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## The Self's Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography

So writers of ancient times trusted their persons to ink and the brush, let their thoughts be seen in their compositions; depending neither on a good historian nor on patronage of the powerful, their reputations were handed down to posterity on their own force.

*Ts'ao P'i (187-226), "On Literature"*<sup>1</sup>

The ancients tell us that there are three kinds of achievement by which a person may hope to endure: moral power, deeds, and words (立德, 立功, 立言).<sup>2</sup> The promise that these forms of achievement do endure contains no clue as to the pragmatic means of their preservation. The later-born Ts'ao P'i 曹丕 looks to precisely that question—to *how* a reputation may be conserved, not to the accomplishment that makes it worthy of survival. Three possibilities are raised: trust a historian; struggle for political power; or give your energies to writing. These means to immortality swerve in interesting ways from the ancient "three immortalities" (三不朽): "moral power" (德) passes unmentioned; office achieved by patronage takes the place of "deeds" (功); and Ts'ao P'i emphatically arrogates to a person's own capacity the hope of immortality through the word—the most trustworthy way to reach posterity.

Ts'ao P'i's relative evaluation of the means assumes a desire common to all three, the desire for a cultural immortality which,

<sup>1</sup> Ts'ao P'i 曹丕, "On Literature" ("Lun-wen" 論文), in the *Wen-hsüan* 文選, ed. Hsiao T'ung 蕭統 (501-531) (Taipei: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1960), p. 1128.

<sup>2</sup> *Tso chuan* 左傳, "Hsiang kung" 襄公 24, 1.

though it promises a less tangible futurity than techniques of refining and ingesting cinnabar, nevertheless admits a more sure and public validation of its efficacy. The intensity of the desire makes one wary of the means to accomplish it. Office and the fame that comes with state service are, at best, risky enterprises; and even the finest historians may neglect some complex and less obvious worthiness, may foolishly trust unreliable sources, may fail to account for the fullness of the self as the person commemorated would wish it to be known.

We wish to be remembered—not simply our names, which may be passed down to the dullest of descendants, but some sense of who we were. In a few generations the ancestral sacrifices will cease, and thereafter a literary text may be the most trustworthy posterity, ever mindful of its filial duties, always honoring the human who was its parent and author.<sup>3</sup>

The traditional biographer's responsibility to record the facts of a person's history is subordinate to a greater responsibility to transmit a moral truth about the subject—"what kind of person he was." One who undertakes to transmit such truths on his own behalf is the autobiographer. Thus autobiography is not an easily recognizable literary form, but an intention, and for the reader, the intuition or the presumption of such an intention. It was Ts'ao P'i's suggestion that a literary text may take the place of the historian's task to more surely transmit that sense of "what kind of person he was."

In the western tradition narrative is the center of biography and autobiography; it is the literary construction of a Life out of life's infinite detail. This narrative core of the autobiographical mode sets the autobiographer in a paradoxical and uncomfortable position, asking a summation that can be perfectly given only posthumously. The Augustinian tradition of confessional autobiography is one solution to the problem posed—the narration of a conversion after

<sup>3</sup>The theme of poem as progeny is an interesting and minor stream in the tradition, explicit (obsessively so) only in the poetry of Meng Chiao, none of whose male children reached maturity. It is closely related to the idea of poem as *somaton*, "little body," common in western literary theory as well as in Chinese. A poem has a complete physiology with "bones," "veins," "ch'i," "head," and "tail," etc.

which there is life but no change, a long epilogue of beatific reflection whose constancy is a foretaste of an eternal constancy to come. Out of the Augustinian tradition, western narrative autobiography becomes possible: it recounts the essential changes of life between youth and maturity, a *Bildung* after which human nature grows steady. But such autobiography can have no place in the Chinese tradition: one may “set one’s mind on study at fifteen and be established at thirty,” but all the most interesting stages of sagely development occur from the age of forty on.<sup>4</sup> Given this Confucian *Bildung* of late-flowering, it is hard to anticipate a final stasis from which to look back and write one’s Life as a whole.

In traditional Chinese literature, narrative, in itself, plays a less important role in the presentation of a human life. The life-narrative is often no more than a sequence of mere contingencies, mere happenings, through which a person has an opportunity to show himself. The perfect form of this non-narrative autobiography may be the individual’s “collected works” (*pieh-chi* 別集), which, from the early ninth century on, increasingly came to be edited by the authors themselves, works arranged in chronological order (often within a generic framework), contextualized by prefaces and notes. Here editorial exclusions, arrangement, and juxtapositions created a species of interior history, not narrating a life story, but letting a life story unfold in the author’s sequence of responses. In more recent times editors have refined this still further in the late classical (and modern) form of a collection, with prose biographies and circumstantial documents by others (e.g., eulogies, letters, answering poems), with multiple prefaces, perhaps with a *nien-p’u* 年譜 (chronology), and interpretive commentary mixed with notes on the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of a particular text. In the more purely autobiographical domain of constructing a collection, there are *pieh-chi* like that of Yang Wan-li 楊萬里, divided into numerous subcollections, each with a preface announcing the author’s external circumstances and interior disposition at that stage of his life. In this we find the initial movement

<sup>4</sup> *Hung-lou-meng* 紅樓夢 or *Dream of the Red Chamber* would seem to be an interesting exception, but in its autobiographical dimensions it is less a true *Bildung* than a case in which the world changes around the protagonist.

toward a documentary *Bildung*, tracing the formation and development of a poet.

Let us leave aside the combinatory, complete form and look to the autobiographical document of which a *pieh-chi* is made—the literary text, especially the poem. The poem (here only *shih* 詩) was a privileged document of inner life, a presentation of self that potentially carried strong autobiographical dimensions. By its very definition, *shih* was the stuff of inner life, the person's *chih* 志, "intent," and *ch'ing* 情, "emotions" or "subjective disposition." Here, rather than in narrative, was the center of interest for traditional theorists—not how a person changed over time, but how a person could be known at all or make himself known.

Abraham Cowley wrote, "It is a hard and nice subject for a man to write of himself, it grates his own heart to say anything of disparagement, and the reader's ears to hear anything of praise from him."<sup>5</sup> The autobiographer's powers are the inverse of the powers claimed by the biographer. The biographer's strength and weakness is his distance from his subject; proximity is the weakness and strength of the autobiographer. The autobiographer may hope to emulate the biographer's distance by the ruthlessness of the confessional mode or by reflection on a past self (impossible in the immediacy of the *shih*, which, even when telling of the poet's past, focuses on the present of the remembering self rather than on the self remembered). The autobiographer strives to establish such distances against the suspicion of self-interest that surrounds the act of autobiography. Authenticity must be autobiography's first concern.

A second and related problem attends all autobiographical discourse: what it means to "know oneself." To "know oneself" is to know oneself as other, a disjunction between the knower and the known which calls into question, even as it proclaims, the autobiographer's unique intimacy with his subject. The act of autobiography irrevocably divides and subdivides the assumed unity of the self. And if the Chinese tradition lacks the promise of the possibility of self-knowledge, assumed in the Delphic *gnothi seauton*, it still

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Cowley, "Several Discourses by Way of Essays, in Verse and Prose," in *The Works of Mr. Abraham Cowley* (9th ed., London: J. Tonson, 1700).

exhorts a more indeterminate “self examination,” *tzu-hsing* 自省, which assumes that something of the self and its motives are accessible through conscious effort.

The most common poetic promise of authenticity and defense against the division of the self is the assertion of spontaneity. Such is the Confucian entelechy of learning in the sage—not to “know the good” or “do the good,” but instinctively to “be good”—“at seventy I followed what my heart desired without transgressing.”<sup>6</sup>

Considering poetic autobiography in its Chinese context, we must attend to the Chinese formulations of the nature and problems of autobiography: how it is possible to speak of the self without falsifying it; how the structure of the self changes under such discourse; how identity is won out of categorical role. In the past I have emphasized the assumed involuntarism of the *shih*, that an organic bond is posited between inner life and exterior poem.<sup>7</sup> Here I would like to consider the dangers that beset such an assumption—elements of motivated and voluntary self-presentation in which the poet, aware that he will be known through the poem, struggles to be authentic or to authenticate his self-presentation.

## A Double Self

Let us say that poetic autobiography begins in apology, in the need to “explain oneself.” Such a need arises only under certain conditions: the poet feels that the self and its motives are more interesting, more complicated, or simply different from what they appear to be; he is pained at the discrepancy, seeks to rectify it, show what is truer and more worthy. Poetic autobiography arises from the fear of being misprized. The human ceases to be an innocent unity of nature and action; he is now a doubleness, an outward appearance concealing, dimming, or distorting some true and hidden nature.

<sup>6</sup> *Lun-yü* 論語 or *The Analects*, II, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: An Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

Suppose, for example, we were to observe some Chin 晉 dynasty (265–419) farmer at his task and believe, according to the biases of the age, that this was some mere peasant dullness, some routine and unreflective performance of a primordial labor whose sole purpose was to sustain his uninteresting life. The farmer turns to us and explains that, in fact, his is the natural human condition, that all human contentment depends on living a life like his. He continues: for a while he had been forced to serve as an official, but he has managed to escape that odious bondage and return to these tasks that are spiritually less fettering. He shows us his poems. We are astounded. The man is not at all what he seemed.

But when we reflect further on our encounter with this eloquent peasant, we wonder why he felt the need to explain himself to us by word and poem, why he was not content to let himself be seen as “mere peasant.” When Confucius and Tzu-lu encountered a pair of philosophical plowmen and “asked about the ford,” the plowmen gave both master and disciple wise advice: they did not, like this farmer-poet, try to explain their “true nature” or seek to justify why they did what they did.<sup>8</sup>

When working at humdrum office tasks, this Chin farmer felt a deep conflict between his nature and the role he was playing: he gave up his post and “returned to his fields and gardens.” But once he admitted the possibility of a “true nature,” distinct from his appearance through outer acts, the unity of the self was not so easy to restore. A doubleness now haunts his life and his poems: nature and behavior, the inner and outer man, no longer *are* a unity; they must actively be brought together, and their unity must be actively asserted, a bond forged by the force of will. Our farmer is T’ao Ch’ien 陶潛 (365–427), who turns out to be the greatest of the pre-T’ang poets. It is not that T’ao Ch’ien simply “is” a Chin farmer; he *wants* to be a Chin farmer. Yet one of the characteristics of a true Chin farmer may be to inhabit his role without reflection, choice, or desire. The capacity to reflect on one’s nature—at first necessary to articulate T’ao’s discomfort in his role as official—endures in this voluntary peasant and becomes the autobiographical impulse, the continuous exposition of “who I *really* am,” “what I *really* am like.” T’ao Ch’ien is an immensely attractive figure, but what

<sup>8</sup> *Lun-yü*, XVIII, 6.

attracts us may be a complex desire for simplicity rather than simplicity itself.

We are perplexed at this simplicity that is not so simple. We look at those poems again:

<p><i>Returning to Dwell in My Fields and Gardens</i> (I)</p> <p>When young, nothing in me chimed with the common:</p> <p>In its roots, my nature loved mountains and hills.</p> <p>I erred, fell into the world's net of dust In all for some thirty years.</p> <p>The captive bird yearns for its former groves; A fish in a pond broods on depths it once knew.</p> <p>I clear away undergrowth at the edge of the southern wilds, Preserve my simplicity, return to my gardens and fields.</p> <p>My holding is only ten acres or so With a thatch cottage of just a few rooms.<sup>9</sup> Willow and elm shade my back eaves; Peach and plum are ranged before my hall. Dim in my eyes are distant villages; Hamlets from which the smoke winds upward.</p> <p>Dogs bark deep in the lanes; A cock crows in the tip of a mulberry. My door and yard have no mixture of dust; Empty chambers give ample leisure Long I was caught in a cage— Now again I revert to Nature.<sup>10</sup></p>	<p>歸園田居 少無適俗韻 性本愛邱山 誤落塵網中 一去三十年 羈鳥戀舊林 池魚思故淵 開荒南野際 守拙歸園田 方宅十餘畝 草屋八九間 榆柳蔭後簷 桃李羅堂前 曖曖遠人村 依依墟里煙 狗吠深巷中 鷄鳴桑樹顛 戶庭無塵雜 虛室有餘閒 久在樊籠裏 復得返自然</p>
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When we saw this man “clearing away undergrowth” by the

<sup>9</sup> *Mu* 畝, translated as “acre,” is in fact considerably less than an acre; T'ao's holdings are thus more modest than the translation suggests. *Chien* 間 is a square measure of house space; the smallness of T'ao's “eight or nine *chien*” has been Englished as a few rooms.

<sup>10</sup> T'ao Ch'ien 陶潛, *T'ao Yüan-ming chi* 陶淵明集 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1982), pp. 40-41.

fields, we took him to be a farmer like all others; and if we may not think of a farmer as *su* 俗, "common," "uncouth," whom can we think of as *su*? But in the very first line of his poem, this farmer informs us that he has always had an instinctive antipathy to the "common"—suddenly we realize, to our surprise, that this would-be peasant is not defining himself in relation to farmers, but in relation to us, the people who read poetry! It is we who are being called *su*, "common" on account of the very learning, ambitions, refinement (*ya* 雅), and occupations which we had always believed to be eminently un-*su*, "un-common."<sup>11</sup>

In the second line he expands his rejection of us and our world: his being "un-common" comes from an unalterable disposition of his nature that loves "mountains and hills"—setting himself apart from our "common" fondness for wealth, honor, and position. We are still secretly convinced (though we will never again hazard our conviction on a further inquiry) that the average farmer would, like us, prefer wealth, honor, and position. Then, as if to prove that his revulsion at our values is no rustic "sour grapes," he tells the story of a public career and flight from it, as if from a cage, back to this hard and satisfying labor of clearing farmland. Indeed, he evokes such a picture of georgic bliss that we can—just for a moment—stand with him and see why he so despises our life. We were in error: he is not "a farmer:" he is T'ao Ch'ien being himself, a condition that happens to involve being a farmer.

T'ao Ch'ien, the first great poetic autobiographer, teaches us much about autobiography: the very act of "explaining oneself" is predicated on a doubleness—a true self and a surface role.<sup>12</sup> The

<sup>11</sup> *Su* 俗 originally meant something like "common usage," "custom," "having to do with the lowborn populace." Under the force of usages such as in this poem (including usages by T'ao's predecessors) and with the idealization of the peasantry, *su* came to describe a "worldliness" or "vulgarity" manifest in the upper classes. My whimsical Chin persona, the sophisticated office-holder who meets T'ao Ch'ien in the fields, is being shocked at the altered significance of the term in T'ao's poem.

<sup>12</sup> Many might claim the distinction of being the first poetic biographer for the fourth century B.C. poet Ch'ü Yüan 屈原. There are serious questions about the relation between the historical figure and the poems attached to his name. But, beyond the question of attribution, an autobiographical interpretation of Ch'ü Yüan's work depends on a complex exegetical reconciliation between the text and a biography known from external sources. T'ao Ch'ien is the true autobiographer, both mythographer and exegete, of his own life.



surface role may turn out to be a lie (T'ao as we might have seen him some years before, performing the routine functions of a magistrate). More remarkably, the surface role may be genuine, but still not sufficient to understand the true self (the farmer who turned out not to be merely "a farmer," but rather T'ao Ch'ien being himself). Doubleness is inevitable: the surface role must be distinct, to be chosen or rejected by the "true self." And in that very act of distinguishing self from role, we have the first assertion of the uniqueness of the self: it must involve a willful individuation from some category in which others find themselves—farmers and readers of poetry. We made a mistake: we thought this was a farmer, and it turned out to be T'ao Ch'ien. For us to understand the distinction, T'ao Ch'ien had to explain himself; and, as he did so, we discovered that he was speaking to us, articulating his nature not in relation to farmers, but in relation to our kind.

T'ao Ch'ien's poetry constantly tells us of the unity of self and role, but it does not embody such unity: it betrays its doubleness, a self-consciously assumed role preceded by judgment and choices made by a "true nature." Both we and the poet learn to distrust surfaces; we now require some assurance that what emerges on the surface, as in a poem, is indeed "true nature." And we come to wonder how inner and outer can ever be brought together again.

## Secret Motives

There is an innocent poetry, addressed to one's own pleasure and to the pleasure of one's friends. In the Chin such poetry seems supremely sophisticated, filled with allusions, ornament, gracious sentiments; indeed, this poetry revels in its sophistication, giving no thought to the possibility that later readers might distrust it for its artfulness (or perhaps, on a deeper level, be bored with its innocence). But once the poet becomes the poet-autobiographer, that innocent sophistication disappears: now the poet must always look cautiously ahead to how he will appear in his poems. His greatest fear is that others, reading his work, will catch a whiff of secret motives. If the outer poem, like the outer role, is a voluntary, motivated construct, then there is always the possibility of manipulation and distortion. As a youth T'ao Ch'ien, our Chin

farmer, fooled others and himself into believing he was suited for public office; just now we were deceived in thinking he was simply a farmer. All we know about him is what we perceive on the outside, what he tells us and shows us about his inner nature. We must wonder if he is telling the truth about himself now and, more seriously, if he does or can know such a truth.

The poet-autobiographer must offer a defense against the suspicions he has raised. He tells us that these poems are spontaneous, offhand, casual, trivial productions of so little importance to the poet that the reader need have no suspicions of secret motives. But we have grown wary: such assertions of casualness and unconcern seem to be a sure mark of a fall from innocent sophistication. Such assertions are meta-apology and arise from the anxiety that the text might seem to be the product of hidden motives. The first meta-apologist, casually inserting a note to remind us of the offhand nature of his compositions, turns out to be the first great autobiographical apologist, endlessly justifying to us his values and his acts:

I live at ease and with few delights. Moreover, as nights have been growing longer recently, I happen to have some fine wine. Not an evening passes but I drink, finish it all by myself, my eyes watching my shadow. All at once I'll find myself drunk, and in this condition jot down a few lines for my own amusement. I have accumulated a great deal of paper with writing on it, with no order at all in the language. So I happened to have an old friend copy them out for his pleasure.<sup>13</sup>

We wondered about that when we read his poems—how we happened to find them all written neatly out before us—strange, coming from a person who cares so little for us. In this preface to “Drinking Wine” 飲酒, T'ao Ch'ien documents the circumstances of composition and preparation of a manuscript of poems; he notes the stages of the process more fully than any of his contemporaries, taking care to emphasize the dominance of whim and accident at every stage of the complicated procedure. We might concede that the natural, spontaneous human could compose poems for his own

<sup>13</sup> T'ao Ch'ien, *T'ao Yüan-ming chi*, pp. 86–87.

amusement, but to copy them out and circulate them smells of “fishing for fame in the world”; hence we have an *amicus ex machina* to perform this disreputable task. The preface is necessary: T’ao cannot let these poems go without assuring us that their “publication” is none of his doing; he fears that others might believe that *he* had them circulated. He wants no one to suspect, even for a moment, that he knew what he was doing or cared in the “Drinking Wine” poems: all is drunkenness, accident, whim—all the proofs of spontaneity, which later poets were to wear as talismans against the suspicion that a poet reveals himself not as he is, but as he wishes himself to be seen. This is not a poet who simply drinks; this is a poet who drinks and watches his own shadow, observing himself, his solitude, and his movements as he drinks.

It should be said, once and for all, that T’ao Ch’ien is not the naive and straightforward poet he claims to be. T’ao is the patron-ancestor of hundreds of T’ang, Sung, and late classical poets—obsessively self-conscious, defensive about his values and acts, trying desperately to win a naiveté out of a conflict of inner values. It was for these complications that later ages loved him. T’ao Ch’ien is *not* a poet of “fields and gardens” 田園 (in contrast to Hsieh Ling-yün [385–433], who *is* a poet of “landscapes” 山水); T’ao’s “fields and gardens” are no more than a setting in which this image of the naive self can be at rest. The outer world falls away; the self becomes the topic of the poem; self-knowledge and authenticity become a problem. These complications accompany T’ao’s status as the first great autobiographer, in his prose as well as in his poetry—the “Return” 歸去來辭,<sup>14</sup> the “Biography of Five Willows” 五柳先生傳,<sup>15</sup> and even in “An Elegy for Myself” 自祭文.<sup>16</sup>

Coming to T’ao Ch’ien’s poetry from the work of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, we notice the number of non-social occasional poems in his collection; i.e., poems that grow out of and address particular life circumstances, but which are not addressed to anyone (though T’ao did write many social occasional

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159–163.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175–176.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196–199.

poems). Such non-social occasional poems include the majority of T'ao's most famous works: "Returning To Dwell in My Fields and Gardens," "Moving" 移居,<sup>17</sup> "Drinking Wine," "Giving Up Wine" 止酒,<sup>18</sup> "Begging" 乞食.<sup>19</sup> We must ask to whom and for whom such poems were written. The English term for readership, "audience," betrays its origins in drama; it is that large, faceless crowd of onlookers which remains the secret object of even western lyric poetry's address. But this assumption of a large, anonymous readership is the accident of a particular history; it cannot be taken for granted as necessary and inevitable for all poetry. A similar (though still distinct) notion of "audience" does develop in Chinese poetry, not out of the quality of address necessary in drama, but out of the autobiographical mode.

The nature of a poetic voice and the nature of its address to others are largely a function of genre. T'ao Ch'ien, the poet-autobiographer, perfected a new genre, apparent in his titles: he speaks of himself, as a particular historical being, to no one in particular and hence to anyone at any time. Here is the address to futurity implicit in the Ts'ao P'i passage; and this genre, this new kind of title, was taken up extensively by T'ao's admirers among T'ang and later poets.

We must set T'ao Ch'ien's poetry in its contemporary generic context. In the fourth and early fifth centuries there were (fictional) genres with impersonal voices—*yu-hsien shih* 遊仙詩 (poems on immortals), *yung-wu* 詠物 (poems on things, often allegorical in this period), and some *yüeh-fu* 樂府. (There was another group of genres which provide the close antecedents of T'ao Ch'ien's new voice, genres in which the poet spoke intensely of himself, but with a generalized lyric "I," an "I" that links the self with common human experience: in this grouping fall *yung-huai* 詠懷 and "unclassified poems" 雜詩. Such poems, by their titles and in their texts, tend to avoid reference to specific site and occasion. T'ao Ch'ien's poems in this mode are quite distinct from his non-social

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

occasional poems. The third group of contemporary genres are the occasional genres. When a poet spoke of himself as a particular historical being, at a particular location and particular time—his specific experiences, responses to occasion, and attitudes—then he was usually addressing someone in particular, someone he knew.

In his non-social occasional poems T'ao Ch'ien speaks of himself in detail to everyone and to no one in particular. In later poetry we become accustomed to such a mode of address, but in the Chin we must marvel at this voice. Why a person would speak thus, speak to no one, requires some explanation: T'ao offers such an explanation in the preface to "Drinking Wine"—"I just happened to scribble these poems out, dear reader; don't believe I was writing them for you." Yet as he excuses himself in the preface, he lets us know that he knows these poems are coming to us, the nameless, future readers of poetry of other places and other times.

It is to such a vast future audience that the poet-autobiographer must speak: he offers them interior history, just as the common historian offers them outer history. The poet-autobiographer is not merely addressing Lord So-and-So, showing his virtues in hopes of a position (though later poets may, for the sake of economy, address Lord So-and-So and eternity simultaneously). His first address to us must convince us that he does not want to convince us of anything, assure us there is no motive in his writing: he speaks to us, telling us he has no intention of speaking to us at all.

T'ao Ch'ien's poetry is filled with contradictions, the contradictions that come from a sophisticated, self-conscious man who yearns to be unsophisticated and unself-conscious. Our pleasure in his poetry is equally contradictory: *his* naiveté we can love, though we would probably be bored by a truly unsophisticated and unself-conscious poet. Whether we acknowledge it or not, our pleasure in T'ao Ch'ien lies in the uncomfortable complexity of the person.

*Returning to Dwell in My Fields and Gardens* (II)

In the wilderness, few human affairs;  
To poor lanes wheels and bridles rarely  
come.

野外罕人事  
窮巷寡輪鞅  
白日掩荆扉

I close my wicker gate in broad daylight—

No worldly fantasies in my empty chambers.	虛室絕塵想
Now and again at the bends of the village	時復墟曲中
Pushing back brush we come and go;	披草共來往
And when we meet, our talk is not mixed	相見無雜言
With anything but how tall hemp and	但道桑麻長
mulberry grow.	桑麻日已長
Daily the mulberry and hemp grow taller;	我土日已廣
Daily my lands grow more broad.	常恐霜霰至
Yet always I fear that the frosts will come,	零落同草莽
That there will be ruin, as with the grass and	
weeds. <sup>20</sup>	

He would put us to shame for our worldliness, but we (the readers of poetry to whom he speaks) should not let our shame lull us into ignoring the rich complexity in his vision of simplicity. “In the wilderness, few human affairs”—the line here is no more than the mark of an attitude and a relation: it might be literally true for a misanthropic hermit, but it is *not* literally true for T’ao Ch’ien. The fields he tends and so proudly extends are not *yeh* 野, “wilderness,” or in T’ao’s phrasing, *yeh-wai* 野外, “beyond [in] the wilderness,” “deep in wilderness,” often suggesting an immortal world.<sup>21</sup> *Yeh-wai* is a special structure of space—a cultivated, civilized world, beyond which is wilderness, and beyond that, something otherworldly, at the farthest extreme from human civilization. In such a remote place there would, of course, be “few human affairs” 罕人事, the acts of civilization and its “problems” (also *jen-shih* 人事). But as we read the poem, we find it is filled with what we might ordinarily have called *jen-shih*, “human affairs and problems”—this agrarian society where men come and go from their labors, talking only of vital concerns, the success of crops, extending fields into the wilderness, worry about an early frost. We must suppose that T’ao does not count these as “human affairs/problems”; rather “human affairs/problems” refer us to a political domain quite distinct from this agrarian society. Implicitly

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>21</sup> It would be tempting to take *yeh-wai*, “beyond the wilderness,” as “at the edge of wilderness”; i.e., where clearing land occurs. But this interpretation would be untrue to the common use of the phrase and parallel phrases as “beyond this world.”

T'ao is addressing readers to whom "human affairs/problems" mean their own, readers from the civilized domain at the opposite extreme from *yeh-wai*.

Our grand carriages cannot penetrate the narrow lanes of his village; he tells us he speaks only to villagers and only about crops. We, the snubbed readers, are sincerely uninterested in the state of T'ao's crops or of the crops of his fellow villagers; but we find that we *are* interested in someone who tells us, in our written poetic language, that *he* is interested only in his crops. Though rejected, we note with some approval that it is only our affairs that merit the characterization "human," as opposed to farmers' problems, presumably not "human." We know that T'ao has given us simply another token of his rejection of our world, like the aloofness of the misanthropic recluse in the first line; but we suspect that T'ao's fellow villagers would not feel pleased to be so lightly excluded from the species. We know that in poetry the terms for an immortal's world, the terms for the world of the solitary recluse, and the terms for a farmer's world can be used *interchangeably*; such easy interchanges occur only when each of these worlds has no subsistence in its own right, but is only a negation of the public, political world, the world of the people who read poetry. T'ao Ch'ien's poetry really cares little for farmers: it speaks to and for our flurried world of carriage-riders and poetry readers.

The last lines speak of a fear of early frost, that his crops will be ruined. But the line is phrased with deliberate ambiguity to encompass anxiety about the poet's own mortality, that he may fall to earth like "common plants" and ordinary mortals. Against just such an anxiety about our mortality, Ts'ao P'i enjoined us to "trust our persons to ink and the brush," to write poems that will perpetuate our identity and memory of us. To write poems is to communicate, *t'ung* 通, one's nature to others, to those who read poetry and cherish the memory of poets. But this poem communicates only blockages and closings, *se* 塞, a world closed off to the very people to whom a poem tries to speak. His lane is too narrow, his gate is closed, he will not speak to us; he tells us this again and again. And he passionately desires that we recognize and always remember the calm dispassion of his mind, that he has no concern for us at all. He has nothing to say to our kind.

## Roles and Sages

The vision of the self which the poet wishes to present is his "role"; and yet the self which the poet-autobiographer actually reveals to us is often a much more contradictory and unsteady being. Traditional commentary tends to honor the desires of poets and takes note only of the uncomplicated surfaces. But still we suspect that the true allure of the autobiographical text may lie in the complications which agitate the surface. It may not be T'ao Ch'ien, the self-satisfied farmer-recluse, that we love, but another T'ao Ch'ien, painfully self-conscious, unsure of who he is, warring against the inner claims of his own class to win for himself satisfaction in being the farmer-recluse. Our affection for Wang Wei may not look to his dispassionate calm, but to some fierce and active mastery of self, a passionate austerity. It may not be expansive wildness that engages us in Li Po's poetry, but a frenzy of posing—sometimes aggressively, sometimes playfully—in which his rich imagination is harnessed and whipped on by some darker need.

The roles which such poets play, the roles in which such poets would have themselves seen by others, are not the mere typology of personality, a hollow form of definition received from the community, but a particular confluence of innate disposition and desire. The term "role" is the unfortunate legacy of a poetics (and following the poetics, a psychology and sociology) which is grounded in drama; and thus "role" assumes an absolute disjunction between itself and "true nature." Unlike the doubleness we spoke of earlier, this lineage of the concept of role assumes the complete separation of person from role (allowing relations of affinity, mutual influence, etc.). Out of Greek drama, the enactment of a "role" often involves the use of a "mask," through which (as Oscar Wilde says) the truth may be told, but which purposefully conceals the being who is telling the truth. We use the term "role" in a different sense here: it is not independent of the self, but an organic dimension of it; role is desire, the surface of the self as it wishes to be known; role is the entelechy of a process of self-definition. Thus we see T'ao, the farmer-recluse, *not* as the complete definition of T'ao Ch'ien and *not* as a false mask: it is the T'ao Ch'ien that he himself would wish to be.



Some embodiments of role are grander than others, and it may be that such grandeur is a function of the complexity and intensity of desire to "become" the role. But desire always reveals some lack, some dissatisfaction and unsureness which are visible in direct proportion to the intensity of the desire: "when things do not achieve their equilibrium, they sing out" 物不得其平則鳴.<sup>22</sup> When such desire is strongly imprinted in the enactment of the role—as in T'ao Ch'ien's constant need to say to us that he has nothing to say to our kind—then the enactment of the role has an allure and cutting edge which less passionate inhabitants of a role can never achieve. Ch'ien Ch'i and a dozen other poets sought a role similar to that of the High Tang poet Wang Wei 王維 of the second half of the eighth century; but the genius that distinguishes Wang Wei's work may be the fierceness of his desire to be such a person—a peculiar violence against self that refuses to permit the common human response. The genius in Wang Wei's poetry is not a distinction of craft or even of art, but of a powerful and complicated human identity. This is heresy in western literary theory; it need not be heresy here.

A poet inscribes his identity in a poem just as all humans inscribe identity in their lives. This identity is role surrounded by rich echoes of complication, contradiction, and desire, echoes which always remind us that the self is more than its role. When those echoes are loud, we are reminded of the indeterminacy of human nature; we intuit layers upon layers of hiddenness; we wonder what a particular person's nature really is. A grand role like T'ao Ch'ien's recalls its negations; and, in doing so, it transcends mere role to enact the relations between humans and roles. We read not of a farmer-recluse named T'ao Ch'ien, but of T'ao Ch'ien, presenting himself as farmer-recluse, with all the complications that attend such an act. Apart from his role(s), a human is plastic, indeterminate, a mere history of accidents, occasions, and changes, unknowable either to self or to others; a role is determinate and communicable, a form through which the indeterminate self can be known.

<sup>22</sup>Han Yü 韓愈, "Preface on Sending Off Meng Chiao" 送孟東野序, in *Han Ch'ang-li chi* 韓昌黎集 (rpt. Hong Kong: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1964), *chüan* 19, p. 7.

And the greatest poets enact the relations between the two—between self and role—the process by which the two seek perfect correspondence.

The obsession with authenticity, the vision of Confucius at seventy, grows from the hope of some consummate union of self and role: such a condition is called “sagehood” (in its Mencian version, the sage being the only role in which the innate goodness of the human can be fulfilled). In his unity of being, the sage sees through the surface roles of others: he sees the complications, the hidden motives, all tensions between surfaces and the inner self. “The Master said, ‘Look to *how* it is; observe from what it comes; examine in what he finds rest. How can a person remain hidden, how can he remain hidden?!’”<sup>23</sup> We are enjoined to scrutinize not only the quality of act and behavior, but also their motives and, beyond that, the kind of condition in which the person is “at rest.” The sage sees through surfaces to the true nature of the creature.

Exercising the wise vision of the sage, virtue may be discovered as well as evil: we may honor the person no longer hidden, or we may condemn him. But if there is a disjunction between the inner person and the role, between tone of voice and statement, then no matter how great the virtue we discover, the person is no sage. At seventy Confucius’ acts and his heart’s desires were the same: he *is* the sage. But we have “seen through” T’ao Ch’ien, and, however much we honor this person and his desires, we recognize an anxiety and unsureness that cannot belong to the sage.

Then suppose we found a poet who, writing of himself, confidently exposes the tension between person and role—someone who does not merely present his desired vision of the self, but, with the sharp eyes of the sage, sees through it. On one level such a person would be the quotidian human with ordinary hopes and illusions—perhaps poetically more interesting than the sage, but less grand. On another level such a person would *be* the sage, seeing through a role to its secret motives and desires, revealing a person (who happens to be himself) as other than that person might wish himself to be seen. It is, admittedly, a paradoxical stance, but the governing voice has the honesty and clear assurance of the sage. We

<sup>23</sup> *Lun-yü*, II, 10.

might look for such a voice in the work of “the sage of poetry” 詩聖, Tu Fu 杜甫 (712–770).

*Empty Purse*

Azure cypress, bitter but still to be eaten;  
Morning's rose clouds can be my morning  
meal.

People of the age have all sown recklessly,  
And my way finds itself among hardships.  
No cooking fire; the well, frozen at dawn;  
No greatcoat for covers; my bed, cold at  
night.

Yet I fear the embarrassment of an empty  
purse

And leave there one coin, watched over,  
to be seen.<sup>24</sup>

空囊

翠柏苦猶食  
晨霞朝可餐  
世人共鹵莽  
吾道屬艱難  
不爨井晨凍  
無衣牀夜寒  
空囊恐羞澀  
留得一錢看

“The Master said, ‘Look to *how* it is; observe from what it comes; examine in what he finds rest. How can a person remain hidden, how can he remain hidden?’” “Look to *how* it is”—in the title he implies an untruth, that his purse is empty, but he tells us the truth in the end. The untruth is not a great lie—it is a figurative truth, a purse not empty but virtually empty. He could have, without guilt, left this merely figurative truth standing; and even if he felt uncomfortable with its literal untruth, he knows that we, the readers of the poem, would never have known the untruth unless he confessed it to us. Yet others, seeing the weight in his purse, would never have known that this coin was not ready cash, only pride—this too he confesses.

Observe from what it comes—he tells us a literal untruth not to deceive us, but so that we will not be deceived as others are deceived, misunderstanding the coin in his purse. Then he tells us the literal truth because he cannot bear to leave us with a partial truth—he exposes his acts and motives to us. He exposes the motive for his deceptive coin—the fear of embarrassment. Yet in exposing the motive, he reveals that he is not so fearful of embarrassment after all.

<sup>24</sup> Ch'iu Chao-ao 仇兆鰲, *Tu-shih hsiang-chu* 杜詩詳注, 5 vols. (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1979), vol. 2, *chüan* 8, pp. 620–621.

Examine in what he rests—we see much in which Tu Fu finds no rest. Cypress cone and roseate clouds are the foods of immortals, foods of purity and otherworldliness, and they are to be Tu Fu's food; they are exposed, the bitter and insubstantial food of hungry necessity. He can find no contentment in them, nor can he pretend to contentment. In hardship, hunger, and cold there is no physical rest. Yet he could purchase a brief respite if he spent that single coin of pride: he keeps the coin, and we learn that he finds greater comfort in avoiding the shame of poverty than in some minor alleviation of his condition. We approve. But he does not simply point to his coin and tell us he is not destitute; he confesses he has it and why he keeps it. And we look beyond "finding rest" in the avoidance of shame to a still more basic "rest" in telling the truth about oneself, making the inner person and the outer person of the poem the same.

There is a wondrous complexity of the human in Tu Fu's poetry: strangely, an honest and authentic voice emerges out of a double untruth—an untruth in telling us his purse was empty and an untruth in telling others his purse is not empty. Tu Fu is the sage-autobiographer, penetrating all the deceptive surface roles that belong to his unsagely, merely human self. "How can a person remain hidden, how can he remain hidden?!"

The voice is not that of the accomplished sage; it is the voice of the fallible human becoming sage, driven by a restless honesty and fidelity to life's circumstances. Yet this movement from ordinary human toward sage is all the more powerful because it is not the perfect transparency of the sage, but the self being laid bare, breaking through those illusions and poses that would comfort lesser men.

He begins with an "Empty Purse": he plans to tell us of his destitution. Yet he begins not with a statement of want but of possession—having cypress cones and rose clouds to eat. These are foods of immortals, chosen for their purity by those who would live forever; in Tu Fu's poem they threaten death by starvation. He boasts of having these, but with an easy irony that exposes his boast as hollow—a provision that is no provision, just like an empty purse that is not empty.

He blames his destitution on the age—"reckless sowing," *lu-*

*mang* 鹵莽, a dead metaphor for careless action, a metaphor that is made alive again in Tu Fu's hunger.<sup>25</sup> Bad husbandry and bad government are blamed on the "people of the age" 世人, also mere "mortals" in opposition to the sort of being who dines on cypress cones and rose clouds. He, destitute gourmand of immortal fare, claims distinction from worldlings, only to admit later that he keeps his coin of pride for the sake of *their* good opinion.

In the third couplet he confesses his destitution, says straightforwardly what he had said in the first couplet through the negations of irony; he confesses his utter destitution only to unconfess it in the final couplet. And he confesses his destitution only to admit that there is something worse than that destitution—shame. In the end all is revealed, and in his honesty beyond honor there is an unmistakable humor, a distance from which he laughs at himself. It is Tu Fu's genius—perhaps the genius of the sage—to be both sincere and wry, to both inhabit and indulgently observe the foolishness of the human creature.

(There is another, less profound, kind of poetic autobiographer, the autobiographer of his own deeds. Such an autobiographer never needs to wonder who or what he is because he lives through his deeds; they are sufficient excuse for the self, and the self is sanctioned to disappear into the deeds. Such a person endures as a mere instrumentality—that by which certain important things were done. The great poetic autobiographers of China are rarely of this sort; but even in China there seems to be some law of proportion in this, that the fewer one's deeds on behalf of the civilization, the more one must enquire whether there might be some worth in the self that transcends acts and can exist without them. Tu Fu has accomplished nothing, or, more important, feels that he has accomplished nothing. And if he seeks to tell us of himself, if he would

<sup>25</sup> *Lu-mang* 鹵莽 is, in fact, a compound simply meaning "careless." However, a famous usage in the *Chuang Tzu* 莊子 (*Chuang Tzu yin-te* 莊子引得, 71/25/38-39) was erroneously explained by an early commentator, Ssu-ma Piao 司馬彪, as "plowing shallow and sowing sparsely" 淺耕稀種, with careless husbandry used as a metaphor for careless government. The implications of careless government are primary in Tu Fu's poem (though intended critically rather than positively as in the *Chuang Tzu*); but the implication of careless husbandry seems to be evoked in the paradigm of starvation, established in the first lines.

claim that his life has interest and value to the later-born, then it must be for what he *is*, rather than for what he has done.

Tu Fu is the meticulous exegete of his inner life, ever watchful against the delusory simplicity of a comfortable role. But "role" is the determinate, communicable aspect of the self; and to explicate the self requires that one not only know the self, but know it in communicable terms. The autobiographer of "being" rather than "deeds" is doomed to speak through role, even though role will always fail the contradictory and indeterminate complexity of the self. Tu Fu, with an intuitive distrust of role's limitations, gives the fuller, more contradictory self an animate presentation by continuously negating his roles and undermining them.

"Empty Purse" is not an isolated example of Tu Fu's movement through role to a presentation of the more complex self beyond role: such poems appear from his early work, on through the poetry of the K'uei-chou 夔州 period. In "Written on the Hermitage of Mr. Chang" (first of two) 題張氏隱居二首之一, Tu Fu sets out seeking the companionship of the recluse and ends up with a distrust of "seeking companionship."<sup>26</sup> In "Going from the Capital to Feng-hsien" 自京赴奉先縣五百字,<sup>27</sup> the long opening is a remarkable piece of self-analysis, laughing at his various self-images, which hover between the grand and grandiose: he "secretly compares himself" to the great ministers of antiquity, as Confucius "secretly compared himself" to old P'eng;<sup>28</sup> the proposition is admirable, but not only does Tu Fu fail the greatness of his ancient exemplars, he also fails the ancient maker of "secret comparisons," Confucius.

Mockery of his failed ambitions occurs throughout the great poem sequences of the K'uei-chou period, such as "Autumn Meditations" 秋興八首<sup>29</sup> and "Autumn Wastes" 秋野五首.<sup>30</sup> But this process of self-exposure occurs on more profound levels: if he speaks with too much assurance, Tu Fu may turn on that confident

<sup>26</sup> Ch'iu Chao-ao, *Tu-shih hsiang-chu*, vol. 1, *chüan* 1, pp. 8-11.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, *chüan* 4, pp. 264-275.

<sup>28</sup> *Lun-yü*, VIII, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ch'iu Chao-ao, *Tu-shih hsiang-chu*, vol. 4, *chüan* 17, pp. 1484-1499.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, *chüan* 20, pp. 1732-1735.

voice and expose its weakness. In the “Barren Palms” 枯櫟<sup>31</sup> from his Szechwan years, Tu Fu laments the palms as an allegorical emblem of the suffering people—a pious, proto-“new *yüeh-fu*” stance. But in the closing of this poem, he turns on himself: an oriole, pecking for grubs in the dying trees with the self-preserving pitilessness of the Taoist sage, turns and sees a passing tumbleweed (the conventional emblem of the poet wanderer); the oriole comments that in its own miserable state it has no right to lament others. The pious voice of the poem suddenly loses its authority: it is both mocked and pitied. In large ways and small, Tu Fu continually steps out of roles he has assumed to show us their fragility, their motives, and their failures.

## Metamorphosis

The poet-autobiographer, exegete of the inner self, hopes to tell futurity who he is, who he was. But in that very process the self becomes somehow doubled, fragmented, recedes into indeterminacy and uncertainty: voice and statement contradict one another. Out of this loss of intelligibility and unity there grows the strong desire to restore coherence to the self. Perhaps the most common way in which this desire was fulfilled in the course of Chinese literary history (and the least satisfying way) was the direct assertion of casualness and spontaneity in composition. From T'ao Ch'ien's self-conscious disclaimer of self-consciousness in the preface to “Drinking Wine,” to Po Chü-i's 白居易 (772–846) studied ease, to the eleventh-century philosopher-poet Shao Yung's 邵雍 (1011–1077) hundred poems, each beginning and closing with the line “It's not that I, Shao Yung, really love poetry” (堯夫非是愛吟詩), to the Kung-an poets of the Ming and their successors in the *hsing-ling* 性靈 poets of the Ch'ing—for fifteen hundred years we hear a constant stream of voices promising authentic and spontaneous revelation of the self. Almost all contain implicit or explicit commentary on their own spontaneity, and they all belong firmly

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, *chüan* 10, p. 855.

in the condition which Schiller called “the sentimental” (not to be confused with the popular sense of the term).

Tu Fu goes beyond the cultivated stance of spontaneity to turn on his own self-image those sage eyes that see through the limitations of role. His legacy to later poets was the capacity to laugh at oneself. But it was Tu Fu’s particular gift that even as he engaged in these acts of irony, he never lost sympathy for that aspect of the self trapped in mere role. Yet among his successors, particularly among the Sung poets, that self-directed irony too often becomes cruel: masks of playfulness poorly disguise a self-mockery whose harshness exposes not self-knowledge but a profound inner discord. The gift of irony, in itself, no better healed the divided self than the delusory hope of spontaneity.

A unified self can never exist so long as knower and known are presented as the same person. But suppose the self were to be recognized in another being: instead of making the self other in self-consciousness, here the poet would see an other as the self. The being out there is unified—not divided against itself in self-consciousness—yet there is a bond of affinity to validate the identification. To see oneself in another being is a capacity of distance. Tu Fu, who “sees through” his roles as if observing himself from the outside, moves on to look in the world for such an “other self.” The first stage of the process is simile:

Wind-tossed, fluttering—what is my  
likeness?—

飄飄何所似  
天地一沙鷗

Between Heaven and Earth, a single gull of  
the sands.<sup>32</sup>

In the Chinese poetic tradition Tu Fu’s is the most perfect and most difficult autobiographical voice. Its perfection resides in its triumph over the reflective division of the self, in a triumph of coherence and intimacy which arises, paradoxically, from a growing distance—at first the distance of irony, then a greater distance in which he sees himself in another. The “single gull of the sands,” “Lakes and rivers fill the earth—one old fisherman”—such images of the “other self,” observed from a distance, are familiar to readers of Tu Fu.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, *chüan* 14, pp. 1228–1230.



Consonant with the autobiographer's unchanging concern, such images are often the centers of an otherwise empty world. The voice in the poem no longer attempts to explain the self's secret nature to *us*; the poet turns away from us, looks into the world to discover there the means for his own understanding. The voice achieves authenticity; we no longer suspect its motives; the poet no longer claims to "know" who he is, but seeks images in the mind and in the outer world to answer the question "what is my likeness."

*Yangtze and Han*

At Yangtze and the Han, a wanderer longing  
to return;  
Of Ch'ien and K'un, one worn-out man of  
learning.  
A wisp of cloud, Heaven shares such  
distance;  
The long night—moon, the same in solitude.  
In sinking sunlight a mind with vigor still,  
In autumn's wind this sickness almost cured.  
Since ancient days they've kept old horses  
Which did not need to take to the far-faring  
road.<sup>33</sup>

江漢

江漢思歸客  
乾坤一腐儒  
片雲天共遠  
永夜月同孤  
落日心猶壯  
秋風病欲蘇  
古來存老馬  
不必取長途

It is a famous poem and a strange one, a poem animated by Tu Fu's unique combination of distance and intimacy. Neither an image of the self nor a parallel couplet belong properly in the opening of a regulated verse; here we have both, a formal displacement to match the theme of displacement. Tu Fu's need to get to the central business of "who I am" brushes aside the more stately ceremonies of regulated verse structure. He gives us two figures for the self; the self can be and is both figures at once, but their serial presentation reminds us of this poet's latitude to see himself as many things—even a true role has no power to stabilize and define this poet—it is only a name he has in passing.

From the very beginning Tu Fu sees himself as if from the outside, alone in a magnitude. He is *k'o* 客, a "wanderer," the

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, *chüan* 22, pp. 2029–2030.

human known in relation to a subjective topography, a physical displacement of journeys and returns in which all locations but one remind him he is not "at home." Immediately he dresses in another role, another mode of displacement, a "worn-out man of [Confucian] learning," this also a falling away, but a falling away in time and quality which seems to promise no hope of return. Here the location is not "Yangtze and Han" but Ch'ien and K'un, Heaven and Earth in their cosmic sense, a location that is no location and that, unlike the location of the first line, gives no directions. Between the two lines perspective is enlarged, diminishing the solitary figure in the scene, but enlarging the scope and magnitude of the observing eyes. The two selves, viewer and viewed, vary inversely in their proportions: here is the largest being and the tiniest.

The grammar of the second couplet has all the indeterminacy of Tu Fu's later style. On one level the "wisp of cloud" is as far as the sky (*t'ien*/天, the vault of Heaven that lies beyond the empty air, *k'ung* 空); the "long night" is as solitary as the moon (for *ku* 孤, "solitude," commonly modifies nights as well as moons). But we know that the poet too "shares" the quality of distance with the heavens and cloud, that he is the "same" as night and moon in solitude.

The observer's remote eyes see the self at a distance, see a cloud at the "sky's edge" (*t'ien-ya* 天涯, the "horizon," the "ends of the earth"), a cloud whose rootless wanderings are the "other self" of the human wanderer: the observer discovers himself there, at the "sky's edge," at the "ends of the earth." And in the blur of distance, the diminutive self easily becomes/becomes-confused-with the "other." Then looking up, also as far as heaven (*t'ien*) beyond the empty air, is another version of that remote, solitary shape—the moon, another transformation of the self after "wanderer," "man of learning," "wisp of cloud." There is almost a reciprocity here, of seeing and being seen—the opening lines with the person as if seen from far above, now the person looking at shapes far from him and above him, other selves that might likewise see him. Like Li Po before him, Tu Fu called the moon a mirror (江邊星月二首之一).<sup>34</sup> There are so many solitudes in this immensity that it

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, *chüan* 21, p. 1899.

seems there should be something like a companionship of solitudes: but these prove no more than solitary mirrors that look on him from afar as he looks on them. The mirror is the autobiographer's device; yet these mirrors are set afar and reveal a metamorph passing from shape to shape.

The third couplet "turns," 轉, turns from outer self to inner, turns from wearing away to regeneration. In the cyclical movement of Ch'ien and K'un (the third couplet often takes up the second line, as the second couplet takes up the first line) what reaches an extreme may revert to its opposite—物極必反. The worn-out may be new again. Displacement in the landscape, being "not at home," generates other displacements—youthful "vigor" in evening and old age, healing amid autumn's destructive powers. Ultimately, his solitude means uniqueness and difference from the common movements of the universe.

His final metamorphosis is into the old horse, the mind's emblem of the self, not in the scene. Here too he is displaced and unique, an old horse whose circumstances are inappropriate for the average old horse. He, unlike them, must take to the long-faring road. Yet here is his uniqueness; the difference that comes of displacement and isolation regenerates him while others die in the comfort of their stables in this time of endings.

This autobiographer reflects on his singularity—that is the stuff of autobiography—in a poem generated around a constant interplay of singularities and multiplicities, a self distinct from others that retains its identity in passing through many shapes. He sees this singularity reflected all around him, and out of the multiplicity of his variations he wins a victory of coherence. He unifies antitheses: he is the farthest and the nearest, the fading and the rejuvenating, the most diminutive and the most immense.

"Yangtze and Han" comes from what Tu Fu called his "journey south," *nan-cheng* 南征. In 768 Tu Fu left K'uei-chou and travelled down the Yangtze, turning south along the eastern edge of Lake Tung-t'ing, past Yüeh-yang and White Sands Post Station, on south along the Hsiang River deep into southern Hunan (he turned back there and started north again, dying in 770 before reaching the Yangtze). It was his final journey—he seems often to have sensed this—and it was a perplexing journey, going south into regions

where no one went unless sent there in administrative exile. He offered many reasons for the journey—to flee war and rebellion, to see friends and patrons—but beyond these too easy explanations, there was to him something mysterious and portentous about the journey, as if he were bound in some mythic itinerary whose significance was to be revealed to him in transit. This sense of enacting some mythic narrative is apparent in the “other selves” he generates for himself in these final poems; they are figures of myth and legend, each of which offers an explanation of who he is, where he is going, why he is going there: he is going off to be the “old man star” 老人星 in the southern constellations; he is Chia I, going to exile in Ch’ang-sha; he is the wandering soul of Ch’ü Yüan, beyond the “Summons,” too deep in the southern wilderness; he is the “wandering star” 客星, the raft that carried a man down the Yangtze, out into the oceans, and up into the heavens; he is the storm-bird, whose coming presages the tempest.<sup>35</sup> He is a self in search of a role to tell him who he is, to surround his goings with a significant and preordained narrative.

The most powerful of these mythic roles for the self is that of the great P’eng, from the parable of magnitude and metamorphosis told in the first chapter of the *Chuang Tzu* 莊子. Leviathan K’un 鯤 (whose name means “roe,” the most immense and the tiniest), a creature of waters like Tu Fu, undergoes a metamorphosis into a creature of air, the mighty P’eng, whose wingspan stretches from horizon to horizon. The transformed P’eng awaits the storm whose name is *fu-yao* 扶搖, “Whirlwind,” to carry it up ninety thousand *li*, where it “plans to go south,” to set off for the “southern deeps,” *nan-ming* 南溟. This is the grandest “journey south,” a myth that draws together many major themes of Tu fu’s last poetry—a singular creature heading southward, a grandeur whose magnitude eludes common recognition (see the *Chuang Tzu* parable and the closing of “Ballad of the Old Cypress” 古柏行),<sup>36</sup> the bird moving with the storm (see “Ballad of the White Duck” 白鳧行),<sup>37</sup> meta-

<sup>35</sup> Of course, several of these figures—the “unsummoned soul” and the “wandering star”—appear commonly in Tu Fu’s K’uei-chou poetry: in that work we can see the beginnings of Tu Fu’s fascination with filling portentous roles of history and myth.

<sup>36</sup> Ch’iu Chao-ao, *Tu-shih hsiang-chu*, vol. 3, *chüan* 15, pp. 1357–1362.

morphosis and regeneration, all on the way to the “southern deeps.”

*Mooring Beneath Yüeh-yang*

Through river lands I've passed a thousand  
miles,

Draw near to city of mountain rising,  
upward a hundred tiers.

A wind from the shore topples the evening  
waves;

Snow on the boat spatters in the cold  
lamplight.

Delayed here, my talent does not end;  
In trouble and hardship my spirits grow and  
swell.

“Plans to go south”—not yet to be  
considered:

In metamorphosis still, Leviathan and  
P'eng.<sup>38</sup>

泊岳陽城下  
江國踰千里  
山城近百層  
岸風翻夕浪  
舟雪灑寒燈  
留滯才難盡  
艱危氣益增  
圖南未可料  
變化有鯤鵬

He journeys far and comes to a place where a storm holds him up, forces him to linger, impatiently. There his eyes follow the mountain city upward, rising ever higher above him as he draws nearer in his boat. From waters to the heights of city and sky, his thoughts on horizontal travels are directed to the vertical, the shore-slope from which the storm winds topple darkening waves and send snow spattering over his boat. This poet, who so often sees mythic landscapes embedded in sublunary scenes, may find a secret form in the mooring—the edge of the vertical stormwind that will carry the metamorphosed P'eng high into the upper air. Once aloft, it can “plan to go south”—not yet. This creature of waters awaits his metamorphosis at the vertiginous edge.

As in “Yangtze and Han” regeneration accompanes metamorphosis: the third, “turning couplets” of both poems are very close—a weariness of hardships and growing lateness in which the

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 5, *chüan* 23, p. 2037.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, *chüan* 22, p. 1945. In line 5 I am following the Ch'iu Chao-ao text rather than the *Chiu-chia* 九家. The essential variant in the Ch'iu text is the 難 of line five; *Chiu-chia* reads 雖, which gives a very different and, I believe, incorrect interpretation. The reading *nan* is supported by at least one of the early editions, the *Fen-men chi-chu Tu kung-pu shih* 分門集註杜工部詩 (SPTK ed.), *chüan* 12.

singular creature is renewed, some powers enduring, some healing or increasing. But unlike “Yangtze and Han,” here the self’s metamorphosis is openly acknowledged, and acknowledged in the grandest terms.

Somewhat farther down the coast of the lake, on the north shore of the large bay called “Green Grass Lake” 青草湖, the metamorphosis is complete: Tu Fu no longer speaks of the P’eng as object, setting it outside the self in the act of naming it; he *is* the P’eng in doing what the P’eng does, embarking for the “southern deeps.”

<p><i>Spending the Night at White Sands Post Station</i> Spend night on the water, now still in last shining, The smoke from men’s dwellings, then this pavilion. Here by the station, the sands white as ever; Beyond the lake, grasses, recently green. The million images of things—all springtime vapor; On that lone raft still, I am the wandering star. Following the waves, moonlight infinite, And on its sparkling I draw near to the southern deeps.<sup>39</sup></p>	<p>宿白沙驛 水宿仍餘照 人煙復此亭 驛邊沙舊白 湖外草新青 萬象皆春氣 孤槎自客星 隨波無限月 的的近南溟</p>
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In metamorphosis a thing may become its opposite: an aging man may grow more vigorous; a tiny being on a vast lake may become the mighty P’eng; the fall of night may make the lake brilliantly white. Strangely, this condition in which the poet finds himself is one of “true names” 正名: green grasses by Green Grass Lake, white sands by White Sands Station. Again the poet is on a margin, an edge—by the shore, at the juncture between day and night. But as night grows, the margin dissolves and he has embarked: white sands in moonlight merge with the sparkling of the moonlit lake—a dark, glittering expanse that seems to be, and may in fact be the “river of stars,” the heavens through which the “wandering star” and great P’eng pass. What seemed to be a solid earthly world was

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1954.

illusory: the spring scene, with its distant burgeoning of green vegetation, is no more than a complex configuration of *ch'i*, hazy, insubstantial. And this place that seemed to be earth and water may be the magnitude of blue heavens necessary to bear the poet/P'eng on his journey to the "southern deeps."

## Epilogue

We hope to be remembered, and for that hope we may "trust our persons to ink and the brush." But in this initial autobiographical impulse we discover an unknown complexity in the self—false roles and partial roles, unsuspected motives, and a growing distrust of surfaces. To our astonishment we discover that, apart from its roles, the self eludes us. Once that lesson is learned, when we write of the "true self," we make distrust of roles and surfaces the subject of the poem. It is an unsatisfying compromise: within all the anxiety and contradiction, we still presume there is some hidden unity that can be called the "self."

Out of the need to explain "who I am," we generate the question "who am I?" The surprise and magnitude of that question—for this question is one of the oddest fruits of high civilization—overwhelms the old autobiographical mode of discourse. The poet-autobiographer turns his attention away from that future audience to which he once looked so intensely. He wonders now, seeks an image of who he "is," the self's perfect mirror that strips away all illusion. He may discover he is not at all the person he thought he was, as when Po Chü-i encounters with surprise "His Own Portrait" 自題寫真:

I didn't recognize my own face,  
 But Li Fang painted my true portrait.  
 Calmly I observe the spirit and the bones—  
 This must be some man of the mountains!  
 The wood of reed-willow easily rots;  
 The heart of the wild deer is hard to tame.  
 So why on the red stairs of the palace  
 Have I served in attendance these five years?

我貌不自識  
 李放寫我真  
 靜觀神與骨  
 合是山中人  
 蒲柳質易朽  
 麋鹿心難馴  
 何事赤墀上  
 五年爲侍臣

Worse still, this stiff, uncompromising nature	況多剛狷性
Must find it hard to share the world's dust.	難與世同塵
Not a nobleman's physiognomy, this! What's	不惟非貴相
more	但恐生禍因
I fear I see cause for ruin here.	宜當早罷去
Quit and flee as soon as I can—that's what I	收取雲泉身
must do—	
Preserve this body of clouds and streams. <sup>40</sup>	

<sup>40</sup> Po Chü-i 白居易, *Po Chü-i chi* 白居易集, ed. Ku Hsüeh-chieh 顧學頤 2 vols. (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1979), vol. 1, *chüan* 6, p. 109.