White Egret as the Ideal Man: Wang Wei’s Metaphor for the Perfect Conflation with Nature

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Li-ling Hsiao and Ashley McGee study Wang Wei’s 王維 (699–759) poem titled “Rill of the Luans” (“Luanjia ta” 樂家瀨) that features a white egret as a metaphor of the ideal man, and explores Wang’s perception of the perfect conflation of man and nature.

The celebrated pastoral poet Wang Wei 王維 (699–759) is most notable in his contemplation of the perfect integration of man and nature. He uses concise and expertly crafted poems to communicate a lifetime of practical and spiritual insights inspired by his natural surroundings. For Wang, man and nature are meant to complement each other, in harmony and of equal importance. However, man is plagued by selfish worldly desires that prevent him from integrating completely with his natural counterparts. Wang thus uses animals as metaphors for the ideal, “natural” man to embody true harmony defined by an existence free from selfishness and desire, synchronized with the cycles of nature. With these “natural” men in mind, this essay investigates how Wang symbolically employs the image of a white egret in his poem “Rill of the Luans” (“Luanjia ta” 樂家瀨) to metaphorize a perfect integration of human and nature.¹

In his four-line poem “Rill of the Luans,” Wang depicts a lively autumn scene in which the natural world interacts with a man-like creature, a white egret. There is an intimate relationship between the creature and its environs. The poem and its word-for-word English translation read:

¹ “Rill of the Luans” is the thirteenth of the twenty poems included in “Anthology of Wang River” (Wangchuan ji 娛川集) that depicts the scenery around Wang Wei’s estate (Peng 1979, 1299-1304).
As wind blows in the autumn rain, the river’s water splashes the rocks. The raindrops and the splashed droplets echo each other, forming an animated picture of water dancing up and down. The poet describes the echo and the repetition in his third line: “dance waves self mutually splash.” Amidst this animated scene of dancing water, the white egret joins the rhythm by repeatedly plunging into the splashing water. Individually, the raindrops, water, and white egret seem to perform a function that is repetitive at best, but together, nature and creature unite to create a rhythmic dance performance.

This dance of nature is also an animated picture of the color white. The raindrops and the water in the first three lines form a curtain of near-white transparency against which the white egret bobs up and down. The river’s water slips down the rocks, becoming white rapids that echo both the rain and the white egret. Despite the mention of “autumn” in the first line, Wang evokes no other color association but white. Wang intentionally uses different shades of white to present this dance of nature; the transparent raindrops mix with the white water splashes and fall into the more opaque white river, while the solid white egret plunges into the white water. The introduction of the autumn season into this scene of dancing white accentuates the vibrancy of nature amidst a season and a color of death, sweeping away the association of melancholy, the emblematic mood of the season. Wang replaces the season’s typical colors of red and yellow with different shades of white, in which autumn’s colorful vibrancy is superseded by the vibrant movements of life. The white egret thus symbolizes the vibrancy of life that triumphs over the characteristic melancholy associations of the fall season, an optimism arising amidst a scene of pessimism.

This scene is not only a picturesque view of nature’s dance, but also a vibrant and harmonious natural song. The first two words of the first and second line: “sa sa” and “qian qian” describe the sounds of the wind and of the water. The whooshing of the wind contrasts with the flowing sound of the water, creating two musical lines that echo each other. This
mixture of the continuous sound of the water with the short and abrupt whooshing of the wind is nature’s blending of legato and staccato musical articulations. Furthermore, the repetitious and loud sounds of the water hitting the rocks create a dynamic between the continuous hissing sounds of the water. This dynamic mixes with the rhythmic murmuring sounds of raindrops as they hit both the rocks and the water. Each natural component works synergistically to create the musical masterpiece: the steady stream of flowing water, like a continuous musical note, combines with the loud splashing and the limitless lively murmurs of the raindrops, while the whooshing sounds of the wind, like brass instruments, bellow above the symphonic water. Moreover, the white egret’s repeated plunges into the water create the surprising, loud sounds that punctuate nature’s music like a drum punctuating a symphony. The word “alarmed” (jing 驚), the third word in the last line, not only establishes the analogy between the clamorous egret and the raindrops and waves, but also emphasizes the surprising drum-like plopping sounds created by the plunging egret as the rhythmic master of nature’s symphony.

The following translation is an attempt to capture the rhythmical essence of this poetic natural performance:

Swishes and swishes the wind in autumn rain;
Hisses and hisses water over the rocks.
The dancing waves mutually splash;
Alarmed, the white egret again descends.2

The cyclic relationship between the egret and its surroundings is readily apparent, but the egret’s role as a symbol for man is hidden deeper within the poem. There are a few integral words and phrases in “Rill of the Luans” that convey the egret’s symbolic nature to the reader. The most prominent representation of this symbolism is the word in the last line: “alarmed.” The last line states: “Alarmed, the white egret again descends.” The word “alarmed” not only places the

2 Pauline Yu translates the poem as the following:

_Luan Family Shallows_

Brisk gusts in the autumn rain;
Rushing on, the stream purrs over rocks.
Leaping waves naturally splash each other:
White egrets are startled, then descend again. (Yu 1980, 203)
egret in a position to punctuate the nature’s rhythmic dance and music, but also imputes a level of self-awareness to the egret. In order to be “alarmed,” a being must first be aware of its position in space. However, this condition alone is not sufficient for the use of the word “alarmed.” A being must be focusing on another matter in order to be alarmed by an unrelated stimulus. Consequently, the egret must be able to formulate its own thoughts in order to have the capability to be “alarmed.” It is precisely the egret’s elevated level of awareness that makes it a metaphor for man.

The egret’s human-like characteristics solidify its position as a symbolic man, but they do not necessarily indicate the egret’s role as the ideal man. Specific language in the poem is integral in introducing the “ideal” component of the egret’s metaphorical symbolism. Given an alarming situation, most men would flee from the stimulus that is causing them to panic, but the egret does the exact opposite. The last line ends with “again descends.” Although the egret could have easily flown away from the rapids that have alarmed it, instead it descends again. It declines to look down on the rapids from the safety of the air. Instead, it repeatedly descends into the water and continues its participation in the cyclical process of nature: the rain contributes to the water supply, which flows past the rocks, and in turn, causes the water to splash itself, which alarms the egret and causes it to descend repeatedly. The seemingly extraneous creature has forged an essential relationship with the rain and water, and has become integral in the cyclical process of nature.

Wang uses the egret to metaphorize a particular type of ideal man. This type of ideal man persists even when events in his life do not proceed as planned. When met with an unexpected surprise, the ideal man simply responds by reacquainting himself with nature. He does not allow outside stimuli to distract him from the important natural cycle in which he participates. Through the use of the word “again” (fu, the fourth word of the last line), Wang makes it clear that the egret is a conscientious and meaningful participant of this cyclic nature. It is not an accidental single action, but an intentional and repeated attempt on the part of the egret. The egret has completely integrated with nature and has become a valuable element in a vibrant, self-sustaining ecosystem. The system is full of life and movement in a mutually supportive relation. It is precisely these lively movements that make the system peaceful and harmonious. Because the egret is symbolic of the ideal man, Wang seems to suggest that in order to achieve harmony in the mortal world, one must integrate oneself with nature: nature and man must be of equal importance.
Re-enforcing the cyclical theme of Wang’s poem, let us return to the first two words of Wang’s first and second lines. Wang characterizes the ideal harmonious relationship between man and nature through the careful insertion of onomatopoeias at the beginning of the first two lines. “Sa sa” and “qian qian,”—translated as “swishes and swishes” and “hisses and hisses”—are the raw voices of nature. Wang could have easily chosen to narrate the sounds of wind and water using words of man’s poetic invention, but instead he allows nature to dictate its own pure sounds. The onomatopoeias signify a delicate harmonious balance between a creature and its environment. By allowing nature to tell its own story, Wang is showcasing a deep respect for humanity’s natural complement: even when humans are not physically present, nature is filled with a spirit of humanity.

This humanity is simultaneously and equally defined by the ideals of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. The varying shades and intensities of the color white remind us of Buddhism, which defines the world as emptiness and illusion. Yet the dance and music allude to the essential elements that Confucius employs to define civilization. Lastly, the self-sustaining quality of the ecosystem, the cycles of water, and the music of wind—an allusion to Zhuangzi³—recall the essential tenets of Daoism. Wang’s ideal man, the white egret, is utterly immersed in this perfectly syncretized ideal of the Three Teachings that have shaped Chinese civilization for two millennia.

References


³ The music of wind is expounded in the chapter “On Equalizing Things” (Qiwulun 齊物論) in Zhuangzi 莊子 (Zhuangzi, 48-9).