HAS passed through the world.
A very big, white elephant
He’s returned, shaking East and West.
He’s left, shutting the eyes of the mighty.
Grey peaks under snow.
He’s left, waking
He’s returned, disturbing the sun gods.
Dew from the topmost leaves.
He’s left, shaking
He’s left, uprooting
Of the mighty ocean.
He’s left with the calmness
Perfume, from a thousand years away.
Have gripped my mind.
Anemones, shocked into life by the melting earth,
And some tumble into my eyes as snow,
Some words vanish from the world.
Flew like a crane, leading the flock into spring.
There, a thousand suns burning in my heart,
The words of the Buddha in the infinite sky
Flew like a crane, leading the flock into spring.
Some suns fade from existence.
Some words vanish from the world.
And some tumble into my eyes as snow,
And strike the earth.
Anemones, shocked into life by the melting earth,
Have gripped my mind.
I sensed their new buds, autumn’s evening
Perfume, from a thousand years away.
the sound of rain falling on the felt roof
the sound of rain striking the felt roof
the sound of sound striking the felt roof
…repeating without repeating...

the sound of rain falling on the felt roof
the sound of rain striking the felt roof
the sound of sound striking the felt roof
…repeating without repeating...

**Simon Wickham-Smith**

I have written here previously on the life and work of the 19th Noys Khyung Danzanravjaa. Danzanravjaa’s education provided him with a vast corpus of religious and literary material from which he could draw, and it is the use he made of this tradition which characterises his poetic output. Structurally, his technique makes frequent use of the head-and-tail form, in which each line of a stanza begins with the same letter and ends with the same word. What is contextually most interesting here is that this is clearly a technique based upon orality: repetition through the stanzas serves as an aide memoire. Over time, however, the metalinguistic aspects of orthographic and aural structure have been subsumed into the form of the genre and the genre itself has become integral to the literature.3

In terms of subject matter, too, Danzanravjaa begins from the traditional topoi of Mongolian poetry – nature, the seasons, the nomadic life – and interweaves them with practical advice based on Buddhist wisdom to produce what in many ways is a radical and unusual corpus. In fact, it was precisely the accessibility of his lyric to the nomadic stock from which he came that so set him apart from the religious establishment.

Perhaps, then, it is a striking conceit to frame Danzanravjaa as the precursor to the work of today’s young Mongolian poets. But he is just a frame. The new voices of Mongolian poetry live in a society where national pride and tradition are being deliberately focussed on the future and out into the wider world. Young poets are discovering a way to combine the Mongolian poetic tradition with a Western sensibility and are thus creating what might tentatively be designated a new strand of world literature.

**The nomadic life: dreams and visions**

A cursory glance through the pages of Mongolian poetry will reveal that, as is the case with Mongolian culture as a whole, the experience of dreams and visions is central to the poetic aesthetic. Indeed, the repetition founded in orality is a kind of enchantment, the creation of a dream state through alliteration and echo.

In fact, it is more a memory than a dream, but a memory caught in the clasp of melancholy, which characterises much of this poetry. Take, for instance, Ölziitögs’s poem in your absence. For me, the overwhelming loss expressed in this poem is a temporary loss, and this emphasises the feeling that her lover (presumably) is going to return. But this is a poem about vision, and Ölziitögs’s vision holds a powerful image to which she can open only in the darkness: “In the dark, in the dark alone, you appear / Where the whole world, time and existence, grow dim”. This is more than simply a vision in her mind of her lover’s image; it is a revelation of a love which is found in the world beyond the senses.

Ayuurzana, who has claimed, Danzanravjaa is my hero!, deals with a similar theme in his poem ‘Standing in the silence of night’. It is interesting to compare the work of these two poets, as the ideas within their poems seem to relate closely to one another. The relation between the work of Ayurzana and Ölziitögs is further enhanced by the information that they are married to each other. Whilst I do not want to presume any creative similarity from this information, it would seem pointless to ignore the obvious emotional input given the nature of both of their poetries. Here, for instance, we have another poem concerned with the physical senses – of smell rather than vision – but Ayurzana’s approach is more narrative. His narrative, in fact, seems to range from a kind of wakeful dream (in which he is caught unaware by a presence, a scent) through memory (again catalysed by scent – ‘A rose garden near by, and I fell into the past’) to a feeling of disassociation in the final verse that, in some ways, resolves the poem into an eternal mystery.

What strikes me in particular when comparing the work of these two poets is the ways in which they address the physical world. Nature and our relationship with it have been central to Mongolian poetry for centuries: for instance, this relationship is one of Danzanravjaa’s principal themes and the medium

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**Ts Bauuudargj (1971)**

**A very big, white elephant**

A very big, white elephant
Has passed through the world.
He’s left with the calmness
Of the mighty ocean.
He’s left, uprooting
The serenity of the earth.
He’s left, shaking
Dew from the topmost leaves.
He’s returned, disturbing the sun gods.
He’s left, commandeering
Golden temples, shining with blood.
He’s left, waking
Grey peaks under snow.
He’s left, shutting the eyes of the mighty.
He’s returned, shaking East and West.
A very big, white elephant
Has passed through the world.
A very big, white elephant...

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**G-A Ayurzana (1970)**

Standing in the silence of night, my mind stupefied, Who was it flashed across my dulled sight? This vision was as intense through the darkness, A path of sadness hanging in the air.

I stumbled along a lighted path, Seeking what remained in my memory. A rose garden nearby, and I fell into the past.

And suddenly I returned.

That perfume! I’d fallen for it utterly, had picked it, breathed it in. O, what flower was it?

Was this truly someone’s love Floating around me? Or a shooting star? Or else, in the silence of night, Was it a shining visage floating past?

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Simon Wickham-Smith

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Portrait

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28
through which he frequently chooses to express his understanding of Buddhist teachings. But the turning of the seasons is no commonplace a focus for both contemporary and premodern literature that it would be extraordinary not to find it in the works of even the youngest and most urban (of) writers.

So whereas Ayurzana chooses to express nature through a dream of concrete (or at least explicit) images (the silence of night, a lighted track, a rose garden) and evokes scent, that most fragile of senses, to express his sudden emotion; Ölziitögs uses the visible solidity of phenomena (an apple, a hat, butterflies, a cloud) to express something that is absent from her and yet felt absolutely.

Accepting pain and sadness

The complex interweaving of images in and between these two poems can be extrapolated to the work of other poets. The signature poem of Enkhboldbaatar, one of the founders of the poetry collective UB Boys, expresses a sense of desolation and confinement relative to the feelings evoked by Ayurzana and Ölziitögs. ‘I sit in a darkened room’, Enkhboldbaatar writes in his poem The Set (Absolute Values) extending the idea of confinement into another of the standard themes of Mongolian literature, the idea of facing the world, with all its difficulties, in a direct and self-aware way. Of course, this theme is also central to Buddhist literature, but there is perhaps a harsher – or at least a stronger – tendency in Mongolian literature (and arguably in Mongolian society as a whole) to accept pain and sadness, which can be seen in part as a manifestation of Danzanravjaa’s influence. For Danzanravjaa was scathing in his criticism of people who refused to understand the truth that was right in front of them, with all its problems and cruelties: when we look at Enkhboldbaatar’s poem, then, we should take into account not only his personal experience but also the historical feeling expressed by poets such as Danzanravjaa.6

The stitting quality of this poem closes around us as we read; we are forced to feel the poet’s misery and futility. ‘The one outside reference, to the moon, ‘Like a woman’s eyes, gazing’, is so dulled and non-committal that its almost total lack of effect is startling. And, later, when the moon reappears, the effect is again to plunge the poet more deeply into his grief, a kind of lunacy or night madness in which emotions are heightened and desperation is made more profound.

How interesting, too, that the poet ‘feels’ freedom in the darkness. But this darkness is a natural darkness and, finally, he exchanges this reassuring darkness for the personal inner darkness of ‘my grief and sadness...’ The ellipsis here, more frequently used in Mongolian poetry than perhaps in Western poetry, seems to me to emphasise the poet’s understanding of his own futile and pointless life.

These three poems discuss the relationship between the inner and outer worlds, their inner and outer lives. This is of course not an aspect exclusive to Mongolian poetry, but I would argue that the deep sense of feeling for, and direct relationship to, nature is characteristic of Mongolian literature, at least from the earliest written sources. The nomadic instinct that informs Central Asian literature as a whole brings to the fore not only the earth and its creatures beneath, but also the heavens and the stars above; the entire cosmos takes on a central role.

External influences: haiku and the Buddha

The literature of neighbouring cultures has been a constant influence on Mongolian poetry. I have already mentioned the nomadic literatures of Central Asia, but of course the Buddhist poetry of Tibet and China has also exercised a powerful effect. Although Danzanravjaa never actually visited Tibet, the general monastic and specific Buddhist education that he received shows throughout his oeuvre: there are direct references to the poems of the 6th Dalai Lama, with whom he is often compared, and also less obvious references to the glau and ghasu traditions of both secular and religious Tibetan poetry.7

But in the contemporary world, Mongolian poetry has been influenced by cultures further abroad. Erdeneetsogt’s Mongolian haiku series uses the traditional Japanese form in a loose way: rather than presenting an image followed by a short concluding idea (in the sense preferred by Bashō), Erdeneetsogt often presents a single image over the three lines. So these are not haiku per se, but rather an adapted form, namely, Mongolian haiku: this recalls the way in which the premodern traditions of nature poetry and Buddhist poetry have been given a more modern voice.

As with traditional Japanese haiku, Erdeneetsogt’s Mongolian haiku evoke nature: the examples printed here are representative of the entire collection, with references to flowers, the music of the church bells, and the sun shining on the darkness. These themes are heightened and desperation is made more profound.

Sorrow

I have come crawling to you, Through arrogance and sudden drops in temperature, Through the colours of the world and Through the suppression of dreams. I want to love you With the kind of sweet affection That can dwell only in a human being. In my heart I mourn one thing, That I’ve not been able to love another. I regret I’m not a swallow on the wild steppe, That I cannot soar to meet another. I want to love you, to Open the eyes of cross-legged Buddhas. I’ve such a magic storm – I want to make a lily in the snow glance up. I’ve such a shining wind... I want to love you... But in the hazy smile of this moment I can’t come close to you. In this cold glow of arrogance, I cannot come to you. I wanted only to love you...

Music

Times of loud noise inside the ger Of the fire’s smell... The lion protects our heritage in the moonlight. Father’s dreams understood, Mother’s fingers on her rosary. Only Buddha in their minds... Their calm, clear eyes are heavy, their Mantors flying. An ornament of sound... (translated by Simon Wickham-Smith)

L ÖLZIITÖGS (1972)

Looking at mountains, I feel I am a mountain. Looking at mist and haze, I feel I am a cloud. After the rain has fallen, I feel that I am grass, and When sparrows start to sing, I remember I am morning. I am not a human, that’s for sure. When stars flare up, I feel I am the darkness When girls shed their clothes, I remember I am spring When I smell the desire of everybody in this world, I realise how my quiet heart is a fish’s. I am not a human, that’s for sure. Under the colourful sky, an immense EMPTINESS Starting from today I am only... A secret whispered to God

What do you like, God asked me in a whisper. The sound of the church bells, The lit candle melting down, The snow, shining in the darkness, And my Bombubulei’s smile. What don’t you like, God asked me in a whisper. The sound of the church bells, The lit candle melting down, The snow, shining in the darkness, And my son’s smile.
D E N K H B O L D B A A T A R (1971)

A SET (ABSOLUTE VALUES)

point (not a new start),
comma (links a numerical sequence),
fifty-six (not an age, not an order, not anything),
comma (this could be the end),
comma (but this one’s a mistake),
another point (this delimits the values),
zero (the correct form) and, behind it, the letter O (same shape, different meaning),
infinity (this is the continuation),
point (the limit of the endless infinite),
the letter E (this is the end),
comma (starting over), and again
the letter E (but this is where it starts),
comma (signal),
zero zero zero zero (four places),
the letter T (meaningless),
∞ (the most amazing (being other)),
point (geometrical), and again
point (literal),
comma (this is how it ends. It means...),
continuing (this indicates the beginning)...}

I sit in a darkened room, Thinking about this and that. The dull moon peers in through the window. Like a woman’s eyes, gazing. The clouds move awhile, Plunging me into darkness. My sight is far away now. I feel freedom in the darkness. From behind the clouds, the moon reappears. Again, the room closes its walls around me. I cannot see beyond the walls, And close my eyes in desperation. I leave behind the freedom of the dark, And sit amid my grief and sadness...

... (EMPHATICOS)
Live not in song but in tears, And don’t be too frail when you’re in love. Be aware that you can barely see through rancour, and in forgiveness, that all of us are sinned against by life. No, no, our fate has always been To be an ordinary and downtrodden servant. We have looked up to the sun, We have had no history up to now. My right hand tightly envelopes my left, My heart tortures my brain, Else desire and trust will gnaw themselves, And my dear body will be mutilated. We may oppose the fury of our fate, But its hook will trick us, As the roe deer is struck down by the hunter’s arrow, And, helpless, collapses to its knees. Oh yes, we are always slaves. We are born into the hands of destiny, And there we die. But we must fight and, If we fight, then death will be acceptable. So live not in song, but in tears, Live to endure, to struggle, and to struggle once again, Like a sword, like a mountain cliff, and Barely able to see through righteous anger. But, at the end, one thing: In this struggle, you will never be victorious. You will never win. And that’s because There’s nothing good in anything.
Contemporary Mongolian poetry has suffered from being reared during the cultural isolation of the Soviet era, but it is nonetheless a vibrant force among Central Asian poetics. The work of these five young writers not only addresses the common themes of nomadic literatures but also the Buddhist tradition with which Mongolians are now starting to reconnect. In this way, then, these poets are closely following the tradition of Danzamjavaya, expressing their ideas of love and separation, of spirituality, of the natural world in a straightforward manner and with direct language. Furthermore, the almost total lack of formal experimentation bespeaks an emphasis on content over form, which reflects the practical nature of a nomadic culture.

But at the root of these poems there remains the visionary, dreamlike quality, a thread stretching back through the history of Mongolian literature. This quality is frequently expressed more in the language than in the meaning; it is the way in which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed. Sound in the original is all but lost in translation, for which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed. Sound in the original is all but lost in translation, for which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed. Sound in the original is all but lost in translation, for which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed. Sound in the original is all but lost in translation, for which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Elizabeth Myhr in helping me to organise my thoughts regarding the relationship between Mongolian and Western poetic forms. I have been unable to find any criticism, in fact, on any contemporary Mongolian literature in any Western language. I would be happy to hear from anyone who has information on previous studies.

This group was founded in 1989 by Enkhboldbaatar, Dashmunkh, and Kunley, and Milarepa and exist in the present day in the form of various styles. These styles were used by poets such as the 6th Dalai Lama, Drukpa Kunley, and humour but, again, is beyond the scope of this essay.

I should also mention here another strand of poetry prevalent in Mongolia itself as in the West. This had its own feeling of desperation and misery but, again, is beyond the scope of this essay.

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