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Deadwood: The Barren Tree from Yü Hsin to Han Yü

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Part I Texts and Translations*

- A. Yü Hsin 庾信 (513–581), “Fu on the Barren Tree” 枯樹賦 (Yü Tzu-shan chi 1.19a–21b [*Ssu-pu ts’ung-k’an*, hereafter *SPTK*]).
Yin Chung-wen was a free spirit and a man of learning, whose fame was known the whole world over.
When the times changed, he went forth to serve as Governor of Tung-yang. But always he was unhappy and ill at ease. He gazed at the locust tree in the courtyard and, sighing, he said:
‘This tree is withering away: the life in it is gone.’
- 5 Trees like the pure pines in White Deer Pass or the striped *tzu* tree that became a grey ox—
their roots may hump and coil around the folds of a mountain slope;
but why does the cassia waste away and perish [as Han Wu-ti lamented when he lost Lady Li], why then is the *wu-t’ung* half dead [as described in the *Ch’i-fa*]?
Once transplanting succeeded in the Three River Provinces [when the altar tree of the house of Han flourished again for Kuang-wu-ti, Liu Pei of the Shu-Han Kingdom, and Liu Yü of the Sung]; and roots were shifted in the nine acres [as in the *Li Sao*].
Such trees blossomed by [Ts’ao Ts’ao’s] Chien-shih Palace, and their fruits fell in the gardens of Sui-yang [of Prince Hsiao of Liang].
- 10 Within them lay the music of Hsieh Valley [where the Yellow Emperor sent his musician Li Ling to get bamboo for pipes]; and of song they contain the “Gates of Cloud” [of the Yellow Emperor].
These trees are roosts for the ‘phoenix with its brood’ [song title], and provide nests for the pair of ducks that shares a single wing [showing their conjugal devotion].
When they hang over wind-swept pavilions, the cranes cry out; when they face moonlit gorges, they bring gibbons to moan.
Then there are those which are gnarled, knotty, pocked, inverted,
where bears and tigers turn heads and look, where fish and dragons rise and sink,
- 15 upright, knobbed like capitals, mountain-linked; cross-grained and crinkling like waters.

* Texts and translations have been placed at the beginning of this essay to avoid breaking up the discussion and to approximate the best way to approach a literary essay—with a prior knowledge of the texts under discussion. Textual cross-references are indicated by a letter for the poem and line number. These cross-references indicate similarities in phrasing or topic: they do not imply conscious reference to the earlier poem.

Carver Shih is startled to see such as these; the craftsman Kung-shu Pan's eyes are dazzled.

First the carving out is done; then curved awls and scrollers are applied.

They level scales and scrape shells flat, fell horns and break off tusks, layer after layer of shattered brocade, petal after petal of true flowers,

20 grass and trees spreading in profusion, mists and red clouds scattering in confusion.

Then there are trees like the pine, pomegranate, ginko, and persimmon [mentioned together in Tso Ssu's "Fu on the Capital of Wu"]

whose dense tops spread over a hundred acres, and sprouts from whose stumps last a thousand years.

In Ch'in one of these was appointed as a minister [when Ch'in Shih-huang enfeoffed a tree that sheltered him from a storm], and in Han a general sat under one [Fen Yi, the "General of the Big Tree"].

But they all become buried in moss, weighed down by growths, pared by the birds, bored into by worms,

25 and some hang low with the frost and dew, some are shaken and ruined by winds and mist.

East by the sea was a temple for a white tree, and an altar for a barren mulberry lay in the western reaches of the Yellow River;

and in the northland they made a gate of willow leaves, and at South Ridge made a foundry among plum roots;

in Hsiao-shan ['s poem, "the Summons to the Recluse," in the *Ch'u-tz'u*] groves of cassia could make one linger, while in the "Ballad of Fu-feng" Liu K'un tied his horse to a tall pine—

do you think such famous trees are found only where the walls [of Ch'ang-an] look down on Thinwillow Camp, or where the passes sink behind Peach Forest [in the capital region]?

30 But when they are separated [from their native soil] by mountains and rivers, or are leaf-stripped in parting,

their torn up roots may cause tears to be shed, or their wounded radicals may ooze blood;

fire will enter their hollow trunks [pun: "hearts"], and sap flow from their broken joints [pun: "resolution"].

They lie slanting, stretched across the mouths of caves; or are broken in half, collapsed across the waists of mountains.

Those of slanting stripes ice-shatter their hundred-span girths; the straight-grained tile-split their thousand yard heights.

35 Knob-covered, filled with swellings, pierced in hidden places, holes within, there tree goblins flicker, and mountain demons cast their spells.

Worse still that the winds and thunder no longer stir them, and that their one-time lodgers never return.

No more can one 'gather dolichoes' there [as in *Shih* 72, interpreted to mean that even while one is away a short while 'gathering dolichoes,' one is slandered in court; i.e. Yin Chung-wen and I need not worry about our reputations at home 'because we're not returning']; but one can still eat the bracken [as did Po Yi and Shu Ch'i, the loyal recluses who refused to serve a usurping state].

They lie sunken away in some narrow lane or drowned in weeds by a thatch door.

40 Once I was pained by the falling of leaves from such trees; now I sigh even more for their dying.

The *Huai-nan-tzu* says: 'When leaves fall from the trees, old men grieve.' This is what I am talking about.

Hence my song:

They are the fire that lasted three months at Chien-chang Palace,
they are the log going thousands of miles on the Yellow River:
they might have been the trees that once filled [Shih Ch'ung's] garden of
Golden Valley—

45 and if not, then surely they were a whole county of blossomers in Ho-yang [the
peach trees planted by P'an Yüeh]."

The Grand Marshal, Huan Wen, heard of this and sighed, saying:

'Once a long time ago I planted willows, and Han-nan swayed with their pliant
branches;

now I see them as they lose their leaves, and the pools of the Yangtze become a
sad sight.

If it is so even with trees, how can one bear it thinking of man?

殷仲文者風流儒雅，海內知名。

世異時移，出為東陽太守。

常忽忽不樂，顧庭槐而歎曰。

此樹婆娑，生意盡矣。

5 至如白鹿貞松，青牛文梓

根柢盤魄，山崖表裏

桂何事而銷亡，桐何為而半死

昔之三河徙植，九畹移根

開花建始之殿，落實睢陽之園

10 聲含嶰谷，曲抱雲門

將雛集鳳，比翼巢鶯

臨風亭而唳鶴，對月峽而吟猿

迺有拳曲擁腫，盤坳反覆

熊虎顧盼，魚龍起伏

15 節豎山連，文橫水蹙

匠石驚視，公輸眩目

雕鐫始就，剗剗仍加

平鱗鏖甲，落角摧牙

重重碎錦，片片真花

20 紛披草樹，散亂烟霞

若夫松子古度，平仲君遼

森梢百頃，槎枿千年

秦則大夫受職，漢則將軍坐焉

莫不苔埋菌壓，鳥剥蟲穿

25 或低垂於霜露，或撼頓於風烟

東海有白木之廟，西河有枯桑之社

北陸以楊葉為關，南陵以梅根作冶

小山則叢桂留人，扶風則長松繫馬

豈獨城臨細柳之上，塞落桃林之下

30 若乃山河阻絕，飄零離別

拔本垂淚，傷根澀血

- 火入空心，膏流斷節
 橫洞口而歛卧，頓山腰而半折
 文斜者百圍冰碎，理正者千尋瓦裂
 35 戴髮銜瘤，藏穿抱穴
 木魅眴眴，山精妖孽
 況復風雷不感，羈旅無歸
 未能採葛，遽成食薇
 沉淪窮巷，無沒荆扉
 40 既傷搖落，彌嗟變衰
 淮南子云，本葉落，長年悲。斯之謂矣
 乃歌曰：建章三月火，黃河千里槎
 45 若非金谷滿園樹，即是河陽一縣花
 桓大司馬，聞而歎曰：
 昔年種柳，依依漢南
 今看搖落，悽愴江潭
 樹猶如此，人何以堪

B. Sun Wan-shou 孫萬壽(Sui), "Barren Tree in the Courtyard" 庭前枯樹 (Ch'üan Sui shih, 3.8b).

Once in Golden Valley
 Or long ago east of P'ing-ling
 Its leaves were all spread to catch the dew,
 Its flowers all blossomed awaiting the wind.
 Now its leaves are falling like this—
 Not at all like the time of its splendor.
 Here in the courtyard its life is gone,
 By the well, a trunk hollow from worms.
 The craftsman need not trouble to look it over:
 Nothing can be made from its knottiness.

- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 當時金谷裏 | A. 44 |
| 昔日平陵東 | |
| 布葉俱承露 | |
| 開花共待風 | |
| 5 搖落一如此 | |
| 容華遂不同 | |
| 庭前生意盡 | A. 4 |
| 井上蠹心空 | A. 24, 32 |
| 匠者無勞顧 | A. 16 |
| 10 擁腫難爲功 | A. 13 |

C. Lu Chao-lin 盧照鄰, "The Sick Pear Tree" 病梨樹賦 (Yu-yu-tzu chi, 1.7b-9a [SPTK] beginning with the last part of the preface dated 673).

. . . I lay sick and alone here in the city, in utter silence with no companions, a hundred days with my head on my pillow, three months with my gate shut. There was no variety of trees in my courtyard—only a single, sick pear tree,

- Only a few hands in girth and a yard in height;
 5 its fruit and flowers were all shrivelled, and it seemed that it could not bear the winter;
 its branches were weak and drooping, and it barely had the will to last through the day.
 Alas! All such trust their roots alike to the rich soil and together are endowed with Animating Breath from the Balance of Cosmic Forces,
 but their spans are unequal, and they differ in flourishing and barrenness.
 How can it be that the natural law which assigns a thing's fate comes from what is natural,
 10 and yet in the changes which living things undergo, fate comes unequally.
 If it is even so with trees, how can one bear it thinking of man?
 Something in it stirred my heart, and I wrote a *fu* on it as follows:
 Heaven's configurations move steadily in their cycles, and Earth's Spirit plants far and wide:
 the scented cassia sprouts up in the orb of the moon; the Fu-sang tree lays athwart the realm of the sun;
 15 the legendary Chien Tree thrusts high above the hill of spirits; the Coiling Peach Trees grow beside the great sea [on the immortal isles].
 Tiny leaves, twigs twining, mighty boughs, branches straight, and they may even think Heaven and Earth no more than a single finger and endure the roosting of sun-raven and moon-toad.
 Some cast their shade over ten thousand acres; some bear fruit every thousand years.
 Why should the rain and dew be bestowed especially on them, or the winds and mists treat them with unique kindness?
 And I pity those precious trees of this world, which stand in full flower, hidden and alone,
 20 their lush fruits fall in Ho-yang, and their good fame in Golden Valley is told, their rareness in Purple Creek was praised, and Mysterious Inner Vision showed their immortal kind.
 Now you, my pear tree, why are *you* so weak and drooping?
 As you are, you have no use in wheel or rafter, no application for beam or stay; presented to the public, you do not stray under the axe or hatchet, and out of the public eye, you are not fought for by craftsmen like Kung-shu Pan or Ch'ui.
 25 You lack even the life of that locust tree in the courtyard, but you do possess the dead branches of the *wu-t'ung* on the cliff.
 Your height is only a few yards; your girth is only a foot.
 The tall trunk, unpaired; each branch is barren;
 your leaves are sick, full of purple; your flowers are withered, with little white.
 Evening's birds resent how precarious their nests are upon you; autumn cicadas grieve at the narrowness of concealment you afford.
 30 You fear lest a summer gale strip you of your leaves and hate how blazing summer's light presses on you.
 But when earth withholds its steaming fogs, and Heaven withdraws its radiant divinity [the sun; i.e. when it is night],
 in the bright moonlight of western Ch'in and under the shooting stars of the Eastwell constellation,
 then your solitary shadow stands alone, and your upright form sways—
 your appearance has the sparkling of the Golden Stem [the column that supported Han Wu-ti's pan to catch the elixir dew], and you seem to have the loftiness of a stone tomb stele.

- 35 Consider the woods of K'ua-fu by the western sea [created out of the oils of his decomposing body] or the trees of Ch'ih Yu by the southern ocean [created out of the fetters with which the Yellow Emperor bound the rebellious Ch'ih Yu]—these all scrape the heavens and brush the sun, hide clouds and spit forth fogs. But in addition there is the rotten column by the bridge and the magic log that went through the heavens,
year after year, every year, no leaves on these, no flowers.
Glory and shame are equal; good fortune and ill lie on the same path:
- 40 better to hold to the passive and accept outer ruin, not to adorn the exterior and meet calamity within.
It is like those sages who give themselves over to wine, those good men who feign madness—
act so as things will fit perfectly together; set aside both joy and grief.
Life is not life to me—creatures just call it life. Death is neither death to me—the Spirit of the Valley does not die.
So confuse the long life of a P'eng Tsu with that of a dead child and view them as equal; hope for the fishtrap and snare [the means for understanding] in this truth.

- 余獨病卧茲邑，闕寂無人
伏枕十旬，閉門三月
庭無衆木，惟有病梨樹一株
園才數握，高僅盈丈
- 5 花實顛顛，似不仕乎歲寒
枝葉零丁，絕有意乎朝暮
嗟乎。同託根於膏壤，俱稟氣於太和
而修短不均，榮枯殊貫
豈賦命之理，得之自然
- 10 將資生之化，有所偏及
樹猶如此，人何以堪
有感於懷，賦之云耳
天象平運，方祇廣植
挺芳桂於月輪，橫扶桑於日域
- 15 建木聳靈邱之上，蟠桃生巨海之側
細葉枝連，洪柯條直，齊天地之一指，任烏兔之棲息
或垂陰萬畝，或結子千年
何偏施之雨露，何獨厚之風烟
憫茲珍木，離離幽獨
- 20 飛茂實於河陽，傳芳名於金谷
紫潤稱其殊旨，玄光表其仙族
爾生何爲零丁
若斯無輪橈之可用，無棟梁之可施
進無違於斤斧，退無競於班倕
- 25 無庭槐之生意，有岩桐之死枝
爾其高才數仞，園僅盈尺

A.49

A.22

A.44,45

A.16

A.3,7

- 修幹罕雙，枯條每隻
 葉病多紫，花凋少白
 夕鳥怨其巢危，秋蟬悲其翳窄
 A.37(desertion)
- 30 怯衡麗之搖落，忌炎景之臨迫
 既而地歇蒸霧，天收耀靈
 西秦明月，東井流星
 顛顚孤影，徘徊直形
 狀金莖之的的，疑石柱之亭亭
- 35 若夫西海夸父之林，南海蚩尤之樹
 莫不摩霄拂日，藏雲吐霧
 別有橋邊朽柱，天上靈楂。
 A.43
 年年歲歲，無葉無花
 榮辱兩齊，吉凶同軌
- 40 寧守雌以外喪，不修禱而內否
 亦猶縱酒高賢，佯狂君子
 爲其吻合，置其憂喜
 生非我生，物謂之生。死非我死，谷神不死
 混彭殤於一觀，庶筌蹄於茲理

D. Lo Pin-wang 駱賓王 (ca.640–684), “A Floating Log” 浮查 (with preface, *Tōdai no shihen* 04236).

As my eyes drifted over the stream, I spied a floating log, tossing aimlessly like that wooden statue riding the current, lost and not knowing where it was going.

I observed how its roots coiled and how its trunk and branches spread out all around.

In its larger parts there was material for beams and oars; in its smaller parts it might have served for wheel axles or rafter eaves.

Were it not endowed with the surging Breath of Heaven and Earth, had it not possessed within itself the pure essences of the universe,

- 5 how could it have relied upon that outward form which passed up over the clouds and measured the sun, how could it have clasped within that frame on which the snow piled and the frost encased?

As long as it was able to keep its timber to itself in some hidden marsh, to hide its flowering behind ranges of cliffs,

to cut from its vision the glory of the Temple's porch [where the plans of state are made], and banish its form from ruin by axe and hatchet,

it could securely spread down its shade over ten thousand acres and hang bright radiance up through the nine layers of the sky;

it could compare its height with the legendary Chien Tree and could equal the long life of the mighty Ch'un Tree.

- 10 But it set down its roots on a perilous cliff, trusted its substance to dangerous paths;

above it was smashed by gales and sudden gusts; beneath it was dashed through by rushing billows and swift waves.

Its base was enclosed by the soil, but its position was rendered precarious by the lay of the land:

the process of increase and decline was not bound to the proper season, nor were the principles of its nurture within its own control.

Once it fell into the stream valley, it bobbed and whirled ten thousand miles, floating then sinking under the waves, moving off then stopping with chance.

- 15 Though some Yin Chung-wen may sigh that the life in it is gone, though Confucius may realize how hard it is to work rotten timber, all the same, if it comes upon a fine craftsman or meets some immortal, then it can tie up at the Herdboy's jetty [in Heaven], and the path to the Jade Ornament [found by Lü Shang, an old fisherman who met an appreciative ruler in Chou Wu-wang and was given a high post] will not be far.

Then Craftsman Shih will size it up, and it will not be far from becoming a vessel for the emperor, Lord of Ten Thousand Chariots.

Thus it is purely chance whether this timber is to be used or not. Alas!

In this case, among all things it is clearly not only those with the same voice and the same spirit that may respond to one another.

- 20 Deeply stirred, I have written this poem to offer to those who suffer the same sickness [i.e., passion]:

Of old it relied on its thousand foot substance,
And on high, looked down over nine cubit peaks.
Its pure heart/trunk surpassed the evening cassia,
Its sturdy resolution/joints outdid the winter pine.

- 25 Suddenly it met with a gale, was broken,
Then was struck by billows and waves.
To no purpose it rages against its ruin:
It has become useless through knottiness.
Three thousand miles into the Sea of Po
30 Through how many layers of sand and mud?
It seems a boat, rolling, unstable,
Or like that statue, floating to what end?
In the end it will be hard to find an immortal,
Nor will it be easy to meet a good craftsman.
35 In vain it harbors a vessel for the emperor,
But who will take measurements for the crafting?

游目川上，觀一浮查，泛泛然若木偶之乘流，迷不知其所適也。

觀其根柢盤屈，枝幹扶疏 A.6,22, C.17

大則有棟梁舟楫之材，小則有輪轅檣橈之用 C.23

非夫稟乾坤之秀氣，含宇宙之淳精 C.7

- 5 孰能負凌雲概日之姿，抱積雪封霜之骨 C.36

向使懷材幽藪，藏穎重岩 C.19

絕望於廊廟之榮，遺形於斤斧之患 C.24

固可垂蔭萬畝，懸映九霄 A.22, C.16

與建木較其短長，將大椿齊其年壽者 C.15

- 10 而委根險岸，託質畏途 C.7

上為疾風衝靡所摧殘，下為奔浪迅波所激射 C.30

基由壤括，勢以地危 C.7

- 豈盛衰之理繫乎時，封植之道存乎我
 一墜泉谷，萬里飄淪，與波浮沈，隨時逝止
- 15 雖殷仲文歎生意已盡，孔宣父知朽質難離 A.4, C.25
 然而遇良工，逢仙客，牛礪可託，玉璜之路非遙 A.43, C.37
 匠石先談，萬乘之器何遠 A.16
 故材用與不用，時也。悲夫
 然知萬物之相應感者，亦奚必同聲同氣而已哉
- 20 感而賦詩，貽諸同疾云爾 (ref. C.1?)
 昔負千尋質
 高臨九仞峰
 真心凌晚桂 A.32
 勁節掩寒松 A.32
- 25 忽值風飈折 C.30
 坐為波浪衝
 摧殘空有恨 A.15, B.10
 擁腫遂無庸
 渤海三千里
- 30 泥沙發萬重
 似舟飄不定
 如梗泛何從
 仙客終難託
 良工豈易逢 A.16
- 35 徒懷萬乘器
 誰為一先容

E. Wang Ling-jan 王冷然 (fl. early 8th century), "An Old Tree Lies on Level Sands"
 古木卧平沙 (*Tōdai no shihen* 05536).

- 5 An old tree lies on level sands,
 In ruin the years and months grow long.
 Roots it has, athwart the water and stones,
 No leaves to brush the mist and red clouds.
 When spring comes, the moss is its leaves,
 And with winter, snow serves for its flowers.
 If it doesn't meet the envoy to the River of Stars,
 Who shall discern that this is the wondrous log?

古木卧平沙
 摧殘歲月除
 有根橫水石
 無葉拂烟霞
 春至苔為葉
 冬來雪作花
 不逢星漢使
 誰辨是靈槎

F. Tu Fu 杜甫 (712–770), “The Barren Nan Tree” 枯枿 (*Tōdai no shihen* 10679).

- A *nan* tree, barren and towering—
 Not one of the villagers takes note of it.
 I wonder how many hundred years
 It's been so pathetic, no life in it.
 5 Above, its branches scrape the dark heavens,
 Beneath, its roots coil in rich Earth.
 Its mighty girth cracked in thunder,
 And insects gathered in thousands of holes.
 Sudden storms brought down its flowing sap,
 10 Gales tore away its sweet scent.
 Then the snowgoose came no more,
 And the pheasant brooded sadly for it.
 Still within it has the stuff for beams,
 But lacks now the desire to reach the upper sky.
 15 Since ancient times good craftsmen have been few,
 But he who knows the tree weeps for it.
 If you plant an elm in the midst of the water,
 It will grow tall so easily;
 Then cut it to hold the golden pan for dew—
 It will sway back and forth, unaware of the danger.

- 枿 枿 枯 崢 嶸
 鄉 黨 皆 莫 記
 不 知 幾 百 歲
 慘 慘 無 生 意 A.4, C.25, D.15
 5 上 枝 摩 蒼 天 C.36, D.5
 下 根 蟠 厚 地 C.7, D.10
 巨 圍 雷 霆 折 A.34
 萬 孔 蟲 蟻 萃 A.24, B.8
 凍 雨 落 流 膠 A.32
 10 衝 風 奪 佳 氣 C.30, D.11,25
 白 鵲 遂 不 來 A.37, (C.29)
 天 鷄 爲 愁 思
 猶 含 棟 梁 具 C.23, D.3
 無 復 霄 漢 志 (C.36, D.5,21–22)
 15 良 工 古 昔 少 A.16, B.9, C.24, D.16,34
 識 者 出 涕 淚 A.3,46–48, D.15
 種 榆 水 中 央
 成 長 何 容 易
 載 承 金 露 盤 C.34
 20 裊 裊 不 自 畏

G. Tu Fu, “The Ballad of the Old Cypress” 古柏行 (*Tōdai no shihen* 10768).

Before the temple of Chu-ko Liang there stands an old cypress:
 Its boughs like green bronze, its roots are like rock.
 Frosted bark drenched by rain, girth of forty spans,

- Mascara color as peak touching sky, two thousand feet up.
 5 Already lord and loyal subject have met their proper time,
 But this tree still is prized by men.
 When clouds come, vapors reach to touch the length of Wu Gorges,
 When the moon is out, there's chill all the way to the white of Snowy Mountains.
 I remember some time ago a road winding east of Brocade Pavilion.
 10 There Liu Pei, the Founder, and his Warrior Duke share the same shrine.
 There trunk and branches towered above the ancient plain,
 Hidden away, the colors of paintings through the empty doors and windows.
 Spreading wide, coiling, clasping, it finds its place in earth,
 But in the dark sky's lonely heights is much fierce wind.
 15 Supporting it surely there is the power of some god,
 From the very first its uprightness came from the deeds of Creation.
 Should some great hall collapse, and they needed beams and rafters,
 Ten thousand oxen would turn their heads, pulling its mountainous weight.
 Without showing the marks of man's art, the world would already be amazed:
 20 It would not refuse the chopping, but none can carry it away.
 Of course its bitter heart/trunk cannot avoid letting termites get in,
 But its fragrant leaves have always given phoenixes lodging for the night.
 You the man of ambition, you who live hidden away—don't sign in rancour:
 Always when timber was greatest it was hardest to put to use.

- 孔明廟前有老柏
 柯如青銅根如石
 霜皮溜雨四十圍
 黛色參天二千尺
 5 君臣已與時際會
 樹木猶為人愛惜
 雲來氣接巫峽長
 月出寒通雪山白
 憶昨路繞錦亭東
 10 先主武侯同閭宮
 崔嵬枝幹郊原古
 窈窕丹青戶牖空
 落落盤據雖得地
 冥冥孤高多烈風
 15 扶持自是神明力
 正直元因造化功
 大廈如傾要梁棟
 萬牛迴首邱山重
 不露文章世已驚
 20 未辭剪伐誰能送
 苦心豈免容蠹蟻
 香葉終經宿鸞鳳
 志士幽人莫怨嗟
 古來材大難為用
- C.7, D.10, F.6
 C.30,36, D.5,11,25, F.5,10,14
 Tu Fu "Sick Cypress"
 C.23, D.3, F.13
 A.16–19
 A.24, B.8, F.8
 A.11,(37), C.16, F.11
 A.3, 46, C.29, D.15, F.16
 passim

- H. Han Yü 韓愈 (768–824), “The Wooden Hermit (first of two)” 題木居士二首之一 (*Tōdai no shihen* 18002).

Passed through by fire, bored through by waves for countless springs,
The roots were as head and face, the stock was as body:
By chance it came to be called “the Wooden Hermit,”
Then there came endless people seeking good fortune.

火透波穿不計春 A.32
根如頭面幹如身 (see D.1)
偶然題作木居士
便有無窮求福人

- I. Chang Chi 張籍 (ca.766–830), “Old Tree” 古樹 (*Tōdai no shihen* 20224).

5 An old tree, its boughs and branches few,
How many springs since it grew barren?
Exposed roots where you can tether your horse,
A hollow belly that surely could hide a man.
Worm-eaten joints where moss grows old,
Scars of fire, recent thunder-cracking.
If it stood beside a riverbank,
Travellers would worship it as a god.

古樹枝柯少 E.2, F.3
枯來復幾春 A.28
露根堪繫馬 A.32,35, B.8, G.21
空腹定藏人 A.24,32, B.8, D.32
蠹節莓苔老
燒痕霹靂新 A.32, F.7
若當江浦上 Tu Fu, “Sick Cypress”
行客祭爲神

- J. Han Yü, “Barren Tree” 枯樹 (*Tōdai no shihen* 18111).

5 An old tree with no branches or leaves,
Wind and frost can attack it no more.
Hole in the belly for a man to pass through,
Bark peeled away where termites still search.
Here lodges only the fungus that grows in a day,
Gone are evening birds that once stayed the night.
Still it can be used for the fuel,
Unwilling to be only an empty trunk, a dispassionate heart.

老樹無枝葉 I.1
風霜不復侵 A.25
腹穿人可過 A.35, I.4
皮剥蟻還尋 A.24, B.8, F.8, G.21
寄託惟朝菌 A.24,37, C.29, F.11

依投絕暮禽 A.24,37, C.29, F.11
 猶堪持改火 A.32
 未肯但空心

K. Po Chü-yi 白居易 (772–846), “Barren Mulberry” 枯桑 (*Tōdai no shihen* 22089).

By the roadside an old barren tree,
 Grown barren in not just one day.
 The bark brown—still alive outside
 But trunk’s core is black, scorched within.
 It’s somewhat like one with too many cares—
 It’s not because it was burned from outside.

道傍老枯樹 I.1, J.1
 枯來非一朝 E.2, F.3, I.2
 皮黃外尚活 J.4
 心黑中先焦 A.32, I.6, J.7–8
 有似多憂者 passim
 非因外火燒

Part II

The things of this world have no other function than to simply be themselves. It is the human species that finds its peculiar mission in encumbering their perfect neutrality with value, significance, and analogical associations. Eventually the intellectual and literary traditions of a civilization load such a freight of meaning onto things that the things lose their simple presences and disappear irrevocably into the consuming world of words.

The origins of this process by which a thing gathers meaning is lost in the beginnings of language, but once the process has begun with an object, it has virtually a life of its own. How does a pine tree in a T’ang poem come to possess its complicated train of associations and values? Behind the use of the word, the “thing,” lies an entire history comprised both of specific usages in specific texts and of commonplaces whose origins are unknown or unimportant. That history, and with it the significance of the “thing,” is constantly changing as new usages appear and old ones fade from fashion and memory.

That history is perhaps the single most powerful force in the literary perception of a thing at any given moment. The literary encyclopediae do not encompass the zoology and botany of China; but poets are largely blind to plants and beasts that have no history of human interest [except for the *fu* poet with his catalogues, which weary the reader precisely because the items are merely themselves]. That history of meaning not only regulates what is seen, it also informs how a thing is seen: the pine tree’s green through the winter, its straightness or crookedness, or its snake-like roots are the domain of the poet; the texture of its bark or the number of needles in a cluster escape the trained senses.

In literature’s complex natural science there is occasionally a new departure as some new object is included in the literary sphere or some old object is treated in a new way. Inevitably the new departure will not be *sui generis*: it will be achieved by some transformation of older ideas. But even so, for some “things” of poetry, there is a true parent text, a text which embodies the object for later readers. With such a parent text

we can begin to trace the history of how an object gathers meaning and how individual poets use the interpretations of their predecessors.

Yü Hsin's "*Fu* on the Barren Tree," *K'u-shu fu* 枯樹賦, is just such a text. The *fu* is a new departure built out of earlier tree lore, but it was the dominant text that embodied the "barren tree" for over two centuries.¹ It is a text that poets through the T'ang would probably have known well, and there are a limited number of treatments of the theme by succeeding poets. Thus we can infer with some security what earlier poems on the object would have been familiar to a T'ang poet at a given time.

No object can be the subject of a poem and long remain neutral, but the initiating poet, Yü Hsin, has a certain degree of freedom in raising questions of meaning in his treatment of the object. These questions—of usefulness, of apparent value versus real value, and of the attitude to be adopted by the human observer—all grow naturally out of a long tradition of tree lore, but Yü Hsin retains the freedom to exclude some ideas, to rearrange others, and to link ideas to physical details in his new departure. However, once the departure is no longer new, these ideas become fixed questions to which later poets *must* address themselves when treating the theme. The initial treatment is best seen as "raising questions" rather than "assigning meanings" because later poets will often make a point of rejecting the correlations found in the earlier poet's work. The later poets struggle against the norms of treatment they receive, trying to assert their poetic identity against that of their predecessors.

From the point of view of the later T'ang poem, an entire tradition of earlier poems treating the subject may be a necessary context for interpretation. That context is neither a body of inert conventions nor a series of "source" passages neatly excised in commentary: it is a series of complete, individual texts to which the later poet responds. In major poems like Tu Fu's "The Barren Nan Tree" or "The Ballad of the Old Cypress" the echoes of earlier versions of the theme are misunderstood if taken as allusions and verbal borrowings: they are part of a much larger process of redefinition of the significance of the barren tree.

The poems discussed here, some major and some very minor, represent a wide range of ways in which poets made use of the literary past. Yü Hsin creates the topic out of a variety of sources. Some of his successors oppose earlier interpretations; other take aspects of earlier versions and change them by setting them in new contexts. Still others, the minor poets, treat the topic as a commonplace, running through a series of conventional aspects of the barren tree with graceful competence.

As it to justify the novelty of the barren tree as a topic for a *yung-wu fu* 詠物賦 (*fu* on a 'thing'), Yü Hsin frames his work with perhaps the most famous story of a barren tree, Yin Chung-wen's sigh over the "locust tree in the courtyard" 庭槐.² In the original anecdote, the locust tree was not only a sign of the impermanence of things, it was also an emblem of political failure, a reference to Yin's own waning fortunes or to those of the Tsin strongman Huan Hsüan 桓玄, who had recently been defeated by Liu Yü 劉裕, the founder of the Liu-Sung Dynasty. Writing this *fu* during his captivity in the north, Yü Hsin clearly intended that the political associations of the barren tree be present, but

¹ *K'u* 枯 (translated as "barren") is a difficult term with no exact equivalent in English. It refers to the apparent lifelessness of trees and vegetation in winter or to the real lifelessness of dead trees and vegetation. It describes appearance, implying "witheredness" (applicable to non-woody vegetation, leaves, human appearance in old age or sickness), "dryness" (with general application), and "leaflessness" (applied to trees). "Barren" is an uneasy compromise implying leaflessness and retaining *k'u*'s appearance of death without necessarily implying true death; i.e. both a winter tree and a dead tree may be said to be "barren."

² This well-known story of Yin Chung-wen (d. 407) can be found in *Tsin shu*, 99 (Chung-hua ed., p. 2605) and in the *Shih-shuo hsün-yü* 3B.30b (SPTK), translated by Richard Mather, *A New Account of Tales of the World* by Liu I-ch'ing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976) p. 453.

the closing citation from the *Huai-nan-tzu* and the anecdote about Huan Wen indicate that the more general associations of impermanence had not disappeared.³ Through the strong topical associations in both the Yin Chung-wen anecdote and the *fu* of Yü Hsin, the barren tree came to be treated as topical allegory, and it retained this convention of use at least through the eighth century.

In his *fu* Yü Hsin synthesized elements from a vast body of tree lore. The trees of the Yin Chung-wen and Huan Wen anecdotes ultimately derive from the commonplace image of the autumn tree, a favorite marker of impermanence in the poetry of the second and third centuries and usually traced back to the *Chiu-pien* of the *Ch'u-tz'u*. A second source of associations developed out of the play on words between "timber" 材 and "talent" 才. This felicitous pun generated a whole family of conventional metaphors; e.g. the man of talent/timber may serve as a "beam" in the edifice of the state; raw talent/timber may be "carved" and given the adornment of culture or may prove too "rotten" to decorate. And early Taoist writers could not resist evolving their own counter-metaphors in the gnarled tree, which by its seclusion or deformity manages to preserve its natural state and avoid the craftsman's axe. A third and independent set of associations lies in portent lore, where seemingly lifeless trees flower out of their barrenness to indicate the restoration of a clan or dynasty.

In addition to these major groups of sources for the barren tree, many of the minor components of Yü Hsin's treatment have their own sources. For example, the desertion of the tree by its former lodgers, a sub-theme that appears in many of the versions, originated in a bit of folk wisdom which maintained that a bird wouldn't roost in a barren tree. It is perhaps impossible to write or to think without engaging a large part of the history of the literature or of the civilization, and to trace that history is to discover an awesome proliferation as one moves back in time.

Fortunately, Yü Hsin's synthesis of these many elements was novel enough to dominate the topic for a few centuries. The barren tree is clearly an emblem of Yü himself, transplanted from his native soil and wasting away in the North. Following an old *fu* tradition in framing his poem with a historical anecdote, Yü Hsin delivers the *fu* through the mouth of Yin Chung-wen, subsequent to his famous exclamation about the "locust tree in the courtyard." However, Yü's exposition of the topic is both simple and untraditional: instead of an orderly presentation of various aspects of the topic, the poet moves through a series of strophes each giving examples of trees in the glory and trees in decline. Finally when the theme of transplanting occurs—the situation most analogous to Yin Chung-wen's situation and his own—Yü lingers to describe the pathos of the ruined tree.

For all its rhetorical bravura, Yü Hsin's "*Fu on the Barren Tree*" is not a particularly complicated work of literature. The value later readers invested in it probably came primarily from the complicated and moving biographical circumstances that surrounded it. The next version is a *shih* by a less than minor poet Sun Wan-shou. Probably writing with Yü Hsin's *fu* in mind, Sun gives a perfunctory summary of the simple glory-decline pattern. What is of great interest, however, is the pressure to raise the question of the usefulness of the talent/timber when describing the tree in its decline. Is the displaced official, the correlative of the barren tree, still of use to the state? Yü Hsin also raised the question of use, but he raised it at a singularly inappropriate place, in his description of the gnarled tree (1.16), which should have been spared being cut up or carved. However, when Yü described the ruined tree, he willfully suppressed the question of its continued usefulness—perhaps because he identified himself too closely with his own metaphor.

³ See *Tsin shu*, 98 (Chung-hua ed. p. 2572) and *Shih-shuo hsin yü* 1A.36b–37a (SPTK) (translated in Mather, p. 57).

The force of the tradition would not allow the question of the barren tree's usefulness to be avoided very long. Every reader knew the elaboration of the timber/talent pun in *Analects* V.ix.1: "Ts'ai Yü was sleeping during the day, and the Master said, 'Rotten wood cannot be carved . . .'" If there is dead wood, there *may* be rotten wood: the person who identifies himself with the barren tree may prove to be of no use to the state (fortunately or unfortunately, according to his philosophical inclinations). Sun Wan-shou adds this inevitable element to the topic: no carver need look at the barren tree because it is worthless. Only an occasional context for the poem would indicate if this is a blessing or a curse.

Whether he was acquainted with Sun Wan-shou's verse or not, Lu Chao-lin also addresses himself to the question of the usefulness of his barren tree, "The Sick Pear Tree." And once the question is raised, later writers cannot resist the temptation to resolve it. Lu Chao-lin accepts the proposition that the tree is useless, but he treats that uselessness as a positive value. It is a new resolution of the theme, but one that comes naturally from a Taoist intellectual tradition replete with stunted, knotty trees. Like Yü Hsin, Lu sees in the tree a direct metaphor for his own condition: as Yü and his tree had been "transplanted" from their native soil, so Lu Chao-lin's tree is "sick," as Lu himself actually was. This variation on the barren tree originates in the desire of the poet to make the emblem of his condition more closely correspond to biographical fact; however, the variation quickly became literary convention, an acceptable alternative when writing in the barren tree tradition. Tu Fu, for example, freely mixes sick trees with barren ones.

In other ways as well, Lu Chao-lin changed the circumstances of the barren tree to suit his own case: rather than a tree in decline, Lu writes of a stunted tree that never flourished. Instead of seeing in the topic a universal process of flourishing and decline, Lu treats his sick pear tree as an example of the inequality of fate that allows some trees to flourish while others waste away.

From one point of view, Lu Chao-lin's *fu* was a more "modern" treatment of the theme than Yü Hsin's: Lu's *fu* is described through the mouth of the poet himself, presenting a tree in what the reader would presume to be Lu's real garden. This frame of historical occasion is an excellent example of the pressure of *shih* on *fu*, and indeed, in some *shih* treatments the traditionally allegorical tree will have to find a place in an occasional, non-fictional setting.

More significant, however, are the archaizing elements in Lu Chao-lin's treatment of the topic. An archaic form lends authority to a statement: the version which seems "older" is more "primal," therefore "truer." First, Lu separates the preface clearly from the main body of the *fu*, in contrast to Yü Hsin's more "modern" fusion of frame-preface and the main body of the *fu*. Lu's separation of the two parts is strengthened by the use of the traditional *fu* formula: "I wrote a *fu* on it as follows." A second archaizing impulse lies in the structure of the main body of the *fu*: Lu follows a descending hierarchy of importance in the trees he discusses, beginning with cosmic principles and moving through a series of progressively "lower" examples. This very formal *fu* structure was particularly characteristic of Wei and Tsin *fu*, and it contrasts sharply with Yü Hsin's freer, more associative amplification. Of course, when Lu reaches his "lowest" example, that of his sick pear tree, he sets out to prove that the last shall be first.

Lu Chao-lin's differences from Yü Hsin can best be understood in the context of Early T'ang *fu-ku* ("return to antiquity") interests. Though from the point of view of later readers the Early T'ang style was hardly distinguishable from that of the Southern Dynasties, Early T'ang writers saw themselves as having progressed backward beyond their Southern Dynasties predecessors. In his "Preface to the Works of Wang Po,"

Yang Chiung singled out Lu Chao-lin as an important figure in *fu*-ku writing of the mid-seventh century.⁴ In the "Preface to the Works of the Duke of Nan-yang," Lu himself roundly denounced the decadence of sixth century writing, while paying a grudging tribute to the greatest of the sixth century poets, Yü Hsin.⁵

If Lu Chao-lin's *fu* does not differ stylistically from Yü Hsin's, it does move towards archaism along the structural lines mentioned above. But Lu's clearest opposition to Yü Hsin's *fu* is on the thematic level: perhaps the most common charge raised by *fu*-ku writers against the literature of the Southern Dynasties was its mood of "rancour," *yüan* 怨, and "lament," *ai* 哀. The influential "Great Preface" of the *Shih-ching* attached clear political and social implications to these moods: "rancour" indicated the poetry of a state in great difficulty, while "lament" signified the destruction of the state. It was these qualities of "rancour" and "lament" that dominated Yü Hsin's treatment of the barren tree, and precisely the same qualities that Lu Chao-lin rejected in his *fu*. The closing injunction of Tu Fu's famous "Ballad of the Old Cypress," not to "sigh in rancour," belongs to the history of the barren tree poem.

Lu Chao-lin rejects Yü Hsin's treatment of the topic by presenting first the pathetic version of the ruined tree, then going beyond the mere pathos. The preface to the "Sick Pear Tree" sets out an elegiac version of the little tree which is reminiscent of the treatment in Yü Hsin's *fu*. At the end of the preface, Lu Chao-lin reproduces literally the statement of Huan Wen which was also quoted at the end of Yü Hsin's "*Fu* on the Barren Tree": "If it is so even with trees, how can one bear it thinking of man?" The reader of Lu Chao-lin's *fu* knows the *fu* of Yü Hsin: he sees here the mark of closure, the formal "emotional response" of the lyric, the "last word" on the pathetic, dying tree. The reader has every reason to expect that the main body of the *fu* will repeat the situation of the preface, and indeed, the *fu* seems to begin that way, as great and famous trees are contrasted with Lu's sick pear tree whose uselessness is emphasized:

As you are you have no use in wheel or rafter, no application for beam or stay.

But already hints of the Taoist usefulness of uselessness appear:

Presented to the public, you do not stray under the axe or hatchet,
and out of the public eye you are not fought for by craftsmen
like Kung-shu Pan or Ch'ui.

Lu Chao-lin then moves to an antithetical night vision of the tree, in which all its inward beauty is revealed. This leads the poet to the consolation of Taoism, a layman's Taoism that admits contradiction to reinforce the consolation: not only is there true superiority in seeming inferiority, all values are relative and thus equal.

Lu Chao-lin has led his reader to expect the pathetic tree of Yü Hsin, has then reversed those expectations and offered the reader a new way to see the tree in which the rancour and self-pity attached to the topic can be avoided. Though "The Sick Pear Tree" has fewer verbal echoes of Yü Hsin's *fu* than any of the other treatments of the topic presented here, Yü's "*Fu* on the Barren Tree" lies just behind Lu Chao-lin's work, and Lu counters the earlier *fu* in every way he can.

Lo Pin-wang's "A Floating Log" draws from a Tsin *fu* on the same topic by Yü Ch'an 庾闡, as well as from the barren tree tradition.⁶ Lo Pin-wang's differences from Yü Ch'an's *fu* lie precisely in echoes of the slightly earlier "Sick Pear Tree," in the specific phrases, allusions, and topic raised. The barren tree is transformed into a floating log through one of the most common allusions in seventh century court poetry, the story of the eighth month raft that took a man out to sea and up into the Milky Way [Heaven or

⁴ Yang *Ying-ch'uan chi* 3.1a-5a. (SPTK)

⁵ Yu-yu-tzu *chi* 6.31-6a (SPTK).

⁶ Ch'üan Tsin wen, 38.4b-5a.

the court]. Again the barren tree has been transformed to answer the specific biographical concerns of the author, and Lo Pin-wang's obsessive concern in his poetry was official preferment—a journey to Heaven/the court.

There is no desire in Lo's poem to oppose Yü Hsin's *fu* and reverse its ominous mood of lament: Lo Pin-wang was content that the ruined tree evoke all the pity and pathos possible, so long as they served his persuasive purposes—"take pity on this tree/myself and recommend me to court." To support this message, Lo offered a new explanation for the tree's decline: its destruction was due not to the natural process of flourishing and decline, but rather to Chance, to *shih* 時, "the times." Another essential revision of the barren tree is necessary to support the poet's plea: the timber/talent of the tree is still useful. The reader is enjoined to take pity on the tree's misfortunes and to respond to the question in the last line by "adorning" it/him and presenting the poet to the court.

The plea for preferment was the most important part of the literary repertoire of the aspiring official, and it is not surprising that Lo Pin-wang's version of the barren tree gained some currency. Lo's revision even received official recognition, as can be seen in the examination poem by Wang Ling-jan, probably from 717. Once an emblem of political failure, the barren tree had become an allegorical figure of unrecognized potential and an apt topic for an examination poem. The theme of unrecognized potential was to remain with the topic, and in Tu Fu we can see an attempt to draw this theme together with the older associations of political failure and ruin.

The Wang Ling-jan poem is no more distinguished than the Sun Wan-shou piece, but it illustrates one very important aspect of the use of the literary past—the interaction between thematic conventions, such as we have seen growing around the image of the barren tree, and the structural rules of a poetic subgenre. The examination poem, like court poetry and much formal occasional verse, had rigid rules of formal amplification. In the Wang Ling-jan poem the thematic conventions of the barren tree tradition are removed from their larger context and used as "building blocks" in the set subgeneric framework.

The first line is the topic on which the examinee was to write; the second line restates and amplifies the first chiasmatically: "ruined" follows from "lies on level sands," and "the years and months grow long" follows from "an ancient tree." The second couplet is a Heaven-Earth couplet, for which red clouds and stone serve as ornamental substitutions. The correlative antithesis for the tree would be "roots and branch tips" (*pen-mo* 本末), for which the poetic substitution here is "roots" and "leaves" (*ken-yeh* 根葉). Often in a formal amplification each of the middle couplets develops one phrase of the opening: in Wang Ling-jan's poem the second couplet elaborates the spatial position of "lies on level sands," while the third couplet treats extension through time following "an old tree" and "the years and months grow long." A seasonal antithesis is often used to mark a long stretch of time, in this case spring and winter. And Wang Ling-jan also ingeniously brings in the trope of substitution (X now serves for Y which is no longer present); this trope of substitution was most common in the "ruined city" topic and the *huai-ku* (meditation on ancient site), and these had close affinities with the barren tree through the shared pattern of flourishing and decline.

Wang closes his poem with a plea for preferment in the reference to the raft that went to Heaven (here, as often in court poetry, conflated with another story of a Han envoy who reached Heaven by going westward). Thus as the fallen tree, turned raft, will carry the Han envoy to Heaven, so the poem on the fallen tree will hopefully carry the poet to court and an official career. This kind of anatomical dissection of a poem is unpleasant, but it represents an aspect of T'ang poetry which should not be ignored. When in strict use, as in this poem, these formal rules of composition supersede any

impulse to originality and atomize the strong conventions of a thematic tradition.

The poems above represent the kind of material inherited by the great poets of the eighth and ninth centuries. They did not inherit a patchwork of disembodied passages and "first uses"; they inherited a complete tradition of whole poems continuing up to their present. Tu Fu was the master revisionist of the literary past; in his hands a wide range of hackneyed themes became new again. While concerned with the values of *fu-ku*, Tu Fu also knew and admired the literature of the Southern Dynasties and Early T'ang, including the poetry of Yü Hsin, Lu Chao-lin, and Lo Pin-wang.

As he took over themes from earlier writers, Tu Fu possessed an almost infallible sense of what had been wanting in the older treatments. Yü Hsin's barren tree was pathetic without dignity, without the nobility that justified the pity. The Taoist consolation of Lu Chao-lin's sick pear tree was an intellectual evasion that did not truly dispel the pathos that the little tree evoked. Lo Pin-wang's floating log was too politically self-serving, and the tree's independent identity disappeared into an extension of the poet's ambition; to restore the tree's independent dignity and make its pathos credible, the tree must not so obviously stand for the poet. It was for Tu Fu to find the right formulation by which the sick or barren tree could incarnate perfectly the values that had grown up around the topic.

In recreating the barren tree Tu Fu borrowed from each of his predecessors, and he spoke to each of their works, but most of all Tu Fu spoke to Yü Hsin, whom he greatly admired, pointing out to Yü what he had missed in his *fu*—the dignity of the tree, its potential for use, and its greatness in comparison to lesser trees. At the closing of "The Ballad of the Old Cypress," Tu Fu writes:

You, the man of ambition, you who live hidden away—don't sigh in rancour:
Always when timber was greatest it was hardest to put to use.

Who is this "man of ambition" (*chih-shih* 志士) and this person "who lives hidden away" (*yu-jen* 幽人)? There is no indication of such figures earlier in the poem; there is no previous sighing in rancour; indeed, until a few lines preceding the closure there had not even been cause for sighing in rancour. We might wish the terms to refer specifically to Yü Hsin, but they must be a generalized figure; however, the chief example of such a generalized figure would be Yü Hsin, the poet who feels such "rancour" on seeing greatness ruined and wasted.

"The Barren Nan Tree" is probably earlier than "The Ballad of the Old Cypress" and is the primary link between the poetic tradition of the barren tree and the old cypress at Chu-ko Liang's temple in K'uei-chou. The revision of the traditional image begun in "The Barren Nan Tree" was perfected in "The Ballad of the Old Cypress."

Tu Fu knows how to evoke traditional values: he does not even need a description of the former flourishing of the tree to bring out the pathos of its decline. He opens with an old tree that no one in a nearby village pays attention to. In a pragmatic world one may well wonder why the villagers should pay attention to it? But by raising the question, Tu Fu presents the tree as a figure of towering solitude against a background of insensitive villagers: secretly he has brought in the theme of the noble "one" unappreciated by the common "many." Behind this slight shift in the theme stands Ch'ü Yüan ("In the nation none understand me") and a host of other figures who stand superior and alone, misunderstood by the world. In this opposition of the one and the many there is a third figure present, the solitary appreciator—the *chih-yin* 知音, "the one who understands music," or the *hsiang-ma* 相馬, "the one who understands the physiognomy of horses," or in this case "the one who understands trees," "the good craftsman," Tu Fu himself. The revision links Yü Hsin's "new departure" to one of the oldest and most potent themes in the literary tradition.

After setting the barren tree in this new context, Tu Fu introduces the phrase of Yin Chung-wen, which links this barren tree to all the barren trees of the literary tradition—*wu sheng-yi* 無生意, “the life is gone from it.” And following this, Tu Fu recapitulates the essential elements of the topic; its glorious past when it scraped the heavens and coiled into earth, the borings of insects, the violent rains and gales, and its abandonment by its former lodgers. But as he enumerates the expected components of the theme in their proper order, their significance is changed by the opening: aspects of the tree that previously evoked only pathos now lend a resolute nobility to its isolation. As in Lo Pin-wang’s version, the timber is still useful, but there is no hope for its use: the failure lies in the ignorance of others and not in the tree itself.

In the closing the value and significance of the tree is again reinforced by a contrast to something ignorant and less worthy than itself, the elm. The elm’s timber is used, but it is inadequate to the task it is given. The tendency to allegorical reading remains with the topic: the barren *nan* tree is often taken as the disgraced minister Fang Kuan; the elm, as his successor. Tu Fu has effectively remade the figure of the barren tree: he has used the basic elements of the tradition, but he has framed them in a new context that changes their meaning.

“The Ballad of the Old Cypress” is a major poem whose complexity makes a comprehensive treatment here impossible. It draws from a number of poetic traditions, of which the barren tree is but one. The closing description of the old cypress develops out of Tu Fu’s treatment of the barren *nan* tree, but the poet has significantly changed his interpretation of the barren tree. Instead of an ignorant, unappreciative world that favors lesser talent, in “The Ballad of the Old Cypress” greatness itself becomes the limiting factor: the paradoxical principle is that the greatest timber/talent is the hardest to use.

In the old cypress of Chu-ko Liang’s temple, the pathos of the tree’s sufferings finally become secondary to its grandeur. The old cypress combines the flourishing tree and the barren tree on the same trunk: it possesses the requisite termites in the heart/trunk, but still has fragrant leaves and provides roosts for the phoenixes—its lodgers have not deserted it. A detail in line twenty-two suggests the essential role a knowledge of the tradition plays in interpretation: why does Tu Fu say *chung-ching* 終經, “always have given the phoenixes lodging?” The answer lies in the knowledge of Tu Fu and every contemporary reader, that when the position of the tree seems precarious (11.13–14) and when there are insects in the trunk (1.21), then the birds that once lodged in the tree will desert it. Without this knowledge the line suggests only that the tree provides lodging; with a knowledge of the tradition, the line emphasizes that the phoenixes *still* come there, and by doing so, they show their continued confidence in the tree.

The last group of poems all come from the early ninth century. Tu Fu’s poetry had received little recognition in the decades immediately following his death, and these three poets—Chang Chi, Han Yü, and Po Chü-yi—were among the first to recognize his real importance. Han Yü, in particular, felt the massive shadow of Tu Fu over him, and time and again in his poetry Han Yü transformed and tried to outdo the poems of the master.

Our primary concern here is with Han Yü’s “Barren Tree” as an attempt to go heroically beyond the image of the tree left by Tu Fu. But Han Yü’s “Barren Tree” is also probably related to Chang Chi’s “Old Tree” and to Po Chü-yi’s “Barren Mulberry.” None of these poems can be dated, but I would like to offer a conjectural scenario to show how they might have responded to one another. I make claims neither of truth nor even probability for this sequence; I offer it merely as an interesting possibility in a situation where secure dating will be impossible.

The sequence is Han Yü's "The Wooden Hermit" (probably datable to 806), followed by Chang Chi's "Old Tree." Han Yü's "Barren Tree" will be in answer to Chang Chi's poem, and Po Chü-yi's "Barren Mulberry" will be a playful response to Han's "Barren Tree." The reasoning is as follows: from Lu Chao-lin on, and especially in Tu Fu, the topic of the barren tree had taken on strong *fu-ku* associations. Han Yü was very sensitive to generic propriety in the treatment of a topic, and he probably would not have written "Barren Tree" as a *lü-shih* unless he were responding to another *lü-shih*: that would be Chang Chi's poem.

Chang Chi's "Old Tree" can be seen as echoing Han Yü's "The Wooden Hermit," which itself draws from the tradition of the barren tree. Han's quatrain comments with gentle humor on the folly of mankind and the indifference of the object of their reverence. Chang Chi is either attempting to make the same point as Han Yü (and doing it poorly) or he is more obviously writing a satire on superstition. In his development of the theme, however, Chang draws more heavily on the tradition of poetry on the barren tree, and in particular he echoes a couplet from another of Tu Fu's poems on the topic, "Sick Cypress":

神明依正直，故老多再拜
Divinity dwells there for its uprightness,
And old men often do it reverence. (10676)

To Tu Fu the moral significance of the sick tree provides justification for the local cult: in Chang Chi's revision the same scene becomes a mockery of superstition.

Chang Chi's "Old Tree" is a poorly written poem and one that damages the figure of the barren tree. Han Yü's "Barren Tree" seems to echo Chang Chi's poem at every point, but it tries to redeem the value of the barren tree in the context of a purely social morality, rather than through religious awe. Like Chang Chi, Han Yü is trying to go beyond the holiness of Tu Fu's version of the tree, but he is trying to do so in some more worthy way. The main point of Han Yü's opposition to Tu Fu's barren trees is that Tu Fu's trees seem content to remain passively noble and pathetic. They have only the dignity of suffering: they do not act, nor act morally. The old cypress of Chu-ko Liang's temple may not refuse to be chopped down but it does not yearn for the axe either.

Han Yü endows his barren tree with a will, and the tree is determined to be of use through an act of will. This startling willfulness of the tree is also Han Yü's own willfulness toward the poetic tradition: the closing of "Barren Tree" is a violent act of the poet's intellect—it is "forced." The closing gesture does not develop naturally out of the condition described in the poem, but reacts instead against it. Tu Fu's tree is noble through its appeal to deep and ancient values; Han Yü's tree is noble by its heroic willfulness, its opposition to stasis, the "hollow trunk"/"void in the heart" of an inimical philosophy. Han Yü is consciously trying to go beyond Tu Fu: it is better that the timber/talent be given to a self-destructive, inferior use than that it lead a life without use. Tu Fu is more confident, the greater poet; Han Yü's poem is striving, both in subject and form, straining to surpass the master.

Finally, we may consider Po Chü-yi's "Barren Mulberry" as a playful rebuttal of Han Yü's poem. In this rebuttal we can see that something drastic has happened to the tradition of the barren tree: the great question of use and real value—the question which had dominated all previous treatments—has disappeared here. The fire had originally been only a minor element in the tradition, but it had been raised to a central position in Han Yü's "Barren Tree." Po Chü-yi accepts the centrality of the fire and adds another of fire's important associations, as an image of excessive cares. The moral seriousness of these barren trees/suffering poets becomes the very thing that burns them up—from within. Even if Po is not mocking Han Yü's poem specifically—and Po's use of the willful fire makes it seem that he is—Po is still mocking the barren tree tradition.

Even in this limited series of poems on the barren tree, we can see something of the range of uses of the literary past. A few areas should be singled out for special consideration. First, a poet may either use general conventions or he may respond to a specific earlier text. All literary conventions develop out of specific texts, but there is some point after repeated usage when the conventions detach themselves from individual works. A T'ang poet writing a parting poem or a poem on one of the common *yung-wu* topics will know the conventions of the topic independently of any specific examples. If in the second or third couplet of a parting poem a poet matches a line on wine with a line on song, he is not necessarily following one of the hundreds of earlier parting poems which use the same antithesis. By the time of Tu Fu the barren tree had gathered a body of true conventions which were largely independent of the famous earlier poems treating the topic. Thus in "The Barren Nan Tree" Tu Fu runs through the proper sequence of events to bring the tree from full flowering to ruin.

Once a topic develops general conventions, they will always be present in the reading of a poem at least on the level of the reader's expectations. The most radical freedom the poet has is only the freedom of negation: even if a poet manages to avoid all the conventions associated with a given topic—and this is exceedingly difficult—this independence will be exposed in reading as "avoiding the conventions." The poem is written and read in relationship to other poems of the same kind.

A poem may respond to specific earlier texts even while using a context of general convention. Because there were only a few major treatments of the topic by famous poets, the barren tree was never entirely independent of specific earlier texts.⁷ If a poet wanted to write on plum blossoms, he did not necessarily have in mind earlier poems on the subject, but when Han Yü writes of the barren tree, what the topic means cannot be separated from well-known poems by Yü Hsin, Lu Chao-lin, and Tu Fu: their works have defined the image.

A second and related aspect of the use of the literary past lies in the generative function of convention versus the poet's impulse to individuate his work. Conventions which grew up around themes, genres, subgenres, and styles played an important role in composition: they provided an immediate answer to "what to say next," and they gave an indication of how to say it. Describing the decline of the tree, the poet would naturally think of "dashing gales," "piercing waves," insects, and the fire. Each of these had particular phrasings associated with it and systems of variation. In the Wang Ling-jan poem we see the compositional rules of a subgenre operating in their most rigid form. Their complexity is an illusion: once the rules were mastered, the course of virtually the entire poem was mapped out for the poet. On formal social occasions a well-constructed poem could emerge with all the facility of a well-constructed sentence.

Serious poets with some sense of their own poetic identity sought to individuate themselves from the conventions as they sought to individuate themselves from their great predecessors. This can be accomplished in various ways. In "The Barren Nan Tree" Tu Fu frames the conventions in a new context that changes their meaning. In lines of Tu Fu's "Ballad of the Old Cypress" we can see a more direct negation of convention: the phoenixes have *not* deserted this tree; do *not* sigh with rancour. In the Lu Chao-lin *fu* and the Han Yü poem abrupt reversal is the means of liberating the poet from convention: a conventionally pathetic version of the tree is created, then changed radically in the closure.

⁷ However, as noted above, there were conventions about the topic which were independent of specific texts; these could be used in poems on barren trees or in poems in which the figure of the barren tree appeared incidentally.

A third aspect of the use of the past is the historicity of the poetic language: certain phrases, metaphors and allusions become linked to specific subgenres, themes, and periods, and these associations become part of their meaning. Whereas traditional commentary is concerned primarily with origins, the value of an image, a phrase, or an allusion is more deeply involved in the history of its usage. When Tu Fu uses the phrase "the life is gone from it" in "The Barren Nan Tree," he is not so much referring to the Yin Chung-wen anecdote as he is calling to the reader's mind the *literary* tradition of the barren tree, the essential elements of which he subsequently recapitulates. Another example might be the story of "riding the raft to the Milky Way," which enters the barren tree tradition through its metaphorical association of gaining favor at court. Quite independently of its anecdotal origins, the allusion was used commonly in court banquet poetry of the Early T'ang. When we find the allusion in the second of Tu Fu's "Autumn Meditations":

奉使虛隨八月槎

"On commission, in vain, I follow the eighth month raft. (11549)

we need to know the source of the allusion, but we need to know much more to understand its function. First, we must know its metaphorical implications of gaining favor at court; but on a more subtle level, the reader should hear the elegiac echo of the gracious world of court poetry, only one of many such echoes in "Autumn Meditations."

A tradition of memorization and oral recitation gave a Chinese poet a particularly intimate relationship with the works of his predecessors. And when a poet began his own composition, that relationship became dynamic. Poems did not exist in isolation: a sensitive reader must hear the various threads of the literary past which weave into a poem and are changed by it. But that past is not comprised of either the disembodied phrase of traditional commentary or of its modern successor, the footnote: it is a complex body of complete, interanimating texts.