

**Reading the Signs:
Philology, History, Prognostication**

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Du Fu's Long Gaze Back: Fate, History, Heroism, Authorship

Martin Kern

In 766, Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), who during the An Lushan 安祿山 Rebellion had lived through the fall of the capital of Chang'an 長安 and the collapse of the Tang imperial order, and who since 760 had resided in the southwestern city of Chengdu 成都, moved his family to Kuizhou 夔州 (modern Sichuan, east of Chongqing 重慶). For two years, he lived there in the Three Gorges area, on the banks of the Yangzi River. With his official career over and already in his twilight years, Du Fu experienced one of the most productive periods of his life as a writer, during which he is believed to have composed some four hundred of his altogether 1,400 poems.¹ One of these poems is a short piece titled “Fan zhao” 返照 (Returning Rays):

North of the Chu King's Palace, just now the dusk is dimming;
楚王宮北正黃昏
West of White Emperor's Castle, the trails of passing rain.
白帝城西過雨痕
Returning rays enter the river, make stony cliffs flutter;
返照入江翻石壁
Homebound clouds wrap the trees, let mountain villages fade.
歸雲擁樹失山村
In my feeble years, with ailing lungs, I only rest aloof;
衰年病肺惟高枕

* The present essay is revised and expanded from an unpublished lecture I presented in early 2011 at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, Erlangen, where thanks to Michael Lackner I had the good fortune of spending an entire happy and productive year, together with my family.

1 For Du Fu's life, see the classic study by William Hung, *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952). There are, of course, fundamental problems with Hung's reconstruction of Du Fu's life from his poetry and interpretation of his poetry from the perspective of his reconstructed life. But the biographical fallacy and its perfect circularity have characterized the reading of Du Fu's poetry since at least Northern Song times—and not entirely without justification. More on this below. For the complete translation of Du Fu's poetry, see Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, 6 vols (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015).

At the final frontier, anxious about the times, I early on shut the gate.

絕塞愁時早閉門

One cannot linger long amidst jackals and tigers rioting;

不可久留豺虎亂

In the southland, there truly is a soul never called back.²

南方實有未招魂

This is a classic example of Tang heptasyllabic regulated verse (*qiyān lǜshī* 七言律詩): a dense and dynamic description of landscape in the first half is followed by the responding voice of the lyric subject in the second. Yet as usual with Du Fu's regulated verse, we encounter strings of references to historical sites and literary writings from the distant past. The landscape is pure hallucination: a world long lost, yet with evening sunlight and clouds performing a cosmic spectacle before both nature and civilization together disappear from sight. The emotional response is not immediate but refracted: a poetic persona created in the images of far earlier verse.

Let me begin with a reading of this short poem and from there move backward, guided by Du Fu's long gaze toward antiquity.

North of the Chu King's Palace, just now the dusk is dimming;

楚王宮北正黃昏

West of White Emperor's Castle, the trails of passing rain.

白帝城西過雨痕

The first couplet provides the setting: "north of the Chu King's Palace," "west of White Emperor's Castle"; dusk is falling after the rain has been passing. "Chu King's Palace" alludes to an ancient site to the northwest of Shaman Mountain (Wushan 巫山) Prefecture in Sichuan: an allusion to the ancient southern state of Chu that had been destroyed a millennium earlier, and that was remembered in a place name. By Du Fu's time, the Chu king who had traveled here had long perished, and nothing was left of his palace. "White Emperor's Castle" refers to another nearby location that was at once historical and cosmological: a city towering high above the Yangzi that was named after the White Emperor, the celestial guardian deity of the West, the direction cosmologically correlated with the season of autumn and the time of decay and death. White Emperor's Castle was atop of Shaman Mountain, where in antiquity, the king of Chu had dreamt of a sexual encounter with the ever-elusive goddess, giving rise to a literature of desire and frustration both erotic

2 Qiu Zhao'ao 仇兆鰲, *Du shi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), 15.1336–7. My translation differs in some stylistic and grammatical choices from that in Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 4, 203–5 (# 15.57).

and political.³ Imagined sites of past glory, both “palace” and “castle” are insignia of royal culture and of the flourishing state.

Yet Du Fu is neither in the Chu King’s Palace nor in White Emperor’s Castle. He is north and west of them, respectively, displaced from history, geography, and mythology just as much as he is removed from his homeland and from the imperial capital devastated by the An Lushan rebellion of the preceding decade. In the day’s twilight, cast across the deep-southern region of Kuizhou, Du Fu gazes over a disappearing landscape and an unfulfilled life, fusing, as so often, reflections on personal fate with those on the destiny of his country. The first couplet sets up an actual yet timeless landscape—Du Fu’s place of exile now reimagined in a mythological dream—and the speaker’s displacement. The time of day is “dimming dusk” where the light disappears; the rain, now passing, leaves nothing but its trails. The second couplet departs strikingly from this silent, nearly motionless scenery:

Returning rays enter the river, make stony cliffs flutter;
返照入江翻石壁
Homebound clouds wrap the trees, let mountain villages fade.
歸雲擁樹失山村

In contrast to the passive, evanescent view of the opening lines, suddenly there is dramatic action, though through the most ephemeral of forces: rays of light that are “returning” or “cast back” at dusk yet unknown from where; clouds that are “homebound” yet unknown where to. And yet, in complementary movements of penetration and embrace they “enter” and “wrap,” making stony cliffs “flutter” and letting mountain villages—note the parallelism between “stone” and “mountain”—“fade.” There is no subject here: there is the action of nature as interpreted through fallible human perception. Each line has not one but two strong verbs, and in each line, the second verb is causative. Stones and mountains dissolve and disappear, and with them, the traces of civilization—villages—where the poetic self has been temporarily lodged.

3 See the “Gaotang fu” 高唐賦 (Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine) and “Shennü fu” 神女賦 (Rhapsody on the Goddess) attributed to Song Yu 宋玉 (trad. 3rd. cent. BCE) as well as the early medieval and Tang “Wu shan gao” 巫山高 (Mount Wu is Tall) *yuefu* 樂府 tradition. For the former, see *Linchun zhu Wenxuan* 六臣注文選 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 19.1a–12a, and David R. Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature, vol. 3: Rhapsodies on Natural Phenomena, Birds and Animals, Aspirations and Feelings, Sorrowsful Laments, Literature, Music, and Passions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 325–49; for the latter, see the many poems in Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩 (12th cent.), *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 17.238–43.

In my feeble years, with ailing lungs, I only rest aloof;
 衰年病肺惟高枕
 At the final frontier, anxious about the times, I early on shut the gate.
 絕塞愁時早閉門

It is only with the third couplet that this poetic self emerges, and that the strict parallelism within the first and second couplets falls away. Now, following the cosmic turbulence and dissolution of the solid material world, we recognize the voice of the old and feeble poet who creates himself as the author of the text and who creates his text as autobiography. In a self-referential gesture that refers to the act of poetic performance, the ailing lungs finally give in. Du Fu, who in so many earlier poems presents himself as the often desperate and yet vigorous “singer” of his verses,⁴ loses not merely his vital breath but, with it, his voice as a poet. Yet precisely here is the poetic paradox: only through the reference to “ailing lungs” do we recognize the poet, albeit at the moment when he is about to expire, able to sing just one more song. He announces his resignation and, in an act of prospective memory, makes himself part of history: the history of poetry. He who in earlier, happier years had “opened the gate” when a guest arrived at his cottage,⁵ now “early on” had already shut it, denying himself the opportunity of a listener and voicing his soliloquy to nobody but himself.

One cannot linger long amidst jackals and tigers rioting;
 不可久留豺虎亂
 In the southland, there truly is a soul never called back.
 南方實有未招魂

If the third couplet appears to evoke the poet’s self at the “final frontier” that is both spatial and temporal, the closing couplet moves deep into literary history. The first line reaches back to (a) the poem “Zhao yinshi” 招隱士 (Calling Back the Recluse) from the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Lyrics from Chu) anthology,⁶ as well as (b) the first of three poems titled “Qi ai shi” 七哀詩 (Seven Sorrows) by Wang Can 王粲 (177–217), a poet whom Du Fu frequently invokes in his

4 See, e.g., the repeated self-referential expressions of singing and speaking in his “Zi jing fu Fengxian xian yonghuai wubaizi” 自京赴奉先縣詠懷五百字 (Expressing My Feelings in Five Hundred Characters When Going from the Capital to Fengxian Prefecture), purportedly dating to 755; Qiu Zhao’ao, *Du shi xiangzhu*, 4.264–75; Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 1, 208–17 (# 4.6).

5 E.g., “Ke zhi” 客至 (A Guest Arrives); Qiu Zhao’ao, *Du shi xiangzhu*, 9.793; Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 2, 350–1 (# 9.72).

6 Hong Xingzu 洪興祖, *Chuci buzhu* 楚辭補注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 12.232–4; David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 243–5.

later years.⁷ The second line alludes again to “Zhao yinshi” but in addition also to the ancient Chu ritual of “calling back the soul,” where a priest attempts to return the departing soul to a dying prince, as in the poems “Zhao hun” 招魂 (Calling Back the Soul) and “Da zhao” 大招 (The Great Calling Back), both in the *Chuci*.⁸ Yet while alluding to the literature from the past, it is with a single word that the poetic voice leads us back into the present: *shi* 實, “truly.” With this final couplet, the displaced poet finally inscribes himself into the history of poetry.

Wang Can’s poem, traditionally dated to 193 but in fact of an unknown time,⁹ represents the moment when the poet reflects on the ravages of his own time. After the rebellious general Dong Zhuo 董卓 (d. 192) had sacked the Eastern Han capital Luoyang 洛陽 and moved the puppet emperor to Chang’an, the old capital of the Western Han, Wang witnessed the violence inflicted on the old “western capital” of the Han. He is about to flee Chang’an and seek refuge in the south, just as Du Fu would do centuries later:

In the western capital, riots beyond imagination;
 西京亂無象
 Jackals and wolves inflict disaster.
 豺狼方遘患
 And now I abandon and leave the central realm,
 復棄中國去
 Dislodge myself afar to the Man tribes of Jing.
 委身適荊蠻
 My relatives face me in sadness,
 親戚對我悲
 My friends pull on me, clinging.
 朋友相逢攀
 As I go out the gate, a view of desolation never seen:
 出門無所見

7 See the selected references in Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 1, 382–3 (“Allusions”). For “Seven Sorrows,” see *Liuchen zhu Wenxuan*, 23.19b–20b; Ronald C. Miao, *Early Medieval Chinese Poetry: The Life and Verse of Wang Ts’an (A.D. 177–217)* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1982), 124–33; Jean-Pierre Diény, “Lecture de Wang Can (177–217),” *T’oung Pao* 73 (1987): 294–9.

8 Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 9.197–10.226, 12.232–4; Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 219–38, 243–5.

9 The biographical fallacy is of course not unique to the interpretation of Du Fu. There is, in fact, an overwhelming tradition of dating a poem to the historical moment it describes, in this case, Wang Can’s purported departure from Chang’an in 193. This is not merely naïve (as if no poem could be written retrospectively), but, more importantly, based on a particular ideology of poetic production (see below).

White bones cover the flatlands.
 白骨蔽平原
 On the road, there is a starving woman,
 路有飢婦人
 Embracing her child, she then abandons it in the grass.
 抱子棄草間
 Turning around, she hears the crying and wailing,
 顧聞號泣聲
 She wipes her tears but does not turn back.
 渾涕獨不還
 “I do not know where I myself will die,
 未知身死處
 How can I keep both of us whole?”
 何能兩相完
 I speed my horse to abandon her behind—
 驅馬棄之去
 I cannot bear to hear those words.
 不忍聽此言
 From the south, I climb Ba Mound slope,
 南登霸陵岸
 Turn my head and gaze toward Chang’an.
 回首望長安
 Now I understand those men of “Falling Stream”;
 悟彼下泉人
 Choking back, I feel the gut-wrenching pain.
 喟然傷心肝

Du Fu’s poem ends where Wang Can begins—with the jackals and tigers, or jackals and wolves¹⁰—the symbols of menace and destruction that themselves go back to “Calling Back the Recluse,” “Calling Back the Soul,” and the “The Great Calling Back.”¹¹ In turn, Wang’s poem ends with two further references to the past: the first is to Mound Ba 霸陵, the tomb of the revered early Western Han emperor Wen 文 whose long reign from 180 to 157 BCE—nearly four centuries before Wang Can—was celebrated for peace and prosperity. Wang Can walks north from Chang’an, ascends Mound Ba from

10 In another late poem, “Jiu ke” 久客 (A Traveler for Long), Du Fu invokes Wang Can explicitly while also lamenting the presence of “jackals and tigers”; see Qiu Zhao’ao, *Du shi xiangzhu*, 22.1936; Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 6, 30–1 (# 22.20).

11 “Tigers and leopards” (*bubao* 虎豹) appear twice in “Calling Back the Recluse” (Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 12.233–34; Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 244–5), once in “Calling Back the Soul” (Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 9.201; Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 225), and once in “The Great Calling Back” (Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 10.217; Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 233). In addition, “jackals and wolves” (*chailang* 豺狼) appear once in “Calling Back the Soul” (Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 9.201; Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 225).

the south, and stands on the tomb of glories past, facing first north and then south. From here he gazes at the old capital, and beyond the capital to the southern land of the “Man tribes of Jing”—a thousand-year old designation for the barbarian southland where he is headed now, and where Du Fu finds himself in 766.

When Wang Can ascends the tomb mound and “gazes” (*wang* 忘) south into the distance, he assumes a sovereign position—just as his initial move north was directed to face an emperor no longer in place. His submission northward has no meaning anymore, yet in turning his gaze, he also is not the ancient emperor who governs the world by facing south, nor is he the cosmic ruler who performs the *wang* sacrifice to the mountains and rivers of the realm.¹² His sovereign gaze is that of the poet who overlooks the landscape to contemplate its past.¹³ As the Confucius of the *Han Shi wai zhuan* 韓詩外傳 prods his disciples during a mountain tour, “When a noble man climbs high, he must lay out [his intent]” 君子登高必賦;¹⁴ and Wang Can himself is famous for his “Denglou fu” 登樓賦 (Rhapsody on Ascending the Tower) where, while wandering aimlessly in the southland, he laments his lost home in the north;¹⁵ this, too, is a work to which Du Fu alludes repeatedly in his late poems.

Yet in “Seven Sorrows,” Wang Can stands not just *somewhere* high up, expressing his intent and contemplating the past. He literally stands on an ancient emperor’s tomb to scan historical time and give expression to his agony. From Mound Ba, he remembers the peace and glory of the Western Han, and an earlier poem comes to hit him: “Falling Stream” (“Xia quan” 下泉; Mao 153) from the ancient *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經), where—according to the poem’s preface in the *Mao shi* 毛詩 (Mao [Classic of] Poetry)—the anonymous authors, distressed by the misery of their time and place, recall the glory, long lost, of the ancient capital of Zhou:

12 Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000), 106–18.

13 Hans H. Frankel, “The Contemplation of the Past in T'ang Poetry,” in *Perspectives on the T'ang*, ed. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 345–65.

14 Xu Weiyu 許維通, *Hanshi wai zhuan jishi* 韓詩外傳集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 267–9 (7/25); James Robert Hightower, *Han Shih Wai Chuan: Han Ying's Illustrations of the Didactic Application of the Classic of Songs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), 248–9 (7/25). Note the homonymy between the earlier “lay out” and the later “rhapsody” (both *fu* 賦).

15 See *Liuchen zhu Wenxuan*, 11.1a–4b; David R. Knechtges, *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), 236–41.

["Falling Stream" expresses] the longing for good government. The men of Cao were distressed by how Lord Gong oppressed and mistreated the people below, who thus could not be safe in their social station. In their agony, [the men of Cao] thought wistfully of the enlightened rulers and worthy nobles [from the past].
思治也。曹人疾共公侵刻下民，不得其所，憂而思明王賢伯也。

"The men of Cao" are not "the people" (*min* 民) of Cao; they are "the men of the state" (*guoren* 國人), that is, the official elite which Wang Can himself, at the age of 17, was just about to join in 193 CE.¹⁶ The poem attributed to "the men of Cao" contains a poignant line, repeated at the end of each of the first three stanzas, that could just as well be Wang's own: "thinking of that capital of Zhou":

Cold is the water of that falling stream,
洌彼下泉
It overflows those bushy *lang* plants.
浸彼苞稂
Oh, me—awake and sighing,
愴我寤嘆
Thinking of that capital of Zhou.
念彼周京

Cold is the water of that falling stream,
洌彼下泉
It overflows those bushy *xiao* plants.
浸彼苞蕭
Oh, me—awake and sighing,
愴我寤嘆
Thinking of that capital of Zhou.
念彼京周

Cold is the water of that falling stream,
洌彼下泉
It overflows those bushy *shi* plants.
浸彼苞薺
Oh, me—awake and sighing,
愴我寤嘆
Thinking of that capital of Zhou.
念彼京周

16 For a summary of Wang Can's biography, see Rafe de Crespigny, *A Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms (23–220 AD)* (Brill: Leiden, 2007), 802–3.

Lush and luxuriant are the millet shoots,
 芄芄黍苗
 The dense rain enriches them.
 陰雨膏之
 The States of all four quarters have audience with the king,
 四國有王
 The Elder of Xun rewards them.
 郇伯勞之

It is not certain whether “that capital of Zhou” refers to Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) Zongzhou 宗周 or, rather, to Eastern Zhou (771–256) Chengzhou 成周 (originally a second Western Zhou capital) which had served as the Zhou capital since 510 BCE. And perhaps the distinction is beyond the point, as Wang Can’s poetic imagination may be embracing both ancient capitals as just one. Geographically, Western Han Chang’an is close to the former site of Zongzhou, while Eastern Han Luoyang is close to the former site of Chengzhou. In Wang Can’s own day, both Luoyang and Chang’an are destroyed, actual ruins sitting next to the imagined ones of Chengzhou and Zongzhou. Gazing south from the top of Mound Ba and contemplating the ancient past of the landscape below him, Wang Can can see only Chang’an, and with it Zongzhou. But Luoyang (and Chengzhou) is what he had left behind, and where his career had been meant to be. For Wang, thus, “that capital of Zhou” would just have been, in the economy of the Chinese writing system, “those capitals of Zhou.”

In the poetry of Wang Can, just as in Du Fu’s, history and the poetry of the past are the same: a reference to one stands in for the other. Speaking intensely of their own fated personal experience, which in each case reflects the fate of the dynasty, both provide a typological interpretation of their own existence: the catastrophic present is always another reconfiguration of disasters past, and a prefiguration of any to come. In calling on Wang Can, Du Fu invokes “Falling Stream” as well, reconstituting the ongoing history of dynastic traumata as the history of literature, where his own poetry continues that of the Han, which itself continues that of the Zhou, and where Tang Chang’an, now destroyed by the forces of the rebellion, recalls Han Chang’an (and possibly Luoyang as well), which in turn recalls Zongzhou (and possibly Chengzhou as well): ruins upon ruins upon ruins; poem after poem after poem. In Du Fu’s voice, echoes of echoes resound.

Both Wang Can and Du Fu’s poems thus claim to have a past they cannot escape. As history repeats itself, poetry is fated to do the same, as it speaks directly from within its own historical context: not voluntary or controlled but inevitable. Du Fu speaks of his “ailing lungs,” a gate “shut” early on, a place

where “one cannot linger long,” and “a soul never called back”; Wang Can inscribes himself into the scene as a historical witness: “I could not bear to hear those words.”

We do not need to take these representations of immediacy literally, but to traditional readers, they were credible for a reason. Since Warring States times, poetry and its authors had served rhetorical functions in early Chinese historiography,¹⁷ and in return, poetry could be read as historical record. In moments of distress or imminent destruction—often followed by the demise of the poet—historical actors burst into song because they could not help but doing so: actors turned into poets through the very experience of terror, anguish, and pain that required the language of song to find its true expression. While the unmediated poetic text validated the historical narrative through poetry’s unimpeachable truth claim, the narrative, in turn, not only anchored a poem historically but also provided it with its very *raison d’être*.

Both *Shiji* 史記 and *Hanshu* 漢書 contain no small number of scenes where the heroic protagonist, in the climactic moment of despair and imminent demise, suddenly breaks down in tears and begins to sing, often immediately before committing suicide.¹⁸ In this historiography, for example, Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊, who after the violent Zhou conquest of the Shang refuse to live under the new regime, die of starvation on Shouyang 首陽 Mountain but not before first singing their song of despair.¹⁹ Often, such moments of impromptu composition and song are infused with emotion: already Confucius first sings and then cries²⁰ as does the famous assassin Jing Ke 荊軻 (d. 227 BCE),²¹ as does Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE) when losing his battle for the empire to Liu Bang 劉邦 (c. 202–195 BCE),²² and as does Liu Bang himself years later, when returning to his hometown one last time toward the end of his life.²³ Such performances by individual heroes, ephemeral moments of truth and authenticity, display the full depth of emotional distress and, by implication, of the truth embodied not only in their voice but in the hero’s total physical existence. These moments of existential

17 David Schaberg, “Song and the Historical Imagination in Early China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59.2 (1999): 305–61; Martin Kern, “The Poetry of Han Historiography,” *Early Medieval China* 10–11.1 (2004): 23–65.

18 I have dealt with this rhetorical phenomenon of historical writing in detail elsewhere and may recall just a few examples here. See Kern, *ibid.*

19 *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 61.2123.

20 *Shiji*, 47.1944.

21 *Shiji*, 86.2528.

22 *Shiji*, 7.333; *Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 31.1817.

23 *Shiji*, 8.389; *Hanshu*, 1B.74.

catharsis evoke emotion in response; more often than not, the audience breaks into tears along with the tragic singer. History reaches its culmination points, and the narrative collapses into the songs of its protagonists.

The rhetorical nature of such accounts of poetry in historiography is evident in multiple ways and examples. After the Han princess Liu Xijun 劉細君 during the *yuanfeng* 元封 period (110–105 BCE) had been sent to marry the ruler of the Central Asian Wusun 烏孫 state, who did not speak her tongue, she composed a poem:

My family married me off to the other end of the sky;
 吾家嫁我兮天一方
 Far away they gave me to a foreign land, to the King of Wusun.
 遠託異國兮烏孫王
 A domed hut is my chamber, felt are the walls.
 穹廬為室兮旃為牆
 I take flesh as my food, sour milk as my drink.
 以肉為食兮酪為漿
 Dwelling here, I always long for my soil, my heart is wounded.
 居常土思兮心內傷
 I wish I were a yellow swan, returning to my old homestead.²⁴
 願為黃鵠兮歸故鄉

How do we have Liu Xijun's song? Of course, we don't have it; the song we have is not that of the princess but, instead, the song in which the princess is remembered, and which the historian, Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), uses for his own purposes, in this case to criticize the expansionist policies of Emperor Wu 武 (r. 141–87 BCE). Likewise the case of the imperial prince Liu You 劉友 (d. 181 BCE) who composed a song shortly before being starved to death in prison;²⁵ his poem, in which he accuses the cruel regime of Empress Dowager Lü 呂太后 (241–180 BCE), survives not merely as proof for the historian's judgment but in place of it: history evaluates itself in verse.

Another improbable poem is that by Xifu Gong 息夫躬 (d. 1 BCE) who, while awaiting imperial appointment, expressed his fears about an untimely and violent death:

Dark clouds in profusion,
 玄雲泱鬱
 Where are they returning?
 將安歸兮

24 *Hanshu*, 96B.3903.

25 *Shiji*, 9.403–4; *Hanshu* 38.1989.

Eagles and hawks in rapid horizontal flight,
 鷹隼橫厲
 While the noble bird wavers and dithers.
 鸞俳徊兮
 Corded arrows dashing like strong winds,
 矰若浮焱
 In one movement, they shoot forth.
 動則機兮
 Thick-standing jujube trees lush, so lush—
 藋棘棧棧
 Where can [the noble bird] rest on their top?
 曷可棲兮
 Giving forth my loyalty, I neglected myself;
 發忠忘身
 I entangled myself in a net!
 自繞罔兮
 My neck bent, my wings folded,
 冤頸折翼
 How can I travel away!
 庸得往兮
 Tears stream down, criss-crossing my face like gauze;
 涕泣流兮萑蘭
 My heart is confused, my guts hurt.
 心結悒兮傷肝
 Rainbows sparkle, the sun is bleared;
 虹蜺曜兮日微
 A light of evil obscurity, not breaking yet.
 孽杳冥兮未開
 My pain penetrates into Heaven, I shout out loud;
 痛入天兮鳴譁
 With my grief at its utmost limits, whom can I tell?
 冤際絕兮誰語
 Raising my head toward Heaven's shine, I display my self;
 仰天光兮自列
 I call on God on High, I reveal who I am.
 招上帝兮我察
 The autumn wind is my chant,
 秋風為我唵
 The floating clouds are my shade.
 浮雲為我陰
 Alas! In straits like these, why still stay on?
 嗟若是兮欲何留
 I strike the spirit dragon, holding on to its beard;
 撫神龍兮搯其須

Roaming in vast circuits, I miss the time of return.

游曠迴兮反亡期

Only when you, the mighty one, lose your support, the world will long for me.²⁶

雄失據兮世我思

After the song, Xifu Gong's *Hanshu* biography offers one final sentence: "Several years later, he died—just as according to his composition" 後數年乃死如其文. The text is both omen and prophecy.

For comparison, consider for a moment what Thucydides writes in the first chapter of his great history of the Peloponnesian War:

In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.²⁷

No early Chinese historian felt the need for such caveats. To the contrary, in letting their historical actors speak and sing, they granted these voices a degree of autonomy that depended entirely on their seeming independence from the historian's own judgment. What is more, poems like those attributed to Liu Xijun or Xifu Gong do not have an audience beyond the person of the singer: when the Wusun princess sings of her plight, there is nobody to understand her language.

From such scenarios, no poem survives, yet to traditional readers of Chinese history, all these songs were plausible as truthful utterances in moments of suffering. For them, the heroic poetry of historiography dramatized and authenticated the historical narrative, condensing the essence of a person's fate—and of the narrative—into the succinct and durable medium of poetry. All such scenes of dramatic impromptu poetic composition are scenes of fate, moments when the protagonist faces his or her end. And almost always, the singer is not just anyone but a noble person who has been wronged: a hero who meets his or her fate and only then, for the first time, is transformed into a poet. In the rhetoric of ancient historiography, this poet-hero becomes a figure of mythological significance, a figure of cultural memory who, moreover, creates the very language of memory—the poem—in which he or she is then preserved for all posterity.

²⁶ *Hanshu*, 45.2187–8.

²⁷ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12 [1.22].

“At the final frontier,” in Du Fu’s words, poetic hero and heroic poet collapse into one.

It is thus obvious how Du Fu, when stating that he “early on shut the gate” as “a soul never called back,” assumes the very posture the ancient historians had given to their lonely singers. And yet Du Fu, in all likelihood, was *not* alone. He merely represents and historicizes himself as such, drawing on the same truth claims as the historians. An author as represented in *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, or in Du Fu’s “last” poems, is paradoxical in more than one way. Strictly speaking, he cannot exist because his song cannot: if it came about as described, it could not have survived. Furthermore, while texts like *Shiji* and *Hanshu* present these authors as men and women of a deeply emotional voice, they are not the masters of their texts: in the moment of fate, they cannot but speak the way they speak. Their poetry is true precisely because it is not “made” in the way a Greek poet “made” his poetry. Their fleeting experiences represent not agency but, to the contrary, the loss of control over one’s own voice. This made them all the more credible and valuable for the historical narrative: in the spirit of the “Great Preface” (“Da xu” 大序)—the programmatic statement on poetry, likely composed in the early empire—such impromptu production of poetry as the inevitable response to one’s circumstances was authentic precisely because it was not controllable by its “author.” In historiography, the representation of poetic performance imbues the narrative with an absolute claim for truth because such songs burst into the open in quasi-natural, unmediated eruptions of personal agony.²⁸

Thus, in inscribing themselves into their poems and claiming themselves as their authors, both Wang Can and Du Fu write autobiography and at the same time also disown their own voices as truly their own. If authorship equals agency, creation, and freedom, as it does with the Greek verb *poieō* (“to make”) and the noun *poiēsis* (“creation”; “poem”), Wang Can and Du Fu’s rhetoric suggests the opposite: thrown into their respective situations, both poets cannot but sing their unhappy song. *Pace* Plato, poetry is not two degrees

28 Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), 37–49. For an alternative to this commonly accepted interpretation of the “Great Preface,” see Martin Svensson, “A Second Look at the Great Preface on the Way to a New Understanding of Han Dynasty Poetics,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 21 (1999): 1–33. Svensson’s observations and distinctions of different arguments within the “Great Preface”—a text that is clearly a composite artifact of multiple layers and origins—deserve consideration. Nonetheless, readers since the early medieval period consistently read the “Great Preface” in the way most of us still read it today, that is, as a cosmological exposition on the production of poetry that indeed showed the author as not in control of his text, and hence as speaking a truth that cannot be questioned.

removed from the truth. It *is* the truth, and it does not know how to lie. In this rhetoric, Wang Can and Du Fu are prefigured, surrounded, and overwhelmed by voices past. They are authors because they are part of a history of authors who all, without volition, had become authors in response to their own, and then shared, punishing fate.

And yet, already with Wang Can—not to mention Du Fu—we see something else emerging from this early discourse of unmediated poetic production: the intensely biographical ideal of authorship and with it the “affective-expressive” paradigm that dominates much of classical Chinese poetry. Under this paradigm, the political cosmos—itsself seen as a reflection of the natural order—resonated deeply in the minds and bodies of its most perceptive individuals and attained the “natural” expression of historical truth in their unique poetic voices.²⁹

Du Fu's final lines, as they invoke the prince who had withdrawn into hostile nature from even more hostile civilization, take us back to the imagined origins of Chinese heroic poetry. “A soul never called back” is Du Fu's way of claiming princely nobility and invoking Qu Yuan 屈原 (trad. ca. 340–278 BCE), the aristocrat and descendant from the Chu royal house who had warned about the state of Qin 秦 as “the land of tigers and wolves” (*huliang zhi guo* 虎狼之國)³⁰ and for Du Fu was the author of “Da zhao” and the subject lamented in “Zhao hun.” Wang Can, standing on the Han Emperor's tomb, has yet to turn to the barbarian southland; Du Fu, like Qu Yuan, is already there, to be never called back. Du Fu knows Qu Yuan just as he knows Wang Can.³¹

Long before Du Fu, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 85 BCE) knew Qu Yuan because he knew his writings:

When reading “Li sao,” “Tian wen,” “Zhao hun,” and “Ai ying,” I grieve over [Qu Yuan's] resolve. Ever since I traveled to Changsha and saw where Qu Yuan drowned himself in the abyss, I never can help shedding tears, and I see him before me as the person he was.³²

余讀離騷、天問、招魂、哀郢，悲其志。適長沙，觀屈原所自沈淵，未嘗不垂涕，想見其為人。

The only other person Sima Qian recalls in a similar way is Confucius:

29 Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

30 *Shiji* 84.2484. Note the echo of “jackals and wolves” and “jackals and tigers” noted above.

31 He pairs the two in a couplet in “Di yu” 地隅 (The Corner of the Earth); Qiu Zhao'ao, *Du shi xiangzhu*, 23.2030–1; Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. 6, 152–5 (# 23.12).

32 *Shiji*, 84.2503.

When reading the writings of Master Kong, I see him before me as the person he was.³³

余讀孔氏書，想見其為人。

Sima Qian's comments emphasize the power of writings to express the true self of their authors. To Sima, the supreme reader and biographer, it is the text that leads us to the true nature of the person, where the author is finally known and understood. In this, the author becomes dependent on his reader: it is the latter who now imagines the former, and who rescues the text and with it the person. This, of course, is how Sima Qian not only remembers Qu Yuan and Confucius but also imagines himself, as he—another fated author—longs for his own posterity in the minds of later readers. The same is true for Du Fu. Like the ancient historian, the Tang poet seeks to create the prospective memory of himself. Qu Yuan as much as Confucius, and Sima Qian as much as Du Fu, is the noble person without power, the high-minded individual who insists on nothing but his moral excellence, and who creates a textual legacy that has no audience except in posterity.

With the final couplet of “Returning Rays,” Qu Yuan, the first and exemplary Chinese poet, becomes Du Fu's ultimate model “at the final frontier.” As the aristocratic offspring of the ancient Chu royal line, Qu Yuan is the displaced *persona par excellence*. What is more, Qu Yuan's very existence is inscribed into his text just as the text becomes the witness of his fate; he is at once heroic poet and poetic hero. Wang Yi 王逸 (d. 158 CE), the compiler and annotator of the *Lyrics from Chu*, writes that Qu Yuan composed all his pieces while in exile from the Chu royal court, and right up to the moment when he drowned himself in the Miluo 汨羅 River. Consider Wang's introduction to the poetic suite “Jiu zhang” 九章 (Nine Pieces):

The “Jiu zhang” are the work of Qu Yuan. When Qu Yuan was banished into the wilderness south of the Yangzi River, he thought of his ruler and longed for his land. Endlessly pained by sorrows, he composed the “Jiu zhang.” *Zhang* means “manifestation” or “clarity,” expressing that Qu Yuan's way of loyalty and trustworthiness is manifested in perfect clarity. When Qu Yuan to the end was not recognized by his ruler, he gave away his life and drowned himself. The people of Chu mourned him grievously and transmitted his verses from generation to generation.³⁴

《九章》者，屈原之所作也。屈原放於江南之野，思君念國，憂心罔極，故復作《九章》。章者，著也，明也。言己所陳忠信之道，甚著明也。卒不見納，委命自沈。楚人惜而哀之，世論其詞，以相傳焉。

33 *Shiji*, 47.1947.

34 Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 4.120–1.

The first of the “Jiu zhang,” “Grieving Recitation” (*Xi song* 惜誦), begins with a formula that might have inspired Wang Yi’s own introductory phrasing:

In grieving recitation I present my sorrows,
 惜誦以致愍兮
 Venting my wrath, I tell my pent-up thoughts.
 發憤以抒情
 Now I declaim my loyalty,
 所作忠而言之兮
 Turn to Azure Heaven for justice!
 指蒼天以為正
 I ask the Five Gods to weigh the circumstances,
 令五帝以枱中兮
 Admonish the Six Spirits to match crime and punishment.
 戒六神與嚮服
 I order the spirits of mountains and rivers to fully support my case,
 俾山川以備御兮
 Command Gao Yao that he may listen and find myself upright!³⁵
 命咎繇使聽直

Han and later commentators have worked hard to explain away the title and beginning formula, *xi song* 惜誦. According to Wang Yi, Qu Yuan composed his text—and all his texts—forn and desolate in the semi-barbarian south, far removed from Chu civilization. But if *xi song* means anything like “In grieving recitation” or “Grieving I make my plaint” (Hawkes), then we stand no longer in front of a tragic hero whose complete isolation excludes any audience. Instead, we hear a voice that self-consciously claims authorship: a voice that wants to be heard, that constitutes the poetic self, and that introduces the following text as the autobiography of the hero. This poetic self calls on the cosmic deities and commits them to bear witness. Equally explicit are the final four lines of the poem where, echoing the introduction, the poetic voice reveals itself again:

Afraid that my true feelings won’t be trusted,
 恐情實之不信兮
 I display them again to explain myself.
 故重著以自明
 May I cherish all this in seclusion,
 矯茲媚以私處兮

35 Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 4.121–2; cf. Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 156.

Hoping to ponder it at a distant place.³⁶

願曾思而遠身

A poem that in this fashion externalizes its authorship is performative and speaks to an audience. Its protagonist—whom Du Fu knew as the historical Qu Yuan—is not the solitary author of his texts but the poet-hero *mis en scene*: both poetic creator and poetic creation. The same phenomenon we find in the opening lines of “Li sao” 離騷 (Encountering Sorrow), the central poem of the Qu Yuan lore as it was known in the Han:

Distant descendant of the God Gao Yang am I,

帝高陽之苗裔兮

My illustrious father’s name was Bo Yong.

朕皇考曰伯庸

The *sheti* constellation pointed to the first month of the year,

攝提貞于孟陬兮

It was the cyclical day *gengyin* when I descended.

惟庚寅吾以降

My illustrious father looked at me and took my original measure,

皇覽揆余初度兮

And from here bestowed on me my auspicious names:

肇錫余以嘉名

He called me harmonious standard,

名余曰正則兮

Named me numinous balance.

字余曰靈均

Rich am I of this inner beauty

紛吾既有此內美兮

Which I double in fine appearance:

又重之以脩能

I cloth myself in lovage and angelica,

扈江離與辟芷兮

Braid the thoroughwort of autumn as my girdle.³⁷

紉秋蘭以為佩

Finally, the twenty-four lines of the introduction culminate in a performative appeal:

Hold fast to the flower of youth, discard the rotten—

不撫壯而棄穢兮

Why don’t you change this measure [of your behavior]!

何不改此度

36 Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 4.129; cf. Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 159.

37 Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 1.3–5; cf. Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 68.

Mount your fast-pacing steed and rush ahead,
 乘騏驎以馳騁兮
 Come with me, and I point us this Way ahead!³⁸
 來吾道夫先路

This, too, is the idiom of dramatic impersonation in front of an audience: the language of recitation or “poetic exposition” (*fu* 賦) that in the early Han flourished particularly at the court of Liu An 劉安 (d. 122 BCE), the King of Huainan who resided in Shouchun 壽春, the former capital of Chu, from where the Qu Yuan legend had emerged. The first eight lines of the “Li sao” serve the sole function of putting the protagonist on stage, introducing him with his divine and aristocratic origin, auspicious names, and outward adornment. The Qu Yuan of “Encountering Sorrow”—whom the text never names as such—is a mythological figure of transcendent origin and metaphysical beauty that descends (*jiang* 降) into the world like a god. Needless to say, the “I” in this presentation is the poetic self, impersonated on stage: no early Chinese author could call himself a descendant of the gods. The performative nature of this impersonation is linguistically marked: “*this* inner beauty” (*ci neimei* 此內美), “*this* measure” (*ci du* 此度) “*this* way ahead” (*fu xianlu* 夫先路) are all deictic expressions that, as usual in the language of performance, have no correspondence in the text proper but gesture toward a dramatic representation in front of an audience. The final one of these markers, “this way ahead” concludes the introduction: what follows, and what the audience is about to witness in this scripted performance (of which, alas, we only have the script), is the spectacle of the celestial journey.

As Qu Yuan is imagined in many roles—member of the royal clan, minister to his king, poet—the narrative and the poetic versions of his legend partially overlap. Both Qu Yuan’s *Shiji* biography and the poetic version of his legend—especially the “Li sao”—contain repeated beginnings, recursive loops, and abrupt transitions characteristic of composite texts. Of the several different versions of the Qu Yuan legend, including the “Jiu zhang” poems, none can be taken as primary and genuine while others must be seen as secondary and imitating. What we have in prose and in poetry is a legend that grew and developed from continuous retelling and rewriting, and by continuous and cumulative composition from performance to performance. But unlike the Du Fu of “Returning Rays,” the Qu Yuan of the “Li sao” is not a self-conscious poet. He is the subject, not the origin, of his poem. Of course, this is not how Du Fu knew him—to the contrary, Du Fu’s Qu Yuan

38 Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 1.6–7; cf. Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 68.

is Sima Qian's Qu Yuan: the heroic, and tragically fated, poet. This Qu Yuan is the political hero standing against the state, the noble minister wronged by his ruler, and the last representative of a lost aristocratic world who cannot but voice his tragic fate in poetry. In Sima Qian's narrative, biographical narrative and poetic expression flow into one another:

Qu Ping was distressed that:

屈平疾

The king's listening was undiscerning,

王聽之不聰也

Slander and slur obscured clarity,

讒諂之蔽明也

The twisted and the crooked harmed the common good,

邪曲之害公也

The square and the straight were no longer given a place.

方正之不容也

Thus, [he] worried and grieved in dark thoughts and created

“Encountering Sorrow.”³⁹

故憂愁幽思而作離騷

This is not narrative. The four indented, rhyming lines are the fragment from yet another poetic version of the Qu Yuan legend. Between history and poetry, the figures of poetic hero and heroic poet frequently switch sides.

The same can be seen in the story of Qu Yuan's encounter with the fisherman. Here, the *Shiji* biography includes largely verbatim the composition “Yu fu” 漁父 (The Fisherman), a dialogue, mostly in prose, between Qu Yuan and an anonymous fisherman who accuses Qu Yuan as stubborn and incapable of adapting to changing circumstances.⁴⁰ It is unlikely that the author of the Qu Yuan biography invented for his narrative the poetic passages of “The Fisherman” (anthologized in the *Lyrics from Chu*). Instead, he incorporated them from an earlier poetic version. At the same time, the *Shiji* version does not include the full text we have in the *Chuci* anthology; it misses the fisherman's final song.⁴¹ Yet for the biography—obviously a composite text of multiple sources—the story works better without the song. In this version, not the fisherman but Qu Yuan, the heroic protagonist, has the final word:

39 *Shiji*, 84.2482.

40 *Shiji*, 84.2486; Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 7.179–81; Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, 206–7.

41 As it happens, the song appears independently in Mengzi 孟子 4A.8. There, it has nothing to do with Qu Yuan or a fisherman but is attributed to a child.

I shall better throw myself into the ever-flowing stream and bury myself in the bowels of the fish in the river! How could I take my brilliant clarity and have it obscured by the confused blur of the world!⁴²

寧赴常流而葬乎江魚腹中耳，又安能以皓皓之白而蒙世俗之溫蠖乎！

Here, we encounter Qu Yuan as the historical protagonist, speaking—as so many others after him—in an emotional and highly personal voice. Following this exclamation, the historian interrupts with a single sentence: “Then [he] created the poetic exposition of ‘Embracing Sand’” 乃作懷沙之賦. And following the full text of “Huaisha” 懷沙 (Embracing Sand)—the only Qu Yuan poem cited in full in the *Shiji* biography—there is but one sentence left to say: “Thereupon [he] embraced a stone and drowned himself in the Miluo River” 於是懷石遂自投汨羅以死.

This is the moment when the dual nature of Qu Yuan as both poetic hero and heroic poet—as figure in the text and author of the text—breaks down: if Qu Yuan the hero is an archaic figure of noble solitude who acts decisively in the final moment of his life, Qu Yuan the poet, whose work has survived his suicide, cannot just have “created” (zuò 作) his elaborate poem on the spot, nor could his creation have survived from such a moment. Qu Yuan the hero, facing his fate, was alone when drowning himself. Qu Yuan the poet, “at the final frontier,” composed and recited “Embracing Sand” and found ways to transmit it to posterity.

Perhaps none of this ever happened. But this is beyond the point: the Qu Yuan Du Fu knew, and in whose image he saw himself, was both hero and poet: “In the southland, there truly is a soul never called back.”

42 *Shiji*, 84.2486.