have tried with a natural English rhythm to convey something of the change from movement to tranquillity with more frequent stresses as the poem progresses. The long vowels at the end of the original, for example, are replicated in those of the last line of the translation, especially the spondee “sand-isle”; this and the words of the second line were arrived at after considerable editing.