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# Du Fu's "Gazing at the Mountain"

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## Introduction

Among Du Fu's (712-770) earliest extant works is the poem entitled "Gazing at the Mountain" ("Wang yue" 望嶽).<sup>1</sup> Traditional editors and commentators have included "Wang yue" among a handful of surviving pieces that appear to date from the period beginning with Du Fu's failure in the *jinshi* examinations of 735 or 736 through the several years he spent in the east and northeast during his travels in Qi 齊 and Zhao 趙.<sup>2</sup> Modern scholars have generally agreed with the traditional chronology, and some have even maintained that "Wang yue" is Du Fu's earliest surviving poem.<sup>3</sup> There seems to be no concrete evidence to warrant such precision; perhaps scholars such as Xiao Difei 蕭滌非 have been inspired to such conclusions, at least in part, by the poem's mood and theme, which seem to exude self-encouragement and youthful bravado in the face of Du Fu's recent failure in the exams. Though it is not necessary to insist that "Wang yue" is Du Fu's earliest extant poem, the circumstantial biographical evidence, combined with the qualities of the poem itself, have led most critics and commentators to conclude that "Wang Yue" was composed as early as 736-737 or soon afterwards.

Because "Wang yue" appears to be one of the earliest of Du Fu's extant works, it has been the focus of much critical attention. Its famous third couplet, in particular, has provoked much discussion and controversy. A number of recent studies have attempted to reinterpret the poem, often using the startling, puzzling third couplet and the implications of its various possible meanings as a crux of discussion.<sup>4</sup> But no

<sup>1</sup>I would like to express my gratitude to Jonathan Pease for his warm encouragement and his careful reading and editing of the draft of this paper. I also thank the three CLEAR readers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup>In editions that attempt to arrange Du Fu's poems in chronological order, "Wang yue" is placed among the first several works. For example, it is the first piece in Pu Qilong's 浦起龍 (b. 1679) *Du Du xin jie* 讀杜心解; the second piece in Qiu Zhaoao's 仇兆鰲 (1638-1713 or after) *Du shi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳注 and Yang Lun's 楊倫 (1747-1803) *Du shi jingquan* 杜詩鏡銓.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Xiao Difei 蕭滌非, trans., *Du Fu shi xuanzhu* 杜甫詩選注 (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1979), p. 2. William Hung has suggested that one and possibly two poems may be dated prior to Du Fu's taking the *jinshi* exam. See William Hung, review of A.R. Davis, *Tu Fu*, *HJAS* 32 (1972): 268-69.

<sup>4</sup>Some of the more recent articles and discussions include: Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) [hereafter *High T'ang*], pp. 187-88; Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 101-3; Paul Kroll, "Verses from on High: The Ascent of T'ai Shan," in *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice*, eds. Shuen-fu Lin and Stephen Owen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 178-83; Xiao Difei, "Hui dang ling jue ding, yi lan zhong shan xiao: tan Du Fu de 'Wang yue'" 會當凌絕頂一覽眾山小: 談杜甫的望嶽 (1980), reprinted in Xiao Difei, *Du Fu yanjiu* 杜甫研究 (Jinan: Qi Lu shushe, 1980), pp. 366-69; Xu Yongzhang 許永章, "Shuo Du shi 'Wang yue'" 說杜詩望嶽, *Wenxue pinglun* no.4 (1980): 131-133; Jiang Yihan 姜一涵, "Li Du yong Dai shi de fenxi" 李杜詠岱詩的分析, *Huaxue yuekan* no. 117 (1981): 13-19; Xiong Zhiqi 熊治祁, "Dui 'Shuo Du shi 'Wang yue' yi wen de yidian yijian" 對說杜詩望嶽一文的一點意見, *wenxue pinglun bianji bu* 文學評論編輯部, ed., *Wenxue pinglun congkan* vol. 13 (Beijing:

single interpretation has proven fully convincing. This study will review various discussions of the poem, attempt to reconcile some seemingly contradictory explanations, and offer a new interpretation. I also will attempt to explain its significance within the Chinese poetic tradition. Du Fu was the bridge between High Tang and Mid-Tang poetry (one could even speak of pre- and post-Du Fu verse with only slight exaggeration). Even in a work as early as “Wang yue” we can see features of Du Fu’s distinctive style that both broke with and yet adhered to “classical” traditions and standards. By scrutinizing a single work we may better understand at least certain aspects of Du Fu’s transformation of the poetic tradition.

### Setting

In 735 or 736 Du Fu took the *jinshi* examination.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the exam he had spent several years in the regions of Wu 吳 and Yue 越 (the southeast) wandering through an area rich in legend and history. Du Fu himself was a northerner, from Jingzhao 京兆, the capital prefecture.<sup>6</sup> It is not clear what prompted his southern travels. They seem to have begun around 730-731 and probably lasted until around 735 when he returned north for the exams. He presumably first took and passed the prefectural exams, earning the privilege of becoming what was termed “local tribute” (*xiang gong* 鄉貢), and thus qualifying to take the *jinshi*. His subsequent failure in the *jinshi* must have been a great shock and disappointment. Du Fu, who was now a young man expecting to assume the role and duties of a scholar-official, suddenly found himself without entry into the civil service.

Du Fu mentions his failure in several later poems. In works such as “Zhuang you” 壯游 (“The Wanderings of My Youth”) and “Feng zeng Wei zuocheng zhang ershier yun” 奉贈韋左丞丈二十二韻 (“Twenty-two Rhymes Respectfully Presented to Assistant Director of the Left Wei”), Du Fu portrays himself as an assured young man, confident of passing the exams, suddenly shocked by the reality of failure.<sup>7</sup> One would be hard pressed to design a better *jinshi* candidate. His learning, his literary gifts, his concern for the people and the dynasty, all would seem to guarantee success. It is true, however, that only a very small percentage of *jinshi* candidates passed.<sup>8</sup> In Du Fu’s descriptions of his failure and disappointment there is a clear

Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1982), pp. 456-459; Zhang Xuanqu 張軒渠, “Man tan Du shi ‘Wang yue’ zhu jie” 漫談杜詩望嶽註解, in *Wenxue pinglun congkan* vol. 13, pp. 460-465; Wu Mingxian 吳明賢, “Du Fu ‘Wang yue’ zhi bijiao” 杜甫望嶽之比較, *Du Fu yanjiu* no. 3 (1988): 32-37; Yang Yuxiang 羊玉祥, “‘Wang yue’ lijiaodian shixi” 望嶽立腳點試析, *Du Fu yanjiu* no. 2 (1989): 56-57; Zhong Shuliang 鐘樹梁, “Du Du Fu zaonian shi zha ji” 讀杜甫早年詩札記, *Du Fu yanjiu* no. 1 (1990): 1-9.

<sup>5</sup>The date and location of the exam is uncertain. Most scholars have thought that Du Fu took the exam in 735 in Loyang (which was then functioning as the principal capital). William Hung (Hong Ye 洪業) has vigorously argued that Du Fu took the exams in Chang’an in 736; William Hung, *Tu Fu: China’s Greatest Poet*, with a supplementary volume of notes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 25-28, notes, pp. 24-25.

<sup>6</sup>Du Fu thought of himself as a man of the capital region of Chang’an, but his family also had roots in Yanshi 偃師 near the Eastern Capital, Loyang.

<sup>7</sup>Guo Zhida 郭之達 (Song), ed., *Jiu jia jizhu Du shi* 九家集注杜詩, in Hong Ye 洪業 (William Hung), et al. eds., *Du shi yin de* 杜詩引得 2 vols. (1940 [in the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series]; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985) [hereafter *Jiu jia*], 12.169-72 and 1.1-3, respectively.

<sup>8</sup>William Hung assumes that Du Fu was a candidate from the Jingzhao prefecture. He notes that this in itself was a very great honor, and that such candidates usually passed the exams. Hung even maintains

sense that his misfortune was undeserved, yet he does not try to explain or blame.<sup>9</sup> It has been suggested that Du Fu's style did not fit with the current fashion, but this is speculative, and in the end we simply do not know why this seemingly ideal candidate was not passed.<sup>10</sup>

Du Fu's experience with the *jinshi* exam may help us to understand "Wang yue." It is important that we have some idea of his frame of mind as he left the capital and headed east. The civil service exams were crucial to men of Du Fu's class; they could make or break a career. The joy, exhilaration and relief of success, but more often the shock and despair of failure frequently found expression in literati poetry. Failure could mark a man's personality for the rest of his life. The lives and verse of the mid-Tang poets Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751-814) and Li He 李賀 (790-816), for example, were crucially shaped by the frustrations and perceived injustices they experienced while struggling with the exams. Meng Jiao's bitterness and anger—the twisted, painful vision of the world portrayed in his verse—can at least in part be traced to his disappointment and shock at failing the exams twice (he finally passed in 796).<sup>11</sup> The exams were often a young man's first encounter with the realities of life. Previous to the exams he was innocent. The candidate studied the classics, composed poetry, and dreamed. But the exams showed him that the world did not necessarily work as it should. Passing the exams was a complex process with many factors: one's background, connections, and politics could be as important as one's ability. It was not always fair. If one failed, there followed a critical period in one's life when one had to struggle to recover and adjust. In a number of post-exam pieces one finds writers expressing their disappointment and attempting to overcome their sense of failure.<sup>12</sup>

### *Gazing at the mountain*

Soon after failing the *jinshi*, Du Fu left the capital (whether Chang'an or Loyang we are not sure), beginning new wanderings that would last eight years. He headed east, the immediate goal of his journey probably being to visit his father who was assistant prefect (*sima* 司馬) in Yanzhou 兗州 (present day Yanzhou 兗州 *xian*,

that Du Fu was the lone Jingzhao candidate to fail the *jinshi* of 736 (but this assertion appears to be based upon very slight, questionable evidence); *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet*, pp. 25-28. As has been noted, however, the date and location of Du Fu's *jinshi* exam is still unsettled. Moreover, Du Fu may have been a candidate from Yanshi rather than Jingzhao.

<sup>9</sup>Du Fu uses the phrase *wu xia* 件下 to describe his failing the exam; see "Zhuang you," *Jiu jia*, 12.170. The sense of *wu* is difficult to fix. A.R. Davis translates it as "perversely;" A.R. Davis, *Tu Fu* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971), p. 20. William Hung suggests "thwarted"; William Hung, review of A.R. Davis, *Tu Fu*, *HJAS* 32 (1972): 269-70.

<sup>10</sup>Hung, *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup>In his collection one finds pieces with such titles as "Luo di" 落第 ("Failing the Exam"), "Zai xia di" 再下第 ("Again Failing"), "Xia di dongnan xing" 下第東南行 ("Wandering in the Southeast After Failing the Exams"), and "Aonao" 懊惱 ("Despair"). Stephen Owen discusses the influence of the exams on Meng Jiao's verse, see *The Poetry of Meng Jiao and Han Yu* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 55-72.

<sup>12</sup>A clear, frank example of such a work is Han Yu's 韓愈 (768-824) "Rhapsody on Encountering Two Birds" ("Gan er niao fu" 感二鳥賦). This piece was composed after Han Yu had failed the placement exam (*boxue hongci* 博學宏詞) for the third time, and finally left Chang'an in defeat. See Han Yu, *Han Changli wenji jiaozhu* 韓昌黎文集校注, ed. Ma Tongbo 馬通伯 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 1.2-3.

Shandong). Du Fu mentions his visit in his poem “Climbing the City-Wall Tower at Yanzhou” (“Deng Yanzhou chenglou” 登兗州城樓).<sup>13</sup> Because Mount Tai was located within Yanzhou prefecture it has been reasonably assumed that Du Fu visited Mount Tai around this time, and thus “Wang yue” is usually assigned to the year 736 or 737. Though the evidence is admittedly tenuous, the traditional dating does appear to be a strong possibility. If “Wang Yue” was not composed around the time of his visit to his father, it was most likely composed soon afterwards, during the few years Du Fu spent traveling through the Qi and Zhao region, and thus is one of the few extant works from this period in his life:

Mount Tai—What is it like?  
Through Qi and Lu its azure never ends;  
Here the Creator gathers wonders divine,  
Its northern and southern slopes divide dusk and dawn.  
Heaving breast—growing layered clouds,  
Split eye-sockets—enter returning birds;  
One day I (too) will mount the highest peak,  
Where in one glance all other mountains dwindle.<sup>14</sup>

岱宗夫如何  
齊魯青未了  
造化鐘神秀  
陰陽割昏曉  
盪胸生曾雲  
決眦入歸鳥  
會當凌絕頂  
一覽眾山小

Though it is an early work, one immediately recognizes the touch of the man who would eventually become one of China’s two most celebrated poets. This poem has long been admired for the strength and boldness of its voice. A number of critics, aware of the biographical setting—that the poem was composed soon after Du Fu’s failure in the exams and subsequent retreat from the capital—have been especially moved by his spirit and youthful confidence. Instead of succumbing to failure, we find Du Fu gazing at a mountain and promising himself that he would someday (like Confucius) mount its peak and gaze down upon the world. The daring imagery, in particular the strange third couplet, is striking; it is an early example of a unique approach to language and diction that would eventually help transform poetry.

But though “Wang yue” has long been appreciated and discussed, it is a far more complex work than has usually been thought. It is not only an expression of confidence and resolve; it also represents the balancing of a welter of seemingly “contradictory” thoughts and feelings, whose key lies in the third couplet. This couplet, with its striking, violent images and puzzling ambiguities, has been the subject of much admiration, controversy and discussion. Various interpretations of the couplet have led to varying explanations of the poem. No single interpretation has proven completely satisfactory. Moreover, the question of the reasons for the couplet’s difficulty and ambiguity has not yet been addressed. The rest of the poem appears to read relatively smoothly and straightforwardly. Why did Du Fu compose this couplet in the manner that he did? It needs to be recognized that these images and ambiguities are not simply the result of a desire to dazzle or impress. Du Fu composed these lines with a deliberate purpose; only after we have fitted the character of his language to his feelings and thoughts can we say that we understand his poem. The deliberate ambiguities of his lines are an attempt to reflect the complexity of his feelings and

<sup>13</sup> *Jiu jiu*, 17.273

<sup>14</sup> *Jiu jiu*, 1.5-6.

ideas. They should be seen as a signal, an invitation to the reader to reflect and reconsider.

Read in the most natural, grammatically straightforward manner (assuming a s-v-o construction), the third couplet hardly seems to make sense:

dang 盪      xiong 胸      sheng 生      ceng 曾      yun 雲

Heaving/scoured - breast - gives birth to - layered - clouds

jue 決      zi 眦      ru 入      gui 歸      miao 鳥

split - eye-sockets - enter - returning - birds

Du Fu is gazing at Mount Tai. What can it mean to say that his breast gives birth to clouds or that his eye-sockets split and enter returning birds? Clearly these are lines to wrestle with. Commentators have suggested a number of solutions which require adjustments of greater or lesser degrees of severity. The simplest, most common explanation assumes that this is an example of poetic inversion; a possible interpretation of the first line being that it is *Mount Tai* that gives birth to layered clouds, the sight of which causes Du Fu's breast to heave in exhilaration.<sup>15</sup> *Dang 盪*, however, has several other meanings in addition to "shake" or "heave," including "rush," "scour," or "cleanse." Commentators have noted that the phrase *dang xiong 盪胸* has a precedent in Zhang Heng's 張衡 (78-139) "Nan du fu" 南都賦 ("Southern Capital Rhapsody"), "The Yu River scours its breast" (*Yushui dang qi xiong 清水盪其胸*).<sup>16</sup> Another interpretation thus suggests that the growing layered clouds and mists are sweeping past Du Fu's breast.<sup>17</sup> This seems to better capture the vividness and power of the line (and possibly the sense), but it gives rise to the problem of exactly where Du Fu is in relation to Mount Tai. The title of the poem suggests that Du Fu is gazing at Mount Tai from a distance. But if this is the case, how could he describe the clouds and mists as rushing by his breast? Some commentators have thus suggested that Du Fu is somehow "imagining" his ascent, or as one commentator has put it:

He imagines the ascent of the mountain in this way. It is not a realistic description. It cannot be explained by simply looking at the sentences and words. Du Fu's person is at the foot of the mountain, but his spirit is wandering at its peak.<sup>18</sup>

In a somewhat similar explanation, Qiu Zhaoao 仇兆鰲 (1638-after 1713) has described the poem as a progression of views:

This was composed while gazing at the Eastern Mountain (Mt. Tai). The poem was written with four stages in mind. The first couplet is the mountain's appearance as observed while gazing from the distance. The next couplet is its stance (*shi 勢*) when closely viewed. The third couplet is the scene minutely observed. The last couplet is

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Qiu Zhaoao's comment in his *Du shi xiangzhu* 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 1.4; Xiao Difei, ed., *Du Fu shi xuanzhu*, p. 3, n. 5; David Hawkes, trans., *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* (1967; reprint, Hong Kong: Renditions Paperbacks, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501-531), comp., *Li zhu Zhaoming wen xuan* 李注昭明文選, ed. Li Shan 李善 (Taipei: Heluo tushu chubanshe, 1975) [hereafter *Wen xuan*], 4.73.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, *Jiu jia*, 1.6; Owen, *High Tang*, p. 187, 380, n. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Wang Sishi 王嗣奭 (1566-1648), *Du yi* 杜臆 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 1.2.

the feeling he has as his gazing and his hope are at their height. The first six lines are a realistic narration; the last two lines are an imaginary depiction.<sup>19</sup>

A number of recent critics, however, are uncomfortable with the idea of imaginary ascents of the spirit and shifting viewpoints, and have attempted to overturn these traditional interpretations. They have gone so far as to suggest that Du Fu is not gazing *at* a mountain, but rather *from* a mountain, some saying that Du Fu has climbed one of the lower peaks and is gazing at the highest peak; others maintain that he has actually mounted the highest peak and is gazing downward. Only in this way do they feel they can account for the image of Du Fu apparently level with the swirling clouds and mists of the mountain heights.<sup>20</sup> These recent interpretations are not very convincing. To begin with, they violate the natural reading of the title. *Wang yue* cannot mean “gazing from the Mountain.” Such interpretations do show, however, the problems that this line raises.

Another recent and even more radical proposal suggests that the subject of the third couplet is not Du Fu, but Mount Tai itself: it is Mount Tai that is heaving its breast and giving birth to clouds and mist. The split eye-sockets are explained as caverns or grottoes into which returning birds enter. Paul Kroll argues that since each previous couplet focuses on the mountain itself, it is unnecessary to shift the focus toward the speaker. By taking Mount Tai as the subject one avoids the “...‘daring’ inversion of normal syntax and the logical incongruities necessitated by the approved interpretation.”<sup>21</sup> But one cannot help feel that this is going too far. This degree of anthropomorphism seems too extreme, even bizarre. With regard to the structure of the work, the third couplet of an eight line poem is the typical location of the break or turn, and thus a natural place for a change of subject or focus.<sup>22</sup> More important, the rationale or intent of such a striking conception is not clear. One is left with a strange, gaping image (how and why do caves and grottoes become likened to split eye-sockets?) with little hint as to how it is to be “pursued.” Accordingly, even Kroll backs away somewhat from his reading, acknowledging that both interpretations (his and the traditional) are possible. He suggests that Du Fu may have been deliberately ambiguous, and notes that François Cheng has also explored this possibility:

<sup>19</sup> Qiu Zhaoao, ed., *Du shi xiang zhu*, 1.4.

<sup>20</sup> See Xu Yongzhang (1980), Xiong Zhiqi (1982), Zhang Xuanqu (1982), Yang Yuxiang (1989).

<sup>21</sup> Kroll, “Verses from on High...,” p. 182.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Owen notes that Du Fu often followed this pattern in his regulated verse; *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, p. 74. It is true that “Wang yue” is not a regulated poem in terms of tonal prosody, but its structure is that of a regulated poem. Traditional critics have pointed out that the third couplet of a regulated poem, like the third line of a *jueju*, was the natural place for the “turn” (*zhuan* 轉). It is interesting to compare the structure of “Wang yue” to an eight-line regulated poem by Wang Wan 王灣 (*jinshi* 712-13) entitled “Ci Beigu shan xia” 次北固山下 (“Stopping at Beigu Mountain”; *Quan Tang shi*, 115.1170). It also has a very striking third couplet, “The ocean sun is born in the remaining night, / The river spring-time enters the old year.” Stephen Owen says of the second half of this couplet, “...this line truly defies comprehension, startles the reader, and forces him to consider the couplet deeply.” Stephen Owen, *High Tang*, p. 15. Wang Wan’s and Du Fu’s poems are not related thematically, but they are similar in their use of the third couplet. Strangely enough, both couplets use *sheng* 生 and *ru* 入 in the forceful third position of the fifth and sixth lines respectively. It is possible that Du Fu was inspired by Wang Wan’s couplet. Du Fu surely would have known Wang Wan’s piece which was widely celebrated during his day. The third couplet in particular was especially admired. Zhang Yue 張說 (667-730) is said to have cited it as an example of a model couplet and had it inscribed upon the Administration Chamber (*zhengshi tang* 政事堂); see Yin Fan 殷璠, comp., *He yue yingling ji* 河嶽英靈集 (completed 753), *juan B*, in the *Tangren xuan Tangshi* 唐人選唐詩 (1958; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), p. 106.

In the absence of the personal pronoun it is possible to ask whether the "straining chest" and the "bursting eyes" are those of the poet, or of the mountain personified. In reality the poet is trying to express precisely the *identification* of the climber with the mountain, and to give a vision of the mountain within.<sup>23</sup>

François Cheng's explanation is interesting. It is a daring attempt to both acknowledge and account for the ambiguities of Du Fu's imagery. However, while one should not immediately reject this interpretation, it still does not appear to fully explain the emotions and ideas that Du Fu may have been trying to express, and it is necessary to explore other possibilities.<sup>24</sup>

The second half of the couplet is just as striking and puzzling. The phrase *jue zi* 決眦 (burst or split eye-socket) is extremely violent, as is the ensuing image, which a literal reading could take as birds entering into split eye-sockets or even split eye-sockets entering into returning birds. The usual explanation is that Du Fu is gazing so intently at the birds as they return to the mountain and enter his view that he strains his eyes until his eye-sockets seem to burst. While I would agree that the traditional explanation may serve as a basic interpretation, that is to say, this is *one* of the events that is actually taking place and being described, it does not go far enough in considering the striking violence of the imagery and its possible significance. Why does Du Fu use such disturbing imagery and convoluted diction to convey a seemingly straightforward event? What is the intent of the image of split eye-sockets? Commentators have pointed out several precedents for this phrase. Cao Zhi's 曹植 (192-232) "Meng dong pian" 孟冬篇 ("Early Winter") contains the line, "They widen their eyes splitting their sockets," (*zhang mu jue zi* 張目決眦).<sup>25</sup> The phrase describes the fierce gaze of a hunter. Although this line helps us understand Du Fu's line—in each case we see a splitting of the socket caused by stretching or widening one's eyes—it is not being used in exactly the same sense. The other precedent often cited has nothing to do with gazing at all. In Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 (179-117 B.C.) "Zixu fu" 子虛賦 ("Sir Vacuous"), in a section describing a hunt, there is the following passage:

Their bows are not fired in vain;	弓不虛發
Hitting the mark they are certain to split an eye,	中必決眦
Impale a breast, pierce a foreleg,	洞胸達掖
Or snap the heart's cords. <sup>26</sup>	絕乎心繫

<sup>23</sup> François Cheng, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, trans. Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 147.

<sup>24</sup> The Qing critic, Wu Jingxu 吳景旭, quotes several works which show that the interpretations of Cheng and Kroll were anticipated by certain traditional scholars:

The Cao commentary to the *Guangyun* (*Guangyun Cao zhu* 廣韻撰注; I have not been able to identify) says, "'*dang xiong*' refers to the breast of the mountain itself. It is used to describe the enriching breath (*run qi* 潤氣) of the clouds, which cleanse and scour (*dang di* 盪滌) the man's breast." The *Sanshan Laoren yulu* 三山老人語錄 (by Hu Shunzhi 胡舜陟 [1083-1143]) says, "In Zhang Pingzi's 張平子 (Zhang Heng [78-139]) 'Nandu fu' there is the line, 'The clear waters scour the breast.' In Xiangru's (Sima Xiangru [179-117 B.C.]) 'Zixu fu' there is the line, 'The bows are not fired in vain, / Hitting their mark they are certain to split the eye-socket.' Du Fu borrowed the words from these two fu. '*Dang*' and '*xiong*' are spoken of with respect to the mountain. Some say they refer to the person. This is incorrect."

See Wu Jingxu, ed., *Lidai shihua* 歷代詩話 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 34.367.

<sup>25</sup> Lu Qinli 遠欽立, comp., *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩, 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983) [hereafter LQL], p. 430.

<sup>26</sup> David R. Knechtges, trans., *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, Vol. 2: Rhapsodies on Sacrifices, Hunting, Travel, Sightseeing, Palaces and Halls, Rivers and Seas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 63. Original text in *Wen xuan*, *juan* 7.156.



Although several commentators have cited Sima Xiangru's line, they have not attempted to apply the image to Du Fu's line. Instead they have cited this as an example of Du Fu borrowing a phrase and then using it for his own different purposes.<sup>27</sup> It may not be wise to ignore this possible signal; the precedent is possibly much more significant than has been thought. Stephen Owen, for example, while basically agreeing with the traditional explanations, suspects that Du Fu is also drawing upon the imagery from the "Zixu fu" to suggest that his close attention to the returning birds is comparable to the archers taking aim when they hunt.<sup>28</sup> However, we might take the hunting image even further, as will be discussed below. Another important question which has not been asked is why Du Fu's gaze should have focused on returning birds of all objects, and why they should impress him so much that they seem to enter his eyes (or his eyes even seem to enter the birds)? Up to this point the poem's subject matter has been fairly traditional. For example, clouds and mists are typically associated with mountains, and are often mentioned in the long tradition of Mount Tai poems. The image of returning birds is somewhat unexpected, though as will be seen it does have important precedents. The third couplet thus presents a host of problems. Du Fu's difficult, ambiguous language has caused commentators to differ on the literal meaning of his lines; more important, the rationale of his style and the significance of his images have yet to be fully explored. It is all very confusing.

Before offering yet another explanation of these lines, I remind the reader that Du Fu's poem begins with him gazing at Mount Tai and then asking what in fact Mount Tai was like. As Paul Kroll has stressed, Du Fu's work belongs to a long tradition of Mount Tai poems, and Kroll's study, "Verses from on High: The Ascent of T'ai Shan" is an excellent review of this tradition. In addition, it is a helpful introduction to the place of mountains and specifically Mount Tai in the Chinese tradition.<sup>29</sup> I will not go into detail on this important subject, but will simply review some points that we should keep in mind as we read Du Fu's poem. To begin with, mountains were sacred places. They were regarded as links between Heaven and Earth, and intermediaries between Heaven and Man. Their peaks and clouds were seen as the source of rivers, rain, and fertility, hence generators of life; they were the abode of divinities, spirits, souls and immortals. Loved, respected and feared, they were repositories of a variety of spiritual feelings and thoughts, and meant different things to different people. They were the objects of state cults—emperors sacrificed at mountains; recluses retreated from the world into mountains; Daoists sought immortality in mountains. Each mountain had its character and significance. Mount Tai, object of Du Fu's gaze, most venerated of the Five Sacred Mountains (*Wu yue* 五嶽), was especially rich in traditions and lore. It was the site of the *feng* 封 and *shan* 禪, the great imperial sacrifices to Heaven and Earth conducted by the emperor; it was the mountain that Confucius was supposed to have climbed; it was also known as an arbiter of fate, the controller of death and life, and it was to Mount Tai that the soul returned after death.<sup>30</sup> In the body of Mount Tai verse one finds works reflecting these various

<sup>27</sup> See the comments in *Jiu jia*, 1.6.

<sup>28</sup> Owen, *High T'ang*, p. 380, n. 6.

<sup>29</sup> For a recent survey, see Kiyohiko Munakata, *Sacred Mountains in Chinese Art* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> See Fan Ye 范曄, comp., *Hou-Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 90.2980: "...The souls of the dead return to Daishan 岱山 (Mount Tai)." This aspect of Mount Tai is often alluded to in early *xiaoshuo*. See, for example, the story, "Jiang Ji" 蔣濟 from the *Lie yi zhuan* 列異傳 (traditionally attributed

traditions ranging from celebratory verse, composed by officials accompanying their emperor's ascent, to *yuefu* laments and mourning songs. Cao Zhi, in his "Qu ju pian" 驅車篇, touches upon a number of these traditions, including the belief that Mount Tai was a spiritual site conducive to the pursuit of longevity and the immortality of a *xian* 仙.<sup>31</sup> A mountain, then, was host to a variety of associations and traditions; it could mean many things. In the case of Mount Tai, a long, diverse literary tradition had developed around it.<sup>32</sup> It was perhaps this rich tradition and multiplicity of meanings that drew Du Fu to the image of a mountain and led him to ask about its true nature. The "meanings" of Mount Tai would help him to explore, and finally resolve the complexities and contradictions that he saw in himself.

When the reader comes to the sixth line of "Gazing at the Mountain" ("Split eye-sockets—enter returning birds"), he is at first puzzled and startled. The image is painful, violent, and the sense at first unclear. When the commentators cite Sima Xiangru's earlier use of the phrase *jue zi*, the impression becomes even more severe. The impact is eased, though, by the apparent explanation of the line. Du Fu simply seems to be describing his intense, strained gazing at the returning birds, albeit in a novel and forceful way. The traditional interpretation is correct. But it explains only one level of Du Fu's meaning. His choice of words and their effects is deliberate, and we should not ignore our first impressions. The painful, violent image and the associations with hunting and archery are Du Fu's way of alluding to his own sense of injury and distress. We know the impact that failure in the exams could have upon a man. It was an event that often found expression in poetry, and it is in the light of Du Fu's recent failure that we should read this poem. When Du Fu obliquely introduces the image of hunting and archery in this line, he is touching upon a metaphor that was often used by failed candidates. Examination lore was rich in imagery of success and failure. Taking the exams was often likened to doing battle. If you were successful you could be described as a dragon or an immortal:

To succeed in becoming an official is like ascending among the immortals. To fail to become an official is like sinking into the Nether Springs (*quan* 泉). The joy and the delight of the one, and the grief and bitterness of the other, are like the distance between Heaven and Earth.<sup>33</sup>

If you failed, you saw yourself as a bird shot down in mid-flight.<sup>34</sup> Chen Zi'ang 陳子昂 (659-700) opens his "Returning West After Failing: Parting From Wei Lin" ("Luo di xi huan bie Wei si Lin" 落第西還別魏四懷) with the following couplet:

A rolling tumbleweed—still not at rest,

轉蓬方不定

to Cao Pi 曹丕 [187-226]); Li Fang 李昉, et al., eds., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (1959; reprint, Taipei: Wen shi zhe chuban she, 1987), 276.2177. For a brief review of Mount Tai and the afterworld, see Ying-shih Yu, "'O Soul, Come Back!' A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China," *HJAS* 47.2 (1987): 388-95.

<sup>31</sup> LQL, p. 435. Ying-shih Yu briefly discusses the links between Mount Tai, concepts of the afterworld, and the development of the cult of *xian* immortality; see "'O Soul, Come Back!'...", pp. 386-95.

<sup>32</sup> For a collection of Mount Tai verse (by no means exhaustive) see Ma Mingchu 馬銘初, ed., *Taishan lidai shixuan* 泰山歷代詩選 (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> Shen Jiji 沈既濟 (fl. late-eighth century) quoted in Du You 杜佑, *Tong dian* 通典, reprinted in *Jiu tong* 九通 (Taipei: Xin xing shu ju, 1962?), 18.101.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Owen notes, "A failed examination candidate was often referred to as someone struck by an arrow or a shot-pellet." *The Poetry of the Early T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 164.

Plummeting wings startled at the twang of a bow.<sup>35</sup>

落羽自驚弦

Du Fu also turned to this image when he described failing to pass the special examination of 747:

Summoned recently by the Sovereign,  
Suddenly I had hopes of “stretching myself”;  
But in the blue skies my wings faltered,  
Wavering, flinching, I could not let loose my fins.<sup>36</sup>

主上頃見徵  
欸然欲求伸  
青冥卻垂翅  
蹭蹬無縱鱗

With the image of the split eye-socket Du Fu is portraying himself as having been shot down, slain. His ideals have been crushed, and his vision of the world literally shattered.

Having to confront for the first time the realities of the world, Du Fu’s feelings are complex. One of his thoughts is to retreat, to abandon the struggle. That is why Du Fu focuses so intently on the image of the returning birds. As was mentioned above, introducing such an image was not typical of Mount Tai poems. Du Fu was probably thinking of Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365-427) when he wrote his line:

I built my hut in the world of men,  
Yet absent are the sounds of carriage and horse.  
You ask me how this can be?  
When the heart is distant the place is also remote.  
I pick chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge,  
And gaze distantly at the southern hills;  
The mountain air is lovely when the sun sets,  
Returning birds fly one after the other.  
In this return there lies a deep truth,  
I try to explain it, but words fail.<sup>37</sup>

結廬在入境  
而無車馬喧  
問君何能爾  
心遠地自偏  
采菊東籬下  
悠然望南山  
山氣日夕佳  
飛鳥相與還  
此還有真意  
欲辯已忘言

Tao Yuanming is gazing at a mountain; the sun is setting; he spies returning birds. The image and mood are peaceful and picturesque. These lines are among the most well known and loved in the tradition. But as James Hightower has explained, the poem is more complex than is ordinarily thought.<sup>38</sup> Again, the clue lies in the image of the mountain. On the one hand, with the mention of the chrysanthemums and the linking of his southern hills (Lushan?) to the Southern Mountain of *Shi jing* no. 166 (*ru nan shan zhi shou* 如南山之壽 “Like the longevity of the Southern Mountain”), Tao Yuanming is expressing a wish for long life. On the other hand, he is also expressing a longing to “return.” The theme of returning was of course the central theme of Tao

<sup>35</sup> Chen Zi’ang, *Chen Zi’ang shi zhu* 陳子昂詩注, ed. Peng Qingsheng 彭慶生 (Chengdu: Sichuan ren-min, 1981), p. 90. See also Han Yu’s “Da Zhang Che” 答張徹 (“Answering Zhang Che”), “When it came time to set foot in the Rites Examination, / They crushed the wings of this provincial.” Translation by Stephen Owen; *The Poetry of Meng Chiao and Han Yu*, p. 192. Original text, Qian Zhonglian 錢鐘聯, ed., *Han Changli shi xinian jishi* 韓昌詩繫年集釋, 2 vols. (1957; reprint, Taipei: Xuehai chubanshe, 1985), 4.397.

<sup>36</sup> From “Feng zeng Wei zuocheng zhang ershier yun”; *Jiu jia*, 1.2.

<sup>37</sup> Tao Yuanming, “Yin jiu shi” 飲酒詩 (“Drinking Poems”) no. 5. I am using the version of this poem found in the *Wen xuan* (under the title “Za shi” 雜詩 [“Miscellaneous Poems”]). In the sixth line it has the variant *wang* 望 for *jian* 見; *Wen xuan*, 30.658. The reasons for my choice are discussed below.

<sup>38</sup> See James R. Hightower, trans., *The Poetry of T’ao Ch’ien* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 130-132.

Yuanming's life. In this instance, however, it is not simply a matter of reclusion, of giving up a career in the busy world for a quiet life, but of someday giving up life altogether and returning to his "true home," the southern mountains, the prospective site of his grave:

My house is a traveller's inn,	家爲逆旅舍
And I am a guest about to depart;	我如當去客
On and on, where shall I go?	去去欲何之
To the southern hills, my old home. <sup>39</sup>	南山有舊宅

As Hightower has noted, the commentators agree that *jiu zhai* 舊宅 ("old home") refers to Tao Yuanming's grave. For Tao Yuanming, passing away was seen as a kind of return; at a certain point life and death are the same.

In "Wang yue" Du Fu also uses the dual symbolism of the mountain to capture his feelings about living and dying, though his focus and intensity differ from Tao Yuanming. Tao Yuanming's voice is of that of a mature man accepting, even welcoming his ultimate fate. Du Fu is a young man shaken by failure, who yearns for escape and relief. Du Fu uses the image of the returning bird, a favorite symbol of Tao Yuanming's, not only to convey his longing to retreat and return, but also the sense that he had been "shot."<sup>40</sup> Remember that Mount Tai was the mountain to which souls returned after death. This aspect of the mountain was often referred to in Mount Tai poems, some of which were mourning songs. For example, the *Yuefu shiji* preface to the *yuefu* title, "Mount Tai Song" ("Taishan yin" 泰山吟) notes:

The "Taishan yin" speak of men dying and their spiritual souls (*jing po* 精魄) returning to Mount Tai. It is in the same category of song as "Dew on the Shallots" ("Xie lu" 薤露) and "Haoli" 蒿里 ("Artemisia Village"?).<sup>41</sup>

In his poem Du Fu has portrayed himself as a slain bird that has had its eye split, and I think one image of this line is that of a returning soul.<sup>42</sup> One reading of this line then is, "Its eye split, the returning bird enters Mount Tai." To speak of returning to Mount Tai was actually a proverbial way of referring to death. It occurs a number of times in earlier verse:

The joys of life not yet exhausted,	人間樂未央
Suddenly one must return to the Eastern Mountain. <sup>43</sup>	忽然歸東嶽
I constantly worry I will soon be roaming Mount Tai,	常恐游岱宗
And never again see my friend. <sup>44</sup>	不復見故人

<sup>39</sup>"Za shi" 雜詩 no. 7; LQL, p. 1007.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. "Gui qu lai ci" 歸去來辭 ("Return!"; LQL, p. 987): "When birds are weary of flight they know to return." Tao Yuanming also composed a series of poems entitled "Returning Birds" ("Gui niao" 歸鳥); LQL, p. 974.

<sup>41</sup>Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩 is quoting the *Yuefu jie ti* 樂府解題; Guo Maoqian, comp., *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 41.605. "Dew on the Shallots" and "Artemisia Village" were both well known mourning songs.

<sup>42</sup>Birds would go on to become a favorite symbol and image of Du Fu's, e.g. "Lü ye shu huai," 旅夜舒懷 ("Thoughts While Traveling at Night"; *Jiu jia*, 27.415): "Floating, drifting, what am I like?/I am a single gull between Heaven and Earth."

<sup>43</sup>"Yuan shi xing" 怨詩行 ("Song of Grief"); LQL, p. 275.

Once we understand the emotions and traditions that lay behind Du Fu's line we can approach the rest of the poem with fresh eyes. I have spoken of the multiplicity of traditions and beliefs associated with Mount Tai. While it was seen as the home of departed souls, it was also known as a source of life. Mountains in general, with their clouds, mists, and rivers were seen as sources of fertility. As Kroll has pointed out, Mount Tai, greatest of the sacred mountains, was particularly rich in this quality:

Mount T'ai was naturally assumed to possess this life-giving quality in greater abundance than other heights, since it was the Marchmount of the East, the east being regarded as the cardinal direction of incipience for all creatures. One therefore sees why the souls of the newly departed dead were believed to make their way to T'ai Shan: they are returning back to their original place of animation.<sup>45</sup>

In the first line of the third couplet ("Heaving breast—growing layered clouds"), Du Fu draws upon this tradition of Mount Tai as generator of life. One traditional interpretation explains that Du Fu's breast heaves in excitement and exhilaration as he gazes upward at the clouds and mists. I would basically agree with this interpretation; I do not think it is necessary to propose that Du Fu has already climbed or partially climbed the mountain. However, Wang Sishi's explanation that Du Fu had ascended in spirit to the heights of Mount Tai is insightful and suggestive. While he gazes at Mount Tai, Du Fu also pictures himself up among the mists and clouds. The image is, I think, of animation and birth. The word *sheng* 生, "to grow, give birth, to live" is crucial. It captures the dominant tone of this line, and contrasts with the violent and negative tone of the following line. Du Fu is exhilarated by the sight of the clouds and mists of Mount Tai; he imagines himself brushed by these same life-generating clouds and mists; and finally the breaths emitted by his own heaving breast are seen as one and the same as the *qi* 氣, or life's breath of the mountain.

I also wonder, however, if the image of the heaving breast may have another side. We have seen that in the following line, Du Fu saw himself as a fallen bird. The image he used was unusually striking and violent, and may "reflect" back on and add another facet to the image of the heaving breast. I wonder if Du Fu was imagining his own stricken person. Perhaps his breath is a last, gasping breath, or his heaving breast a weeping, sobbing breast; his eyes split not only by arrows but by tears. As we and the Chinese say, "my tears fall like rain"; the Chinese could also say, "my gasps/sighs turn to clouds."<sup>46</sup> It is typical of the young, especially children, to picture

<sup>44</sup> Liu Zhen 劉楨 (?-217), "Zeng Wu Guan zhonglang jiang si shou" 贈武官中郎將四首 ("Four Poems for Leader of Court Gentlemen Wu Guan" no. 2); LQL, p. 370.

<sup>45</sup> Kroll, "Verses from on High..." p. 175. The *Bowu zhi*, quoting the *Xiaojing yuanshen qi* 孝經援神契, notes, "Mount Tai is the grandson of the Lord of Heaven. It is in charge of summoning men's souls. The east is where the myriad creatures are first created, therefore it controls the length of a man's life." See Zhang Hua 張華 (232-300), *Bowu zhi jiaozheng* 博物志校證, ed. Fan Ning 范寧 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 1.12.

<sup>46</sup> The image of one's sighing breath turning to clouds occurs in several earlier poems, cf. the concluding couplet from Fu Xuan's 傅玄 (217-78) "Fang ge xing" 放歌行 ("Letting Go"; LQL, p. 557), "A long moan, my tears fall like rain,/ Deeply gasping (*tai xi* 太息) my breath turns to clouds." See also Ji Kang's 嵇康 (223-262) "Si qin shi" 思親詩 ("Thinking of My Family"; LQL, p. 491), "My tears are like rain, my sighs (*tan* 歎) turn to clouds." For eyes ruined by tears, see He Xun 何遜 (?-ca. 518), "Wei ren qie si er shou" 為人妾思二首 no. 1 ("Thoughts of a Concubine"; LQL, p. 1708), "About to leave, I cry until my eye-sockets are no more (*lei wu zi* 淚無眦),/ Not looking my sorrow is even greater."

their disappearance or death when they feel they have been wronged.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps this is another aspect of the imagery of this couplet. Admittedly this reading would seem unusually frank and extreme given the usual parameters of the poetic tradition, yet there is some precedent for it. Looking back at the literary tradition of mourning songs ("Wan ge" 挽歌) and eulogies, we find a minor tradition of poets composing funeral pieces for or about themselves.<sup>48</sup> Again, it was Tao Yuanming who returned to this theme several times:

Last night I was a man among the living,  
This morning I am entered in the register of ghosts.  
My soul-breath scatters, who knows where?  
A withered body is stored in a hollow box.  
My lovely children pull at their father and weep,  
Friends hug me, crying.<sup>49</sup>

昨暮同爲人  
今日在鬼錄  
魂氣散何之  
枯形寄空木  
嬌兒索父啼  
良友撫我哭

In front of me are trays full of refreshments,  
To my side my loved ones weep.  
I want to speak, but no sounds come out,  
I want to look, but cannot see.  
I used to sleep in a lofty hall,  
Tonight I shall rest in a land of weeds.  
In the morning, leaving through the gate,  
I will return to the endless night.<sup>50</sup>

肴案盈我前  
親舊哭我旁  
欲語口無音  
欲視眼無光  
昔在高堂寢  
今宿荒草鄉  
一朝出門去  
歸來夜未央

In the second half of Du Fu's third couplet the images imply dying and a longing for return. The first half of the couplet speak of the forces of life: exuberant gazing, life-giving mists. Yet even this positive picture has its negative side; the same images of life can also be seen as images of injury and sorrow. Du Fu's heaving breast may be sobbing, with his gasps turning to clouds. What is the proper reading? All are correct, all are expressive of Du Fu's thoughts and emotions at a single moment. Du Fu portrays himself as having been shot; as weary of the world and wanting to retreat and return; he sees himself as wronged; perhaps he imagines his own death. Yet the sight of Mount Tai and the awareness of his mortality combine to trigger an equal and opposite effect: a new confidence, exhilaration, and resolve. With this couplet Du Fu has portrayed his encounter with his mortality and his reanimation or rebirth. This after all is "what Mount Tai is like."

This multiplicity of meanings, and the inner unity of what sometimes may seem to be contradictory thoughts and emotions, run throughout "Wang yue." Du Fu describes Mount Tai as dividing *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. Commentators ordinarily read

<sup>47</sup> After Tom Sawyer has been wrongly scolded by his aunt he takes solace by imagining his death:

He pictured himself lying sick unto death and his aunt bending over him, beseeching one little forgiving word, but he would turn his face to the wall, and die with that word unsaid. Ah, how would she feel then? And he pictured himself brought home from the river, dead, with his curls all wet, and his poor hands still for ever, and his sore heart at rest.

Mark Twain, *Tom Sawyer* (1876; reprint, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Puffin Books, Penguin Books Ltd, 1950), p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, the series of literati "Wan ge" 挽歌 gathered in the *Yuefu shiji*, 27.399-403.

<sup>49</sup> From "Ni wan ge ci" 擬挽歌辭 no. 1 ("In the Style of a Mourning Song"); LQL, p. 1012.

<sup>50</sup> From "Ni wan ge ci" no. 2; LQL, p. 1013. Bao Zhao's 鮑照 (ca. 414-466) "Song bo pian" 松柏篇 ("Pine and Cypress") contains an extensive description of his imagined impending death and burial; LQL, pp. 1264-65.

these terms in their literal sense as the northern and southern or the dark and light slopes of a mountain.<sup>51</sup> It is true that Du Fu is describing the physical mountain, so immense that its northern and southern slopes appear to literally split the view into dusk and dawn. Yet we now also understand that Du Fu was at the same time thinking of *yin* and *yang* metaphorically. Mount Tai, as the destination of departed souls and also the animator or bestower of life, was the ultimate symbol of both life and death; of *yin* and *yang* together.

Finally, Du Fu declares that someday he will mount the summit, where in a single glance all other mountains will dwindle. Du Fu is alluding to Confucius who was said to have climbed Mount Tai, the world dwindling before his eyes.<sup>52</sup> By alluding to yet another Mount Tai tradition, Du Fu expresses the renewal of his hopes and ambitions. This was the sacred mountain most associated with statecraft. Emperors hoped to conduct *feng* and *shan* sacrifices there; officials hoped to climb it with their emperors;<sup>53</sup> Confucius himself had been to the top.<sup>54</sup> By declaring that he would emulate Confucius, Du Fu is indicating that his confidence and ideals have been “reborn.” As was mentioned above, critics have particularly admired the strength and bravado of Du Fu’s lines, especially in light of the fact that he had just failed the exams. We know of Du Fu’s disappointment and pain, yet even while he was expressing a sense of injury and a longing to retreat, this same person could declare that he would someday mount the summit as Confucius had. Once more, however, there is more to Du Fu’s statement than meets the eye. This is more than bravado. Of course Du Fu will someday mount the summit. All men will mount the summit; all men will return to Mount Tai as departed souls. Du Fu’s statement of bravado is also an acknowledgement of mortality. And it can be suggested that it was precisely this awareness of mortality that gave Du Fu comfort and strength.

The word “gaze” (*wang* 望) in the title of Du Fu’s poem can also mean “expect,” “wish,” or “hope.” Surely he had this other sense of *wang* in mind, as well as its basic meaning. He literally expected and hoped for the mountain and all the things that this meant. The inspiration for Du Fu’s title was probably Tao Yuanming, who, as we have seen, also gazed at and longed for a mountain. It is true that most editions of Tao’s collected works have *jian* 見 (“to perceive, to catch sight of”) rather than *wang*, and that critics from Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) to James Hightower and Lin Wenyue have insisted that *jian* is the obviously superior reading.<sup>55</sup> I personally prefer *wang*, in part because it has the secondary meaning of “expect” and “hope,” and clearly Tao

<sup>51</sup> See the comments in Qiu Zhaoao, ed., *Du shi xiang zhu*, 1.4.

<sup>52</sup> *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注, ed. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju Xianggang fenju, 1984), “Jin xin zhangju shang,” p. 311 (*Mengzi yinde*, 7a.24).

<sup>53</sup> On his death-bed, Cui Youfu 崔祐甫 (721-780) stated that one of the three regrets of his career was not being able to assist in the performance of the Feng and Shan rites; see David McMullen, *State and Scholar in T'ang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 132.

<sup>54</sup> There is even a song about Mount Tai attributed to Confucius. See the “Qiling ge” 丘陵歌 (“Hill Song”); LQL, p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Su Shi’s comments and those of a number of other traditional critics who have for the most part agreed with him can be found in the *Tao Yuanming shi wen huiping* 詩文集評 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), pp. 167-73. Lin Wenyue 林文月 has an extensive discussion of this issue in an essay on Tao’s poem, see “Youran jian nanshan’ yu ‘Chitang sheng chun cao’” 悠然見南山與池塘生春草 in Lin Wenyue, *Duzhongwen xi de ren* 讀中文系的人 (Taipei: Hongfan shudian, 1978), pp. 107-18. For Hightower’s remarks, see *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*, p. 132.

Yuanming, as Hightower has explained, was expecting or hoping as he gazed at his southern hills. I am not convinced by the usual poetic arguments that consider *jian* as more haphazard or uncalculated and thus more dramatic or natural. When one lives by a great mountain or by the sea, it is natural to regularly, even habitually, turn one's gaze in its direction, and Tao Yuanming must have often cast his gaze toward his Southern Mountain. Leaving aside, however, the question of the superiority of *jian* versus *wang*, it can be reasonably assumed that Du Fu was most familiar with the version of Tao Yuanming's poem that used *wang*. This is the variant found in the *Wen xuan* (*juan* 30; under the title "*Za shi*" 雜詩), the anthology that was a cornerstone of the education of men in Du Fu's class. Du Fu of course may have had access to other versions of this poem found in collections of Tao Yuanming's verse, but he certainly knew the *Wen xuan* version well, and very likely had committed it to memory.<sup>57</sup> Thus we can suggest that as Du Fu gazed at Mount Tai, he not only remembered Confucius, he also thought of Tao Yuanming, who had gazed at and had taken comfort in the sight of his Mountain.

Du Fu began his poem by asking what Mount Tai was like. It was in fact many things. It was *yin* and *yang*; it was retreat and advance, life and death; it was the mountain of Confucius, and in a sense it was also the mountain of Tao Yuanming. It was precisely this multiplicity of meanings and traditions that awed and fascinated Du Fu. When he asked what Mount Tai was like, it helped him to answer the question of what he was like. The multi-faceted images of Mount Tai encompassed the many different, apparently conflicting emotions and thoughts that welled in his mind. As he gazed at the mountain, he found himself.

### Conclusion

The difficulties and ambiguities of "Wang yue" have inspired many discussions and interpretations. As we have seen, the question of determining the "correct" interpretations is a more complex problem than has been thought. Different and, at first sight, contradictory explanations coexist. Du Fu is gazing up at Mount Tai, his breast heaving at the sight of the emerging layered clouds. At the same time he is up among the clouds and mists, his breast brushed and nurtured by the life-giving breath of Mount Tai. He is also a bird that has been shot, his breast heaving, gasping his last. The poem is a gesture of strength and bravado, but also an expression of weariness and retreat. His images and his syntax are deliberately ambiguous, in order to capture the complexities of his thoughts and feelings. Du Fu reminds us that it is possible, and very human, to feel and think at one moment quite different thoughts and emotions. His lines can and were meant to be read in different ways. In this study, I have attempted to reconcile a number of the traditional and modern interpretations, as well as add new readings. Above all, I have tried to explain the rationale of Du Fu's ambiguity by first describing the personal setting that created his thoughts and feelings, then exploring the manner in which they guided Du Fu's vision. Admittedly the reading that has been presented is difficult and not always apparent, but the signs that point to such a reading are insistent. Du Fu's striking imagery and language have not been fully accounted for by previous explanations; they are invitations to explore. At the same time, however, my reading has been guided by certain



principles. I have simply asked what Du Fu may have been thinking and feeling at a distinct point in his life, and I have attempted to identify the building blocks available to him when he composed his poem—images, symbols, traditions, and precedents—all the elements that shaped Du Fu's vision and in turn were reshaped in his verse. It is by identifying such fundamental facts as the historical setting of the poem, the meanings of Mount Tai, the crucial impact of the exams on poets<sup>56</sup> and their poetry, the traditional images and lore associated with the exams, and the literary traditions and precedents that Du Fu was heir to, that we can attempt to recreate his world and understand how his poem works. Once we are aware of this evidence, the explanation of "Wang yue" presented here begins to make sense. As the poem's structural logic and internal harmony become clear, it takes on a new life, becoming a deeper and even greater work than has been previously recognized.

In closing I would like to comment on the rationale of the technique and art seen in "Wang yue," and the place of Du Fu's poem in the historical context. Du Fu was a poet of the High Tang, the great classical age of Chinese verse. One of the distinguishing features of a poetry in its "classical" stages is a sense of restraint. A classical style is in part characterized by the things it refrains from talking about, or the restraint with which it deals with certain matters and avoids extremes of expression. In short it is guided by a certain degree of decorum and propriety. In Chinese poetics, the phrase "ai er bu shang" 哀而不傷 ("grief not carried to the point of self-injury"), originally used by Confucius to praise the first song in the *Shi jing*, indicates the value placed on a sense of decorum.<sup>57</sup> One of the fascinating aspects of "Wang yue" is the way in which it treads the line between classical restraint and the excess that would characterize certain types of post-High Tang verse.<sup>58</sup>

Mid-Tang poets such as Meng Jiao composed during a period when the standards of decorum and restraint of an earlier age had apparently broken down. Meng Jiao's poetry in particular could never be mistaken for Early or High Tang verse. The painful ranting, the directness, the violent—almost paranoid—vision of the world, would have been practically inconceivable earlier. Meng Jiao's verse was admittedly an extreme example of Mid-Tang poetry that later ages would recoil from, but even Han Yu's work possesses a certain prosaic frankness that earlier poets ordinarily would have avoided. But it is precisely their outspokenness and frankness that make them so informative. For example, we understand better the pain, injury, and disappointment of a failed candidate from Mid-Tang works because they spoke freely where earlier poets would have remained silent or whispered. There was a place for sorrow, complaint and dispute in Early and High Tang verse, but in general decorum and propriety prevailed. We saw Chen Zi'ang, after failing the exams, comparing himself to a drifting tumbleweed and a stricken bird. But these metaphors were old and hallowed ones, their original force long since worn smooth, and in a way this

<sup>56</sup> Yoshikawa Kōjirō has suggested that Du Fu not only memorized the text of the *Wen xuan*, but Li Shan's 李善 (c. 630-690) commentary as well; Yoshikawa Kōjirō, "Tu Fu's Poetics and Poetry," *Acta Asiatica* 16 (1969): 9. The Song critic, Wu Zeng 吳曾, notes that Bo Juyi 白居易 (772-846) was familiar with *wang*, using it in one of his poems in imitation of Tao Yuanming, but that Wei Yingwu 韋應物 (c.737-c.791) uses *jian* in a couplet that alludes to Tao's poem. See *Tao Yuanming shi wen huiping*, p. 168.

<sup>57</sup> Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (1938; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, n.d.), p. 99. Original passage in *Lunyu yinde*, 3.20.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Owen has often discussed the place of decorum in the poetic tradition and Du Fu's ignoring of usual standards; see, for example, Owen, *High T'ang*, p. 193.

was part of their appeal. They were clear and direct, but safe in that they remained within the proper bounds.

Du Fu's poem lies somewhere between the classical tradition of High Tang poets such as Wang Wei and such mid-Tang poets as Meng Jiao and Li He. In "Wang Yue" he is moving in directions that would eventually lead to the mid-Tang, and later. The frank, deeply personal tone, the startling, violent images, and the daring language are characteristically his. We see that Du Fu, even in his youth, was in advance of his era, going beyond convention and revitalizing the tradition. For him it is not enough to say that he is a stricken bird; rather he is a bird whose eye-sockets have been split, a bird that longs to return to Mount Tai. The image is a fresh, powerful restatement of what had been a convention. It is difficult to imagine any previous poet conceiving such an image. It is important to note, however, that Du Fu, in his own way, continued to be guided by a sense of restraint and balance. He still does not say things out loud, and has compressed his thoughts and feelings in a series of shifting, interlocked images and allusions that balance each other. It thus can be suggested that Du Fu's ambiguity was, in this case, more than a poetic technique, but can also be seen as a kind of restraint, a way of taming and masking the powerful emotions that lay behind his poem. Most important, Du Fu chose to compose his poem not as a pure complaint or lament, but at a moment when he was able to come to terms with his failure, when he was able to balance and reconcile light with dark, and his desire to retreat with his resolve to go forward. There is pain in Du Fu, but it is restrained, suppressed, and finally overcome. Through poetry it is transformed, and emerges in a different and more noble form.

Du Fu's "strength" was not solely a matter of individual character. If one can speak of High Tang poets as being greater than Mid- and Late Tang poets, it is in part because history and tradition provided them with a foundation that was denied to later poets. In Du Fu's time, the standards of propriety and decorum that had developed over centuries were still in force. Most poets acknowledged them naturally and unconsciously. Of course propriety and decorum in themselves do not guarantee good poetry; in fact, in the High Tang we can see traditional standards being bent and stretched, and it can be argued that it is precisely periods such as this that produce great poetry. Poets such as Du Fu and Li Bo, in their individual ways, pushed the rules and standards and at times went beyond them. The point, however, is that the tradition still held power. Part of the force and strength of a poem such as "Wang Yue" lies in the tension between the demands of a tradition that advocated restraint and the powerful, extreme feelings of the individual. In this instance they are in balance, a kind of harmony has been achieved. But one senses that the balance is delicate, and that if it were upset, the effects could be likened to the bursting of a dam.

Mid-Tang poets belonged to a different world from that of Li Bo, Wang Wei, and Du Fu. The catastrophes that had begun in 755 had drastically altered China. There had been a "fall," the old standards and traditions had broken down. Unchecked, poets such as Meng Jiao and Li He were free to pursue their personal visions of a world gone wrong. Not all writers succumbed: Han Yu is the great example of a man who struggled to revive and uphold tradition. In him one senses a strength of character and optimism (and perhaps naiveté) that provides a striking contrast to his friend Meng Jiao. The Song poet, Su Shi, presents a somewhat similar impression. But at

times one cannot help but feel that the apparent strength, assurance and optimism of men such as Han Yu and Su Shi were in part the result of individual effort and will, as if they were struggling to keep at bay dangerous forces that preyed on them all too easily.

There is the individual, but there is also history and time. We stand in awe of the High Tang poets, and acknowledge that they are greater than the generations that followed. Yet we also recognize that they were not just individuals, but stages in a process. Decay and fall are inevitable; poets, as part of this process, take the steps and directions that are offered them. Du Fu was a great poet in part because the times let him become great. Poets may struggle against time, and we may admire their efforts, which can be heroic in the case of a Han Yu or a Su Shi. But even they were inevitably marked by time, and denied the classical balance and strength that was granted to an earlier generation.

Chinese poetry, for the most part, was the product of a certain class of educated, adult males. Although poets began their training as children, they were inevitably guided into writing “adult” poetry. The available occasions, topics, and sub-genres, such as parting poems, poems on history, eulogies, and personal laments, belonged to the realm of literate adult males whose poetry often matured and improved as they grew older. Occasionally, however, one can still catch glimpses of youth in poetry. The examinations, so crucial in the lives of the literati, were usually first taken by young men. One can think of them as a rite of passage. The pain and disappointment associated with the exams—this first encounter with adult realities—sometimes found their way into poetry. The results could show particular force and violence, and push the tradition to its limits. In “Gazing at the Mountain” we not only see Du Fu poised between youth and adulthood, but also Tang poetry—Chinese poetry—poised at an edge, an early hint of the classical tradition beginning to be threatened. Du Fu stretches the tradition, yet continues to adhere to it, taking it into new worlds and new heights, but also balancing it on a brink, ready to fall from its classical moral poise and restraint. The conflicts, pressures, and strange, powerful, wonderful shapes and images that resulted are part of Du Fu’s greatness. They are also signs of impending and inevitable change. And when history and time inevitably took their toll, it was the legacy of Du Fu above all that would provide a direction for the poets who followed.