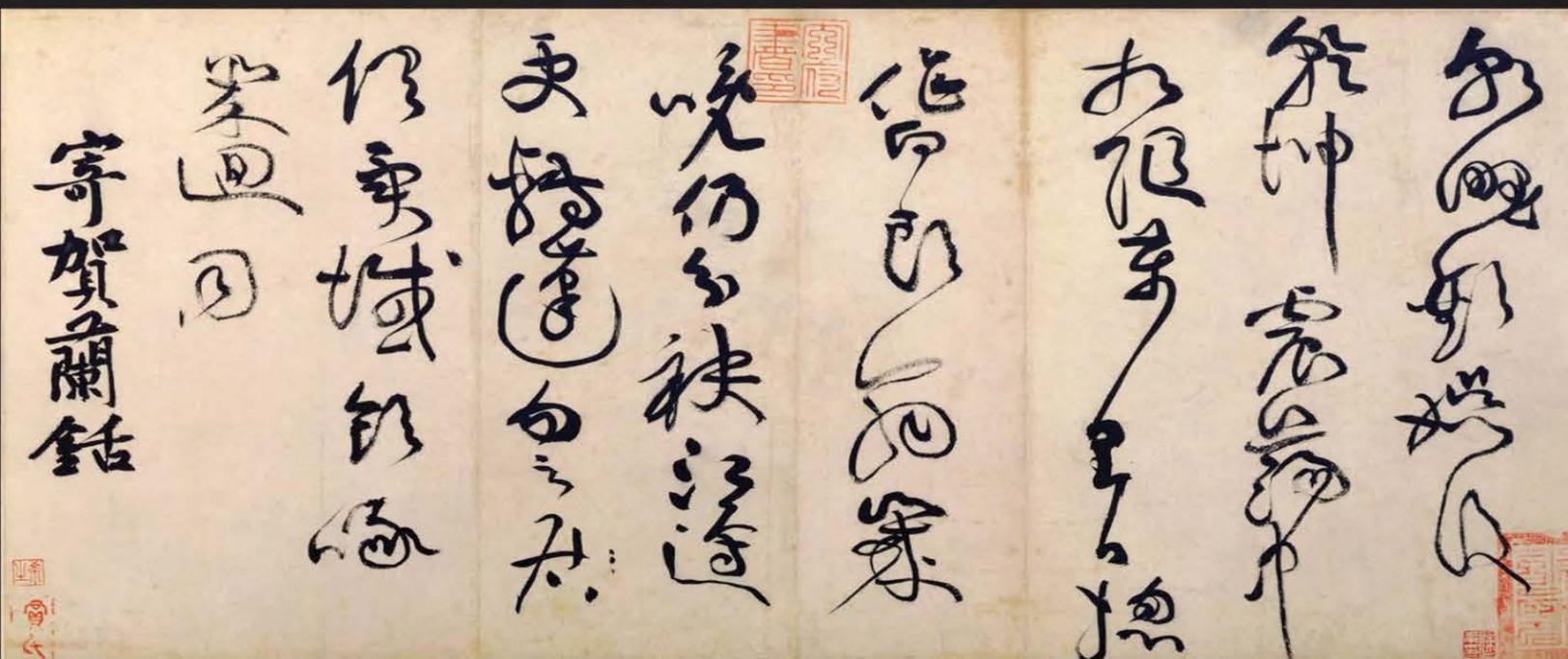


Awakened Cosmos

THE MIND OF
CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY



David Hinton

Other Books by David Hinton

WRITING

Desert (Poetry)
The Wilds of Poetry (Essay)
Existence: A Story (Essay)
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Fossil Sky (Poetry)

TRANSLATION

The Selected Poems of Tu Fu: Expanded and Newly Translated
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The Selected Poems of T'ao Ch'ien

The Selected Poems of Tu Fu

AWAKENED COSMOS

*The Mind of Classical
Chinese Poetry*

David Hinton



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Introduction

POETRY IS THE COSMOS AWAKENED TO ITSELF. Narrative, reportage, explanation, idea: language is the medium of self-identity, and we normally live within that clutch of identity, identity that seems to look out at and think about the Cosmos as if from some outside space. But poetry pares language down to a bare minimum, thereby opening it to silence. And it is there in the margins of silence that poetry finds its deepest possibilities—for there it can render dimensions of consciousness that are much more expansive than that identity-center, primal dimensions of consciousness as the Cosmos awakened to itself. At least this is true for classical Chinese poetry, shaped as it is by Taoist and Ch’an (Zen) Buddhist thought into a form of spiritual practice. In its deepest possibilities, its inner wilds, poetry is the Cosmos awakened to itself—and the history of that awakening begins where the Cosmos begins.

In that beginning, there was neither light nor space—and for consciousness, they are the essentials. During its first moments, the Cosmos was a primordial plasma of subatomic particles. This plasma expanded and cooled until the particles could bond to form the lightest atoms, hydrogen and helium, whereupon the Cosmos became transparent to radiation such as light. Eventually, hydrogen and helium began condensing into proto-galactic clouds under the gossamer influence of gravity, and chance fluctuations in the density of these clouds led some local areas to intensify their condensation until pressure and heat became so fierce that hydrogen atoms began fusing together. In that process, which can only be described as

magical, stars were born. And with those stars came the elemental dimensions of consciousness: space and light and the visible.

Those dimensions began to evolve. The stars grew old, like anything else, and died. In the furnace of their old age and explosive deaths, they forged heavier elements and scattered them into space, forming nebular clouds that in turn condensed into new stars. It is the heartbeat of the Cosmos, this steady pulse of stellar birth and death, gravity's long swell and rhythm of absence and presence, presence and absence. And in the third star-generation, our planet was formed, rich in those heavy elements. It cooled and evolved until eventually water appeared: hydrogen, created during the original cosmic expansion, combining with oxygen, one of those heavier elements created in the cauldrons of dying stars. Water formed mirrored pools in hollows on the planet's rocky surface, and in these pools the Cosmos turned toward itself for the first time here. It became "aware" of itself in those mirrored openings deep as all space and light, deep as the visible itself.

Living organisms evolved and eventually developed receptors that allowed them to sense whether or not light was present. Those light receptors provided decisive selective advantages, and so developed into more and more sophisticated forms. The lens evolved as a means to concentrate light on receptor cells, thereby making creatures more sensitive to weak light. This innovation eventually led to image-forming eyes, which combine a lens with highly specialized receptor cells. And with that, the Cosmos turned toward itself once again, eventually giving shape to consciousness, that spatiality the eye's mirrored transparency conjures inside animals. It was a miraculous development: the material universe, which had been perfectly opaque, was now open to itself, awakened to itself!

Although ancient Chinese poets and philosophers didn't describe it in these scientific terms, this same sense of consciousness as the Cosmos open to itself was an operating assumption for them—though perhaps here *existence* is a better word than *Cosmos*, as it suggests the sense of all reality as a single tissue. This existence-tissue is the central concern of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (sixth century

B.C.E.)—the seminal work in Taoism, the spiritual branch of Chinese philosophy that eventually evolved into Ch’an Buddhism. Lao Tzu called that existence-tissue *Tao*, which originally meant “Way,” as in a road or pathway. But Lao Tzu used it to describe the empirical Cosmos as a single living tissue that is inexplicably generative—and so, female in its very nature. As such, it is an ongoing cosmological process, an ontological pathway by which things emerge from the existence-tissue as distinct forms, evolve through their lives, and then vanish back into that tissue, only to be transformed and reemerge in new forms. It is a majestic and nurturing Cosmos, but also a refugee Cosmos: all change and transformation, each of the ten thousand things in perpetual flight, always on its way somewhere else.

The abiding aspiration of spiritual and artistic practice in ancient China was to cultivate consciousness as that existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself, awakened to itself: looking at itself, hearing and touching itself, tasting and smelling itself, and also thinking itself, feeling itself—all in the singular ways made possible by the individuality of each particular person. This is consciousness in the open, wild and woven into the generative Cosmos: wholesale belonging. As we will see, it was recognized as our most essential nature in Taoist and Ch’an Buddhist thought, the foundational structure of consciousness for artist-intellectuals in ancient China: poets, painters, calligraphers, philosophers, Ch’an adepts. And it seems a beautiful, even essential alternative—both philosophical and ecological—to the disconnectedness that structures consciousness in the West.

A typical classical Chinese poem appears to be a plain-spoken utterance about a poet’s immediate experience. This is the poem that has sounded so uncannily familiar to modern American readers and has had such a profound influence on the modern American tradition (see my book *The Wilds of Poetry*). But that is only the apparent content of the poem, much like a mountain landscape is only the apparent content of Chinese landscape paintings like those on the following page, in which there is no attempt to realistically

portray an actual landscape. Instead, the paintings render the inner wilds of that Taoist/Ch'an cosmology.

At its deepest level, the tissue of Tao is described by that cosmology in terms of two fundamental elements: Absence (無) and Presence (有). *Presence* is simply the empirical universe, the ten thousand things in constant transformation, and *Absence* is the generative void from which this ever-changing realm of Presence perpetually emerges. And so, Tao is the generative process through which all things arise and pass away—Absence burgeoning forth into the great transformation of Presence.

In a Chinese landscape painting, all the empty space—mist and cloud, sky, lakewater—depicts Absence, the generative emptiness from which the landscape elements (Presence) are seemingly just emerging into existence or half vanished back into the emptiness. At the same time, those landscape elements seem infused with Absence, because they are drawn as outlines containing the same color that renders emptiness throughout the painting. This makes philosophical sense because the concepts of Absence and Presence are simply an approach to the fundamental nature of things. In the end, of course, they are the same: Presence grows out of and returns to Absence and is therefore always a manifestation of it. Or to state it more precisely, Absence and Presence are simply different ways of seeing Tao: either as a single formless tissue that is somehow always generative, or as that tissue in its ten thousand distinct and always changing forms.



FIG. 1
Hsia Kuei (twelfth–thirteenth centuries): *Streams and Mountains, Pure and Remote*.

National Palace Museum, Taipei



FIG. 2
Ni Ts'an (1301–1374): *Wind Among Riverbank Trees*.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

So, the painting renders an ongoing cosmological origin-moment. It also renders consciousness at that moment—in the open, wild and woven into the existence-tissue—and it does this in a number of ways. The human element in these paintings is always small and well-integrated into the landscape’s cosmology, or there is no trace of the human at all. The lack of perspective makes it feel as if the viewer is somehow inside the landscape’s cosmology and able to wander there, rather than a center of identity looking at the landscape from a single viewpoint outside the painting. But the most important way paintings weave consciousness into the existence-tissue landscape depends on the way such paintings were viewed, and that was determined by Taoist/Ch’an meditation practice that was commonplace among ancient China’s artist-intellectuals.

Ch’an means “meditation,” which makes sense because meditation was the primary element of Ch’an practice; and as such, it appears repeatedly in the chapters below. In its barest outlines, meditation involved sitting quietly and watching thoughts come and go in a field of emptiness. With experience, the stream of thought fell silent, and practitioners inhabited mind emptied of all content. Once the mind was silent, perception became a spiritual practice—the opening of consciousness become a bottomless mirror allowing no distinction between inside and outside. In looking at a painting, one mirrored the painting, making its space the space of consciousness. So, ancient artist-intellectuals gazed into paintings for long periods of time as a kind of spiritual practice. It was a discipline that returned consciousness to dwell at that cosmological origin-moment as a matter of immediate experience, a moment that filled mind with a particular form of emptiness. In the end, the painting is not simply about its apparent content—mountain landscape—but about the emptiness surrounding it, about how that emptiness is brought into focus and animated by the landscape elements.

Chinese poems render much the same thing, though in very different ways. As in a landscape painting, the apparent material of a

poem (Presence in the form of the poet's immediate experience and thoughts) is not the entire poem, the way it is in an English poem. Instead, that apparent material exists for the way it articulates the emptiness surrounding the words. It is not just open to silence, it articulates silence. That is the essential experience of a poem as spiritual practice, the inner wilds of the poem that are lost in translation.

It begins with the wide-open minimal grammar that is immediately apparent when looking at a Chinese poem in the original (see the first page of any chapter below). All of that empty grammatical space functions much like the empty space in paintings—as the generative emptiness (Absence) from which the words and thoughts (Presence) seem to be just emerging into existence. And as in the paintings, that emptiness infuses the world created by the words: Presence belonging finally to Absence. The poem therefore infuses everyday experience with that generative tissue of emptiness. Like a painting, a poem is not simply about its apparent content—the particular life-experience described in the poem—as it seems from the perspective of our own cultural assumptions, which is the view we see in a translation of such a poem. It is, instead, about the emptiness surrounding it, each poem revealing that emptiness in a singular way. And what is that emptiness? It is, finally, the wild existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself, awakened to itself in the form of human consciousness.

—

All of this suggests new possibilities for biography not as the usual narrative of events that define an identity-center, but as a story of the existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself through an individual lifetime—that untranslatable dimension of experience in the inner wilds of a Chinese poem. One aspect of this book is the attempt to trace that kind of biography, using classical Chinese poetry as a way in to a life—specifically, the life of Tu Fu, widely considered to be China's

greatest poet. And so, this book might be described as a biography of the existence-tissue Cosmos awakened to itself in his particular form.

Tu lived from 712 to 770 C.E., at the height of the T'ang Dynasty, which is legendary as a time of peace, prosperity, and unrivaled cultural achievement. The legend was largely true until Tu's middle age. But in 755, when Tu was forty-three, a civil war broke out and continued sporadically until his death—a war so devastating that by the end of Tu's life, two-thirds of China's people were either dead or displaced and impossible for census-takers to count. Tu himself lived those years as an impoverished refugee, forced to flee home after home and travel exhausting distances in search of safety and financial support amidst the fighting. This made his life emblematic of the refugee nature of things—the existence-tissue Cosmos all change and transformation, a perpetual state of departure.

However difficult these years were, they were also the years during which he wrote nearly all of his major poetry. Tu Fu's great predecessors tended to focus on the more spiritually sustaining aspects of experience—moments of meditative depth among rivers and mountains. But Tu's poetry is known for its social engagement, its openness to all aspects of the dire sociopolitical situation and his refugee life. This is what sets Tu apart in Chinese poetry: he allowed everything into his poems. In the Western context, this might be described as an impressive range, as exploring new aspects of experience in poetry. In the Chinese conceptual framework, it is that and much more: it represents Tu's mastery of living as the Cosmos awakened to itself. For in its elemental gaze, the Cosmos too accepts everything.

This mastery was a result of Tu's early study and practice of Taoism and Ch'an Buddhism. Born into the privileged intellectual class, he was assiduously educated in all aspects of the culture, and he is renowned for his erudition. But Tu was unusual in that he spent large amounts of time away from home as a young man. Little is known about those years, but it seems likely that he traveled because he was uncomfortable at home. Tu's mother died shortly after his birth, and he was apparently raised by an aunt. His father remarried

and had several children with Tu's stepmother, so by the time he was a young man, his itinerant life may have been due to family tensions: hence, he was already a refugee of sorts.

In any case, this period of wandering must have involved substantial amounts of time in and around Ch'an monasteries—because his well-documented adult life doesn't include any extended time spent practicing Ch'an; and as we will see, the poems reveal that from the beginning Tu was familiar with the Ch'an monastic setting and that he comfortably associated with Ch'an masters. This includes no less than Spirit-Lightning Gather (Shen Hui), dharma-heir to the illustrious Sixth Patriarch and arguably the preeminent historical figure in the formation of Ch'an. Indeed, Tu called him the Seventh Patriarch in a late poem, referring to the seminal dispute in Ch'an's development, where Spirit-Lightning Gather convinced the Ch'an world that his teacher Prajna-Able (Hui Neng) was the true Sixth Patriarch. But more importantly, the poems show that he had mastered Taoist/Ch'an insight in deep ways. Tu is often described as having little interest in Taoist/Ch'an experience because his poems are rarely concerned with the insights of that tradition. But that is only true on the surface. In fact, Tu's mastery of those insights was so deep that there was no need for him to work at them in his poems. Instead, those insights provided the conceptual framework within which Tu moved through the world, the operating assumption shaping his poems. This suggests how fundamentally that framework structured experience for artist-intellectuals like Tu, and it provides a more complicated lens on Taoist/Ch'an insight than direct approaches to the ideas themselves, because it reveals that insight under the stress and compromise inherent to a broad range of lived human experience.

The terms of that Taoist/Ch'an insight will be described in the chapters that follow. Suffice it to say for the moment that Ch'an masters insisted awakening was not some transcendental state, but our everyday awareness. Hence, enlightenment as the fabric of everyday experience. However confused and unenlightened our lives may seem, however blind to that everyday enlightenment we may be

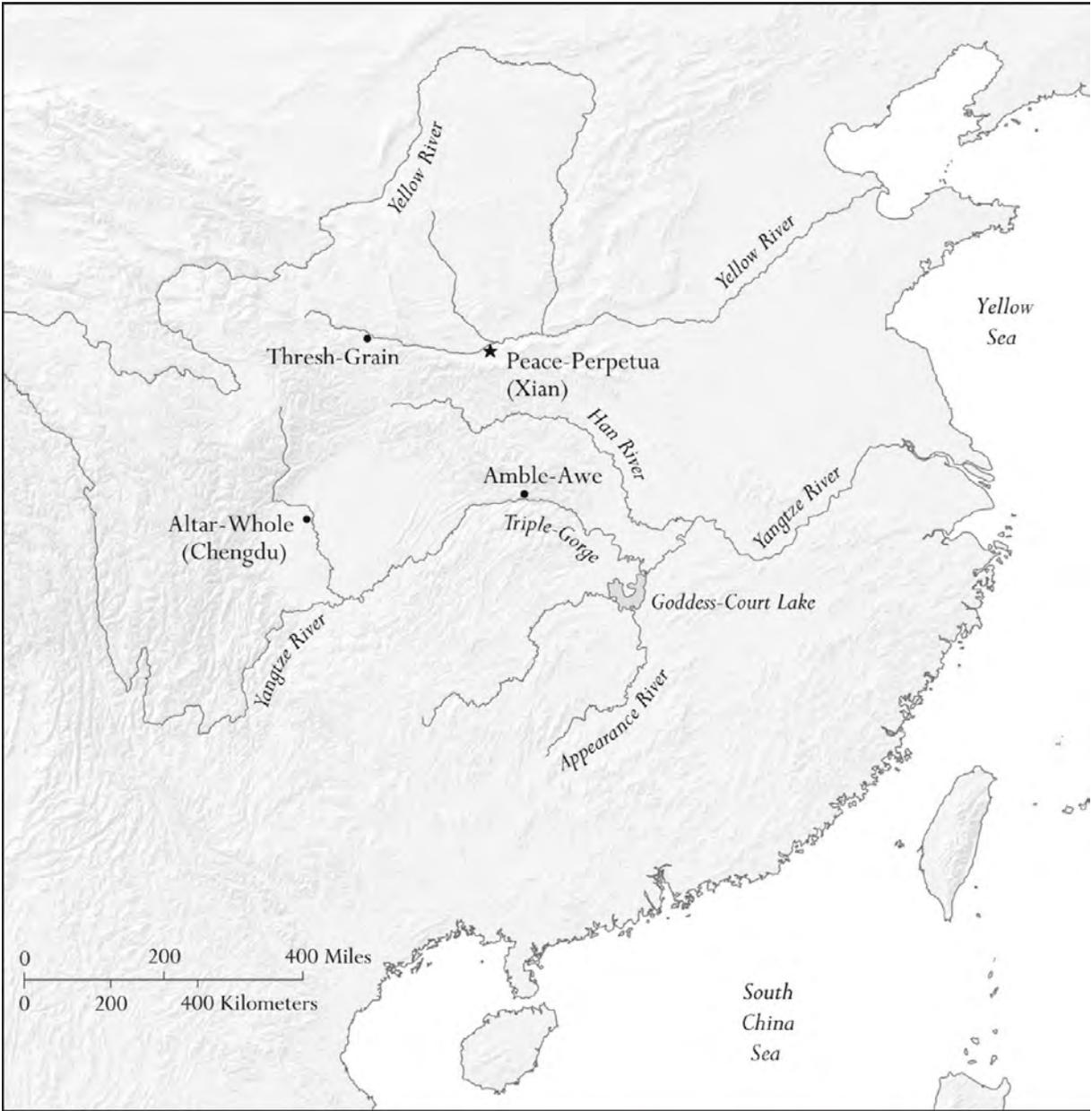
—we are always already wild consciousness in the open, always already the Cosmos aware of itself, awakened to itself. It is this awakening that Tu's poems enact through all the disorienting, seemingly unenlightened struggle of his life, and this is why he is so revered in the tradition. Especially because the poems enact that awakening across such a broad range of experience—perhaps most notably his late poems, which probed the deepest darkest dimensions of Taoist/Ch'an insight, for he lived those years at the extreme edge of existential exposure to a vast and indifferent Cosmos, a Cosmos that is in the end impervious to our attempts at wisdom.

Tu's awakened perspective—consciousness in the open, the wild Cosmos open to itself—can be talked about to some extent in English, but cannot easily be rendered as immediate poetic experience. As the chapters that follow will make clear, our cultural assumptions and the very structure of the language through which they speak largely preclude it. In a word, there is no wildness in the structure of English. This book tries to tell the biography of that awakened perspective by exploring representative poems from Tu's life, approaching each poem in a chapter with three parts that try to work past those limitations of English: First, the original poem, with English equivalents, which provides direct access to the very different nature of the Chinese poetic language and how that language structures consciousness differently. Second, a translation rendering the poem as it might best be understood within the constraints of English. And finally, an essay that describes the inner wilds of the poem, the dimensions not available in translation: how the poem is not only about what the words say, but also about how those words animate the silence, the cosmological emptiness surrounding them, how they give voice to that emptiness, which is the existence-tissue Cosmos awakened to itself. Said another way: how that awakened perspective of Taoist/Ch'an insight is manifest in the poem; and how it transforms the poem, Tu's biographical experience, and the possibilities of consciousness in the open. In this, these chapters portray a person living and acting not as a detached

spirit-center, but as wild: dwelling in and acting from the cosmological/ontological ground. That is, the chapters together present a biography of the wild Cosmos awakened to itself in one particular human manifestation: a magisterial poet who lived a remarkably insightful life in eighth-century China.

Reading Guide

THIS BOOK HAS A COMPANION VOLUME PUBLISHED BY New Directions: *The Selected Poems of Tu Fu: Expanded and Newly Translated*, which is an updated version of my first book. It is much enlarged and offers a new approach to translation that has developed over the decades since I worked on that first book. *The Selected Poems* makes available a large body of Tu Fu's work, thereby providing a broader poetic context for the discussions in this book, and this book provides the necessary conceptual framework through which to more deeply read the full range of poems in the *Selected Poems*.



1

Ancestor Exalt

望

gaze

嶽

sacred peak

岱

Exalt Mt.

宗

ancestor

夫

then

如

like

何

what

齊

Ch'i

魯

Lu

青

blue/green

未

never

了

end

造

create

化

change

鍾

concentrate

神

divine

秀

beauty

陰

yin

陽

yang

割

cleave

昏

dusk

曉

dawn

盪

heaving

胸

chest

生

birth

曾

layers

雲

cloud

決
burst

費
eye

入
enter

歸
return

鳥
bird

會
soon

當
when

凌
reach

絕
extreme

頂
summit

一
one

覽
glance

衆
all

山
mountains

小
small

Gazing at the Sacred Peak

What is this ancestor Exalt Mountain like?
Endless greens of north and south meeting
where Changemaker distills divine beauty,
where *yin* and *yang* cleave dusk and dawn.
Chest heaving breathes out cloud, and eyes
open dusk bird-flight home. One day soon,
on the summit, peaks ranging away will be
small enough to hold, all in a single glance.

TO UNDERSTAND WHO TU FU WAS, TO TELL THE story of his life in a conventional sense, one might begin with his ancestors: his mother a great-granddaughter of the emperor who founded the T'ang Dynasty, his father a government official descended from a distinguished line of government officials. But to understand Tu in the more fundamental sense of consciousness in the open, the Cosmos open to itself, we must understand his deeper ancestors. And that is where this poem begins, an interest very possibly related to the fact that, in addition to his mother's death when he was very young, his father had recently died—meaning his human ancestors were all lost to him now. Mountains were seen as vast and sage presences in Tu Fu's China, deeply comforting, but how is it exactly that Exalt Mountain could be an “ancestor”?

This is among the earliest surviving poems by Tu Fu. He was around thirty when he wrote it, six years after failing the national examination that qualified people from China's elite class to fulfill their primary purpose in life: to help the emperor care for the people by working in government. Tu was exceptionally brilliant and very cosmopolitan because of his extensive travels. In addition, he was nominated for the exam by the capital district, intellectual center of

the nation, which meant he was among the most sophisticated and well-connected candidates, and virtually guaranteed to pass. It isn't clear how it happened—perhaps because of political intrigue, or perhaps because he was too forthright and independent-minded in his political essays—but somehow he failed. For the next six years, he wandered. Little is known about this time, though it's clear he continued cultivating Taoist/Ch'an insight, his most foundational cultural inheritance. That inheritance is on conspicuous display here in this poem, and it describes the remarkable dimensions of Exalt Mountain as ancestor.

Exalt was one of China's five sacred peaks, and in its popular sense, Exalt-Mountain Ancestor refers to the mountain as a deity. But given the cosmological ways Tu Fu describes Exalt Mountain, it's clear he sees something quite different. That mountain cosmology begins here in this poem with Changemaker, which also sounds like some kind of deity. But it is in fact Tao, that generative existence-tissue that is the *maker of change*. In gazing at the mountain, Tu Fu is gazing at a dramatic manifestation of the wild Taoist Cosmos: he sees Exalt as a kind of cosmological center-point where space stretches endlessly away north and south (literally, the ancient kingdoms of Ch'i and Lu from Lao Tzu's time), where the divine beauty of all existence is condensed into a single dramatic site by Changemaker Tao. But Changemaker, the generative tissue of Tao, is not separate from the mountain. Instead, the mountain is simply a particularly dramatic intensification or distillation of that tissue, a fact emphasized when the mountain is described as a place where the dynamic interaction of *yin* and *yang* becomes visible.

Tu has in mind here the early meanings of *yin* and *yang* as the shadowy northern slopes (*yin*) and sunlit southern slopes (*yang*) of a mountain, but also their more philosophical meanings as the two fundamental elements of *ch'i*. Widely known as something like the cosmic breath-force, the energy giving life to the material Cosmos, *ch'i* is actually much more. It is another way of describing Tao, emphasizing its nature as a single living tissue: the matter and energy of the Cosmos seen together as a single dynamic and

generative tissue surging through its perpetual transformations. Manifest as female and male, dark and light, cold and hot, receptive and active—*yin* and *yang* produce the cosmological process of change through their dynamic interaction. Indeed, in their most magisterial incarnations, *yin* and *yang* are earth and heaven, the interaction of which produces the ongoing transformations of the Cosmos as a whole, and mountain landscape is where that interaction was most dramatically visible for artist-intellectuals like Tu Fu: earth tipping up and churning into heaven, heaven seething down to mingle all windblown mist and sky breathing through earth.

As a religious deity, Exalt-Mountain Ancestor supposedly summoned the dead to the mountain's slopes, and "to wander Exalt Mountain" was to be among the dead. In the cosmological ways he describes Exalt Mountain, Tu Fu opens this mythological account to a more profound level, for he reveals the mountain as a grand incarnation of Tao as the generative tissue from which we are born, and to which we return in death. For Tu Fu, born of this generative tissue, the mountain could therefore only be called *ancestor*.

This relationship to the mountain takes on a surprising intimacy in the third couplet, where grammar becomes wildly ambiguous and spacious, weaving Tu Fu and the mountain together. The "heaving chest" sounds like it's Tu out of breath and panting from the climb, but how could Tu's chest give birth to layered banks of cloud? Mountain slopes might be called the mountain's *chest*, and they were popularly thought to be the source of clouds, for wisps of mist and cloud are often seen rising out of valleys and canyons and forests there. This image appears often in Chinese poetry, suggesting pure mountain landscape as a place at the origin of things, at the generative heart of the Cosmos. Here, that origin-landscape is integrated with Tu Fu himself—his chest indistinguishable from the mountain's chest breathing out mist and cloud. This also invests the mountain with the sense of being a living body. And indeed, the term meaning "chest" can also mean "heart-mind," interfusing Tu and the mountain at an even deeper level, while at the same time investing the mountain with a kind of sentient life.

The empty-mind mirroring cultivated in Ch'an meditation appears dramatically in the second line of this couplet. There, a grammatically literal reading suggests Tu's eyes burst so widely open by this moment of awakening to landscape that sight seems to enter the scene of birds returning through the mountain landscape at nightfall to their nests. But the grammar with all its empty space affords another reading: a grammatical inversion in which birds returning home seem to enter Tu's eyes, as if their nesting place were within him. And combining these readings, we again find Tu's mirror-deep mind wide-open and interfused with this mountain landscape, no distinction between subjective and objective. This integration of mirror-deep consciousness and mountain cosmology is distilled in the poem's title, where 望 means not only "to gaze," but also the "landscape seen," thereby dissolving the distinction between Tu and mountain. Hence, consciousness as integral to that generative and ancestral cosmology, as belonging to it wholly. Or in other words: consciousness in the open, wild, the existence-tissue Cosmos aware of itself.

We would expect this "landscape awakening" of mirror-mind to happen after a long difficult climb, on the summit where vast views open away, but Tu's awakening comes as he confronts day's end and the failure of his (perhaps halfhearted) effort to reach the summit. And it deepens in his description of what he will one day find on the summit, for the last line grammatically establishes a simple equation between his "single glance" and all those small mountains—an equation at those mirrored depths of consciousness that makes little sense in the Western conceptual framework, with its "soul" radically separate from earthly landscape, and is all but impossible to articulate in the structures of English grammar (which reflects that framework). Again, the poem's empty grammar integrates subjective and objective into a single tissue, reenacting a mirror-deep identity with the ancestral mountain landscape, identity which means in Taoist/Ch'an terms that Tu's truest self is nothing other than the generative tissue of the Cosmos. And so, the apparent content of the poem—Tu's experience on the mountain—shapes the emptiness

around it by rendering consciousness as the opening through which the Cosmos looks out at itself. Here, Tu encounters the vastness of his wild mirror-deep mind—for in its depths, horizon-wide expanses of imposing mountain peaks seem small.

Tu Fu will spend his life wandering among those ancestors, traveling thousands of miles through that cosmology of peaks his single mountaintop glance can hold. It was an impoverished life of refugee wandering. But however tangled he was in the difficulties of his life and times, Tu's wandering was always that existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself—ancestor wandering itself and gazing into itself, thinking itself and feeling itself, lamenting itself and celebrating itself, writing poems about itself. That is how this poem animates the cosmological emptiness surrounding its words, how it voices that existence-tissue Cosmos awakened to itself: it renders wild mirror-deep consciousness itself as ancestor.

2

Depths Awakening

遊	龍	門	奉	先	寺
wander	dragon	gate	devotion	ancestor	monastery

已	從	招	提	遊
already	from	[four-]	[directions]	wander

更	宿	招	提	境
yet	overnight	[four-]	[directions]	border

陰	壑	生	虛	籟
yin	valley	birth	empty	music

月	林	散	清	影
moon	forest	scatter	lucid	shadow

天	闕	象	緯	逼
heaven	rift	star	planet	close

雲	臥	衣	裳	冷
cloud	sleep	robe	clothes	cold

心

心

口

口

口

欲
almost

覺
wake

聞
hear

晨
dawn

鐘
bell

令
call

人
people

發
incite

深
deep

省
awakening

Wandering at Dragon-Gate's Ancestor-Devotion Monastery

At four-directions monastery, I wander off,
stay the night in four-directions borderland.

Born of the valley's yin-dark, empty music
drifts, moon-forest pellucid shadow-scatters.

Heaven-rift planets and stars gathered close
here—I sleep all cloud-mist and chill robes,

then beginning to stir, hear the morning bell
call out, opening such depths of awakening.

FEARED AND REVERED AS THE AWESOME FORCE OF change, of life itself, the dragon in ancient China was a mythological embodiment of Tao and its ten thousand things tumbling through their traceless transformations. Small as a silkworm and vast as all heaven and earth, dragon descends into deep waters in autumn, where it hibernates until spring, when its reawakening corresponds to the return of life to earth. It rises and ascends into sky, where it billows into thunderclouds and falls as spring's life-bringing rains. Its claws flash as lightning in those thunderclouds, and its rippling scales glisten in the bark of rain-soaked pines. Existence all generative transformation driven by a restless hunger, the refugee Cosmos as a dynamic interplay of heaven and earth—it's all dragon. Dragon is the vast and mysterious tissue of Tao given just enough form that we can *feel* it, that it can *feel* in us its dynamic life writhing through its endless transformations. So, this book might also be called a biography of dragon in the form of Tu Fu.

The title sets the stage for this poem: Tu Fu wandering out into the land of dragon. It is a paradox central to Taoist/Ch'an practice: the more you struggle toward awakened dwelling—consciousness

integral to dragon's generative tissue, as the dragon awakened to itself—the more you isolate yourself as a thinking center of identity separate from that tissue, and the more you project that awakening out into some future time and place. In “Gazing at the Sacred Peak,” we would expect realization to come after a long arduous climb, on the summit of Exalt Mountain with its open distances and inspiring views, but Tu Fu finds realization by *not* climbing the mountain. And it's the same here, in this roughly contemporaneous poem: rather than arduous practice in a monastery, he finds realization by turning away from realization—by leaving the monastery, wandering among ancestral dragon-lands, sleeping, waking. It is a form of insight that recurs often in Tu's poems, as in “Visiting the Ch'an Master at Clarity-Absolute Monastery” from his last years:

Isolate, high among mountain peaks rising
ridge beyond ridge, dawn smoldering mist,

icy stream spread thin across a gravel bed,
sunlit snow tumbling from towering pines:

in such dharma perfected, poems are folly.
And I am who I am, lazy even about wine,

so how could I renounce wife and children,
ch'i-site home again beneath further peaks?

Here again, mountain landscape is the great teaching (“dharma”), and when Tu is too lazy to go be a Ch'an monk among those dharma mountains, it reveals a deeper Ch'an wisdom in which there is no reason to struggle for insight because it is already the very fabric of his everyday life.

Tu refers to Ancestor-Devotion Monastery as 招提 (*chaot'i*), an abbreviated transliteration for the Sanskrit *caturdisah*, meaning the four directions of space. *Caturdisah* asserts that the monastery and its sangha *belong to the four directions*, because awakening is all about belonging to landscape as the manifestation of Tao's

generative tissue. *Four directions* suggests vast expanses of landscape; and in the second line, Tu wanders away from the monastery to the very borders of those four directions. It almost sounds as if he has traveled to the edge of the world. But there's quiet whimsy here, because he hasn't actually gone far at all, only to the edge of the monastery's property. And it is from this humorous exaggeration that Tu shapes awakening as a deep belonging to those expanses—the same ancestral expanses lazybones Tu holds in a single glance at the end of “Gazing at the Sacred Peak.”

In the monastery, the struggle toward awakening inevitably involved a great deal of philosophical thought directed at understanding the weave of consciousness and Cosmos. At the same time, realizing that the isolate thought-realm precludes awakened dwelling, the sangha took meditation as a core practice that returns consciousness to its wild original-nature as empty and open and integral to the Cosmos, as indeed the Cosmos aware of itself. As we have seen, meditation in its barest outlines began with sitting quietly and watching thoughts come and go in a field of silent and dark emptiness. From this attention to thought's movement came meditation's first revelation: that we are, as a matter of observable fact, separate from our thoughts and memories. That is, we are not the center of identity we assume ourselves to be in our day-to-day lives—that center of self-absorbed thought that takes reality (Tao's cosmological tissue) as the object of its contemplation, defining us as fundamentally outside reality. Instead, we are wild: the empty awareness (known in Ch'an terminology as “empty-mind”) that watches identity rehearsing itself in thoughts and memories relentlessly coming and going.

With experience, the thought process slowed, and it was possible for adepts like Tu Fu to watch thoughts burgeon forth out of the dark emptiness, evolve through their transformations, and disappear back into it. The revelation here was that thoughts appear and disappear in exactly the same way as the ten thousand things appear and disappear in the process of Tao's unfurling, and that both thought and things therefore share as their primal source the same generative

emptiness, dark and silent. In this, meditation revealed that consciousness shares dragon's nature, that consciousness is wild by its very nature—always already integral to the living tissue of a generative Cosmos. And so, it is always already awakened.

After enough experience in meditation practice, the stream of thought fell silent, and adepts inhabited empty-mind, that generative ground itself. Here, they were wholly free of the center of identity—free, that is, of the self-absorbed and relentless process of thought that defines us as centers of identity separate from the world around us. This was the heart of dwelling for ancient Chinese artist-intellectuals like Tu Fu: mind and Cosmos woven together in the most profound cosmological and ontological way, identity revealed in its most primal form as the generative tissue itself. It is a mind in which the thought and memory that structure isolate identity have emptied away, a mind in which the stories and explanations that promise a path toward awakening have also emptied away. Hence: consciousness in the open, the existence-tissue Cosmos open to itself.

Here in this poem, Tu Fu applies the insights of meditation practice to a kind of landscape practice, leaving the monastic realm behind and entering the Dragon-Gate landscape where a river had carved its way between two cliffs. This was a landscape that embodied Ch'an awakening. It was invested with the aura of Buddhist practice, for its cliffwalls contained thousands of celebrated Buddhist statues—a concentration of art so intense it is now a UNESCO world heritage site. And at the same time, as wild landscape, it was itself free of story and explanation, our human meaning-making. This is deepened by the fact that it is night: those meaningless wilds gone nearly dark, a consuming dark that is not only without conceptual distinctions, but also without perceptual distinctions. And it is a very particular kind of darkness. It is “*yin-dark*”: female, source that generates the ten thousand things in their constant transformation, the same source-tissue revealed in meditation as our most essential identity, as the dark ground that generates the ten thousand thoughts. Here, it is more simply a place

of awakening, of nurturing in a vast cosmological sense: fecund yin-dark with planets and stars nestled close in a “heaven-rift,” Tu Fu’s descriptive for Dragon-Gate that emphasizes cosmological dimensions cradled there over the river, filling the open space between Dragon-Gate’s cliffs.

This is a nurturing at once cosmological and ontological, reminding us of the graph for *ch’an*: 禪. Meaning literally “meditation,” 禪 contains as its left-hand element 示, which derives etymologically from 𠄎 and the more ancient oracle-bone form 𠄎, images showing heaven as the line above, with three streams of light emanating earthward from the three types of heavenly bodies: sun, moon, and stars. These three sources of light were considered bright distillations of, or embryonic origins of, *ch’i*: the breath-force that pulses through the Cosmos as both matter and energy simultaneously—its two dimensions, *yin* and *yang*, giving form and life to the ten thousand things and driving their perpetual transformations. And although the terminology is different (and the moon is only secondarily a light/energy source), this ancient Chinese description of reality is basically the same as contemporary cosmology’s account, in which stars are in fact the “embryonic origins” of reality: in their explosive deaths, stars create the chemical composition of matter; and in life, they provide the energy that drives earth’s web of life-processes.

Yin-dark, planets and stars nestled close: Tu Fu’s dwelling as integral to the *ch’i*-tissue is palpable and powerful here, dwelling that already has all the elements of awakening. In night’s near darkness, Tu’s attention naturally turns to sounds, and he describes those sounds as music, but music that is *empty* (虛). In Ch’an, this term has considerable philosophical resonance. It is one of several synonymous Taoist/Ch’an terms that describe things as empty of all conceptual content: usually landscape, as here, or consciousness. Here, applied to music as the voice of Dragon-Gate’s dark wilds, it suggests those wilds are pure and empty of meaning. It also suggests that Tu is hearing sounds and experiencing dark wilds with the clarity of an empty mind, free of story and explanation and meaning-

making He has shed those structures of isolating identity, opening the wild empty-mind that is the goal of meditation practice in monasteries like the one he had just left.

To cultivate mind as wholly empty in the Taoist/Ch'an sense, the act of perception become a spiritual practice: it is perhaps first and foremost to cultivate a direct engagement with one's immediate experience, as opposed to being consumed in the machinery of mental events. Tu describes cultivating such landscape practice like this: "In a river's clarity, you can polish mind jewel-bright." And taking it a step further, in a poem written at a Ch'an mountain monastery, he says: "I turn / and look away into mind nowhere it is." But that engagement opens surprising cosmological depths—for in that empty-mind, the opening of consciousness is a mirror allowing no distinction between inside and outside: hence, the dragon open to itself. And as Ch'an's influence became pervasive across the arts in the centuries preceding Tu Fu, this empty-mind mirroring led to a poetry made of clear and concise images, as in this poem, where this Ch'an-imagist strategy integrates consciousness and landscape / Cosmos by making landscape the content of mind. This is the imagism that migrated via Japanese haiku into Ezra Pound's poetics, from which it shaped much of modern American poetry (see my book *The Wilds of Poetry*). And it makes sense this became a defining feature of classical Chinese poetry, which must always include an emotional dimension, for "mind" in Chinese is 心 (心 in its earlier more recognizably pictographic form: image of the heart muscle, with its chambers at the locus of veins and arteries), which means both "heart" and "mind" simultaneously. There is no ingrained distinction between the two. So that empty-mind integration of consciousness into the cosmological whole was also an emotional experience, an experience of the *heart*.

Here in "Wandering at Dragon-Gate's Ancestor-Devotion Monastery," this Ch'an-imagism is manifest in the monastery bell, the planets and stars, the breezy weave of moon and forest, light and shadow. And it appears more generally in the night's moon-silvered darkness. Tu Fu's gaze into nighttime wilds is a deeply meditative

act: empty-mind mirroring the world gone dark, and therefore integral to that world. Mind as yin-dark, that cosmological ground that is source of both the ten thousand thoughts and the ten thousand things. Hence, again, identity quite literally as the generative existence-tissue.

The generative space of empty-mind is brought into focus and animated in the empty space infusing and surrounding the words of classical Chinese poems like this—a space created by the poem’s grammar, which is minimal in the extreme. This grammar allows a remarkable openness and ambiguity that leaves a great deal unstated, leaves it as an absent presence. All words can function as any part of speech. Prepositions and conjunctions are rarely used, leaving relationships between lines, phrases, ideas, and images unclear. The distinction between singular and plural is only rarely and indirectly made. Verbs are not uncommonly absent, and when present they have no tenses, so temporal location and sequence are vague. And very often subjects and objects are absent, which creates the sense of individual identities blurred together into a shared space of consciousness. But perhaps the most remarkable effect of this empty grammar is that it embodies the original nature of consciousness as empty-mind, that generative tissue from which words and thoughts emerge. It embodies, therefore, consciousness as wild, as always already awakened: consciousness in the open, the awakened Cosmos open to itself. And that is precisely the emptiness revealed by a poem like this.

That is the beginning of what cannot be rendered in English, for English grammar contains no wildness. Already in the open spaces of the first couplet, we assume an implied “I” that “wanders” away from the monastery and “passes the night” in the dark wilds at the edge of the monastery’s territory. But without the pronoun, it remains an absent presence. So, it is Ch’an empty-mind that wanders and passes the night, or consciousness in general (poet and reader, for instance, indistinguishable here), or the awakened Cosmos open to itself, or perhaps the Dragon-Gate landscape. And this landscape is most fundamentally the generative tissue of Tao, which appears explicitly

in the poem as *yin*-dark. Similarly, in the sixth line, the empty grammar blurs Tu Fu and the clouds together as possible subjects for the verb *sleep*. It seems grammatically that the clouds sleep, but the oddness of that leads us to fill in an “I”: “among the clouds, I sleep.” In effect, the two are blurred together, a reading encouraged by the “cold robes,” which seem evocative of cloud-forms. But in the end, it feels again like it is the existence-tissue Cosmos itself that sleeps and stirs.

Like thought and memory in the mental realm, language for artist-intellectuals like Tu Fu was not experienced as an ontologically distinct realm as it is in the West, where we assume it to be a transcendental system of reference pointing at the empirical world from subjectivity’s outside (inside?). Instead, it was seen as integral to the empirical, part of Tao’s generative movement. The empty grammatical space surrounding and infusing the words of the poem is, then, that same generative emptiness from which the ten thousand things are born. And it is no less the empty-mind from which thought is born, the same empty-mind that hears the bell incite awakening.

That bell is a quintessential instance of Ch’an’s mirror-mind imagism. With its penetrating clarity, the bell opens the spatial depths of Ch’an mirror-mind’s empty expanses—the *depths of awakening* revealing consciousness in the open, consciousness as the Cosmos open to itself, awakened to itself. Free of the need for a stated subject defining a center of identity that hears the bell (“I hear”), Tu’s poem renders an awakening that seems shared by everyone: Tu Fu, the monks in the monastery, people in general, the reader.

This awakening is the nature of everyday experience, the very fabric of our lives, for in the actual moment of pure perception, there is no self involved. If we look closely at what happens in consciousness, we find nothing more than the perceptual experience itself. It is only upon reflection afterward that we describe it as an “I” hearing—a description dictated not by experience itself, but by a body of philosophical assumptions. However preoccupied Tu’s

poems will be with the dire challenges of his life, they are always suffused with this fabric of everyday awakening, that weave of consciousness and Cosmos. By walking away from the monastery's spiritual struggle in this poem, Tu opens himself to that everyday weave, that dwelling in which he hears not just a bell sounding, but the bell heard by an awakened mind, by the cosmological emptiness this poem shapes and reveals outside of its words. So, it is the dragon-tissue, is indeed the awakened Cosmos itself that hears the bell's call drifting across the Dragon-Gate wildscape.

3

Drifting Whole

題	張	氏	隱	居
write on wall	Longbow	family	recluse	house

春	山	無	伴	獨	相	求
spring	mountain	no/ Absence	friend	alone	for you	search

伐	木	丁	丁	山	更	幽
chop	tree	crack	crack	mountain	again/ more	quiet mystery

澗	道	餘	寒	歷	冰	雪
creek	pathway	remnant	cold	pass	ice	snow

石	門	斜	日	到	林	邱
stone	gate	slant	sun	reach	forest	place

不	貪	夜	識	金	銀	氣
no	desire	night	know	gold	silver	ch'i

遠	害	朝	看	麋	鹿	遊
far	injure	morning	see	deer	deer	wander

乘	興	杳	然	迷	出	處
mount/ ride	burgeon	dark	thus	confuse	leave	place

對	君	疑	是	泛	虛	舟
facing	you	suspect	this/is	drift	empty	boat

Inscribed on a Wall at Longbow's Recluse Home

Amid spring mountains, alone, I set out to find you.
Axe strokes *crack—crack*, and quit. Quiet mystery
deepens. I follow a stream up into last snow and ice
and beyond, dusk light aslant, to Stone Gate forests.
Deer roam all morning here, for you harm nothing.
Wanting nothing, you know *ch'i* gold and silver all
night. Facing you *on a whim* in such dark, the way
home lost—I feel it drifting, this whole empty boat.

SPRING MOUNTAINS, THE REPEATED CRACK OF AN AXE, deepening quiet, tumbling streamwater, snow and ice, the facing cliffs of Stone Gate, dramatic late-light slanting through mountain forests: Tu Fu enters the drifting empty-boat world of sage-master Longbow through the resounding perceptual clarity of his walk into the mountains. And so, in another poem from Tu's early years, awakening begins quite simply with that Ch'an mirror-mind imagism. Indeed, that *quiet mystery* the axe strokes deepen is the silence of meditation, mind empty of all content, allowing the act of perception to become a Ch'an practice cultivating oneself as the wild Cosmos awakened to itself.

This cosmological clarity appears in the first line. The most obvious reading is simply "In spring mountains without friends, alone, I set out to find you." But there's an odd and unsatisfying redundancy in "without friends" followed by "alone." Another possible reading is "Spring mountains not friends, alone, I set out to find you"—but that seems unlikely because ancient artist-intellectuals like Tu Fu saw mountains as the best of sage friends, and as facilitators of awakening, as in this poem. And so, we are encouraged to read 無 as "Absence" rather than "no"—a possibility

encouraged by the fact that, as we will see below, the Taoist/Ch'an tradition exploited this double meaning in a number of key concepts.

The new reading of the first line becomes something like: "In spring mountains, with my friend Absence, I set out alone to find you," or perhaps, remembering that mountains were considered sage friends: "Spring mountains my Absence friends, I set out alone to find you," similar to the moment in a late poem where Tu has "Absence alone for company." Given how vast a concept Absence is, one can only smile at Tu's grand assertion. But in this bit of humor lay the deep dimensions of Tu's entrance into this world of his sage-recluse friend, for empty-mind is itself integral to that generative tissue of Absence. So to be in the company of Absence suggests being aware of the world at that deep ontological level, and/or inhabiting the world as Absence. And indeed, empty-mind perception is Absence looking out at Presence. This is Taoism's way of describing the Cosmos looking out at itself, and that perception is enacted in the poem by the imagist clarity of Tu's walk.

This Ch'an-imagism highlights the clarity and sheer thusness of particular things, and its deep cosmological dimensions grow out of another Taoist term for the cosmological/ontological process of Tao: *tzu-jan* (自然). Literally meaning "self-ablaze," from which comes "self-so" or "the of-itself," *tzu-jan* is a near synonym for *Tao*. But it is best translated as "occurrence appearing of itself," for it is meant to emphasize the particularity and self-sufficiency, the selfless and spontaneous *thusness*, of the ten thousand things in the ongoing transformation of Presence emerging from Absence. As in any typical Chinese poem, the Ch'an-imagist clarity of the first four lines calls up this whole *tzu-jan* cosmology: empty-mind inhabiting that cosmology wholly. Such are the depths Tu enters as he sets out into the mountains.

These depths resound in the *quiet mystery* that axe strokes deepen at the end of the second line: 幽, meaning most simply "quiet solitude," which is sufficient as a description of the empty-mind opened by the perceptual clarity of his walk. But it goes much deeper even than that. Appearing often in recluse poetry, 幽 infuses the

surface meaning “quiet solitude” with rich philosophical depths, beginning with the sense of “dark/secret/hidden/mystery”; and that leads finally to the term’s deepest level, which animates the whole cosmological process of *tzu-jan*. Here it means forms, the ten thousand things, barely on the not-yet-emergent side of the origin-moment: just as they are about to emerge from the formless ground of Absence, or just after they vanish back into that ground. So Tu is now inhabiting reality at origins, in that place where *tzu-jan* perennially burgeons forth, a place where time is experienced in a very different and more primal way: as an all-encompassing generative present where occurrence burgeons steadily forth. This sense of time shapes the classical Chinese language, for rather than embodying a metaphysics of time—that metaphysical river of past, present, and future taken for granted in the West—classical Chinese with its uninflected verbs simply registers action, occurrence appearing of itself (*tzu-jan*) in that generative present.

Sage wisdom in ancient China meant understanding the deep nature of consciousness and Cosmos, how they are woven together into a single fabric, and how to dwell in that weave as an organic part of Tao’s generative cosmological process. Such dwelling begins with empty-mind awareness of *tzu-jan* at origins, then deepens into living or acting as *tzu-jan*, there at those origins where things are constantly becoming themselves with selfless spontaneity. This practice is known as *wu-wei* (無為: “not / Absence” + “action”). *Wu-wei* initially means “not acting,” in the sense of acting without the metaphysics of self, or acting with an empty and therefore wild mind. This selfless action is the movement of *tzu-jan*, so *wu-wei* means action integral to *tzu-jan*’s spontaneous burgeoning forth.

Wu-wei was a spiritual practice that ancient Chinese artist-intellectuals pursued in their daily lives and in their artistic practices, and Tu refers to one famous example of this in the penultimate line: “on a whim” (乘興), which is literally “mount/ride/use” + “burgeon,” giving something like “following/trusting-to what burgeons forth (in the mind),” a formulation in which that Taoist/Ch’an generative cosmology is clearly operating. (興 recurs in Tu’s titles and

elsewhere, and the closest equivalent in English is “thought,” but that fails as translation because it loses the radically different cosmological context.) *On a whim* refers to Wang Hui-chih, a sage recluse who lived four hundred years before Tu Fu. Wang set out “on a whim” through the snow to visit a friend one day, but when he arrived the whim had vanished, so he turned around and went home without seeing his friend. Tu is suggesting here that his own visit to Longbow’s recluse home followed the same *wu-wei* spontaneity. And indeed, Tu’s mastery of *wu-wei* infuses virtually all of his poems, and it is one of the primary reasons for the reverence accorded him in the tradition.

Tu wrote openly and effortlessly about all aspects of experience, no matter how mundane. In this, Tu’s *wu-wei* practice is an extension of his Ch’an realism, and it is perhaps most remarkable in the way that he wrote steadily through all the debilitating challenges of his day-to-day refugee life. And this practice went so far as to include a great many tossed-off poems that just traced a fleeting moment of thought, accepting and valuing it even though it had no real “poetic interest” in any conventional sense. As for the poems themselves: they tend to follow the movement of his thought, giving them a spontaneous associative texture. In shorter poems, this creates a subtle sense of collage made up of striking juxtapositions (this becomes more prominent in later poems). And his longer poems tend to move in a kind of liberated ramble following the transformations of experience and thought. Choices and judgments are part of what define us as identity-centers separate from the world, but Tu’s poetic practice accepted all aspects of experience and any movement of thought equally: self integral to Cosmos, to the unfolding process of *tzu-jan*.

Indeed, the *wu* in *wu-wei* is 無 (“not/Absence”), the same word we saw with its double meaning in the poem’s first line, a double meaning also exploited in several other key Taoist/Ch’an concepts, including *wu-hsin* (無心): “no-mind/Absence-mind,” synonymous in the Ch’an lexicon with *empty-mind*. So, in addition to “not-acting,” *wu-wei* means “Absence-acting.” That is, acting as generative Absence—which is, of course, simply another way of saying “acting as

tzu-jan.” Since empty-mind is no different than generative Absence, the perceptual clarity of the first four lines was *Absence perceiving*—or in modern Western terms, the wild Cosmos perceiving itself. And here, the walk as a *whim* is revealed as *Absence acting*, Absence taking a walk into the mountains to visit a friend—or again, the existence-tissue Cosmos taking a walk.

And further, the poem itself is *wu-wei* action (Absence acting), for the title describes it as written on a wall of his host’s house, a common practice that suggests the poem was composed spontaneously “on a whim” and scrawled in that moment across the wall. Hence, the Cosmos thinking itself, understanding itself, expressing itself, feeling itself. And in addition, writing on the wall like this was an act of calligraphic art, which was seen as a form of Ch’an practice that also cultivated *wu-wei* as one of its primary artistic aspirations. As it unfurls ideograms, the brushstroke moves always at the ongoing originary moment of Presence burgeoning forth from Absence: hence, the calligrapher moving with the elemental energy of the Cosmos, enacting the essential movement of Tao’s magisterial cosmological process. The calligraphy on this book’s cover gives a sense of what Tu’s poem might have looked like there on the wall in Longbow’s house—the ideograms dramatically liberated from standard forms like those seen in the poem printed at the beginning of this chapter. In standard form, the graphs are evenly spaced and each fits into a uniform square space. But in the more artistic forms of calligraphy, this is utterly transformed by an aesthetic that closely resembles gestural abstract-expressionism. And Tu Fu would have written his poem on the wall in this gestural way, as a Taoist/Ch’an practice of wild empty-mind participating in the cosmological process.

So, like his walk into the mountains, Tu’s poem was wholly an enactment of *wu-wei* as spiritual practice: in addition to being composed with selfless spontaneity, it was written on the wall with the spontaneous artistry of *wu-wei*. This is reflected at a deeper structural level of the poem, as we have seen: in the wide-open minimal grammar, each word emerges from generative emptiness.

Composing the poem was, in this further sense, to move on that generative edge. And reading it is a very similar experience: drawing meaning out of the mysterious Absence surrounding the words, the reader participates in the generative emptiness at the source of language, mind, and all heaven and earth. It is as if Lao Tzu were describing poetry when he said, “Keeping words spare: occurrence appearing of itself [*tzu-jan*].”

Wu-wei—that selfless wander at full ontological and cosmological depth, acting as the wild Cosmos itself: it changes everything. And here, that wander is consuming because, unlike Wang Hui-chih, Tu is so completely adrift in the traceless transformations of *tzu-jan* that he has lost track of where home is. But here in the mountains, he can share that drift with his sage host, and this suggests yet another reading for the poem’s first line: “In spring mountains, an Absence friend: I set out to find him.” We can talk ourselves into some understanding of that wander, but how does this cosmological drift actually feel as immediate experience? That is what Tu captures in his final image of an empty boat adrift, an image that demands the deep philosophical levels of the poem to resonate in its full sense: the translatable narrative surface of the poem is not enough.

It seems Tu and his friend are in this boat, so to call it empty is to suggest the two are absent in the Ch’an sense of empty-mind. But 虛 (“empty”) is essentially a synonym for 無 (“Absence”) in the Ch’an lexicon. So here, Tu’s “empty” boat is the “Absence” boat, that generative process as a cosmological drift of transformation. Moving as *wu-wei*, Tu and his friend belong wholly to that cosmological drift, that refugee Cosmos. To do this requires a mind emptied of the self-identity that defines an individual as separate from the cosmological drift. It is also, as in meditation, wild mind empty of all content, and therefore free of the explanations that give reality meaning or value or purpose. And indeed, another meaning of 虛 is “meaningless, purposeless, useless”: hence, that “empty boat” is also a boat of meaninglessness, purposelessness, uselessness. So there is the sense of being adrift as that great transformation and without the orientation provided by our human meaning or explanation. In a

sense, this is the deepest description of Tu Fu's refugee life to come: empty-mind adrift in the empty and inexhaustibly generative Cosmos, the existence-tissue Cosmos adrift in itself. Chuang Tzu (365–290 B.C.E.), the second seminal Taoist sage, had his own poetic celebration of that selfless drift:

if you mount [乘] the source of heaven and earth and the ten thousand changes, if you ride the six seasons of *ch'i* in their endless dispute—then you travel the inexhaustible, depending on nothing at all.

4

Blood Black

悲	陳	陶
lament	array	delight

孟	冬	十	郡	良	家	子
early	winter	ten	prefecture	fine	homes	children

血	作	陳	陶	澤	中	水
blood	makes	array	delight	marsh	center	water

夜	曠	天	清	無	戰	聲
night	expanse	heaven	clear	no	war	sound

四	萬	義	軍	同	日	死
four	ten thousand	loyal	soldiers	together	day	dead

羣	胡	歸	來	血	洗	箭
multitude	Mongol	return	come	blood	bathe	arrows

仍	唱	胡	歌	飲	都	市
again	sing	Mongol	song	drink	capital	market

都	人	迴	面	向	北	嘯
capital	people	turn	face	toward	north	wail

日	夜	更	望	官	軍	至
day	night	again	gaze/	government	army	arrive

hope

Array-Delight Lament

Early winter across ten prefectures, noble homes: their children
bleed now into Array-Delight, blood making water in the marsh.

Night open wide, skies crystalline depths, the battle gone silent:
leaving forty thousand loyal warriors dead there in a single day,

Mongols come thronging back, their arrows bathed blood-black,
and out drunk in the markets again, they mangle Mongol songs.

We of the capital—we turn away, face north to mourn and gaze
and, another day gone dark, long for our army's sudden return.

THE CATASTROPHE CAME IN 755. TU FU WAS FORTY-THREE when a devastating civil war broke out, a war that would shape and haunt the last fifteen years of his life. Tu had returned to the capital, Peace-Perpetua (Ch'ang-an: today's Xian), ending the years of wandering during which he wrote those early poems. This return marked a renewed determination to secure a government position, and eventually his brilliance attracted the attention of the emperor, who ordered a special examination for him in 752. Tu passed, making him something of a celebrity—but much to his disappointment, it soon became clear the dysfunctional government would not offer him a job anytime soon.

Tu was by now married and had several children. Living in the capital and his ancestral village just south of the capital on the slopes of Whole-South Mountain, he struggled to support the family. Governmental appointment, and with it financial security, continued to elude him until the country suffered sixty days of steady rain. Famine and hardship drove him to a village north of the capital where the family apparently found assistance and managed to survive. The next year, he left his family there and returned to the capital, where he finally secured a position as advisor to the crown

prince. But his joy at this long-awaited success was short-lived. Returning north to retrieve his family, he found his son had died of malnutrition; and soon thereafter, rebel armies swept through China from the northeast and seized Peace-Perpetua.

When the capital fell, the government was forced to flee with its loyal armies. The emperor had for decades been a model ruler, but he eventually became hopelessly self-involved and inept. Seeing the nation ravaged by his self-indulgence, the heartsick emperor abdicated in favor of the crown prince. So Tu was suddenly an advisor to the emperor. Somehow, though, in his attempts to rejoin the government, Tu ended up trapped from late summer of 756 through the following spring in the devastated capital, the setting for this poem. He seems to have kept hidden from the rebel authorities because he was part of the emperor's government, though he appears to have moved around the city with some freedom. This probably meant living disguised as a commoner, or perhaps as a monk, for one poem describes Tu hiding in a Ch'an monastery, the abbot of which was a friend he would meet again later during his refugee wandering (see chapter 7). Commanded by another of Tu Fu's friends, Fang Kuan, imperial armies were sent to retake Peace-Perpetua. But they were defeated at Array-Delight, just west of the capital—a disastrous turn of events that Tu's poem describes from his precarious perspective in the capital.

T'ao Ch'ien, Hsieh Ling-yün, Meng Hao-jan, Wang Wei, Li Po: Tu Fu's great forebears generally limited their serious poetic engagement to a range of situations suited to spiritual depth and insight. Tu Fu's trajectory as a poet might have followed those predecessors, but when this catastrophic war ravaged the relative peace and prosperity of T'ang China, he didn't restrict his poetry to tranquil moments of enlightenment in mountain landscapes. His awakening was as large as the awakening of the language itself: large enough, that is, to include all of experience equally, rather than limiting it to privileged moments of lyric beauty or insight. This is a kind of relentless realism; and in the Ch'an/Taoist framework, that realism is almost synonymous with enlightenment: consciousness as

the awakened Cosmos open equally to creation and destruction, beauty and terror, joy and grief. Open to it all and open to feeling itself in every possible way. This is another way of describing Tu's mastery of *wu-wei*—and again, at the heart of his greatness within the Chinese tradition.

Tu was hopelessly tangled in the civil war's devastation, but his open poetic awareness resulted in a vast outpouring of poems: around 1,200 survive from those eleven years, over 80 percent of his life's work; and according to legend, that is only a fraction of what he actually wrote. Further, the depth and complexity of his poems increased dramatically, and they opened new dimensions of stark, elemental experience. But like "Array-Delight Lament" bearing witness at frighteningly close hand to the devastation of war, even the bleakest of these poems is transformed by the Taoist/Ch'an clarity of awakening, of consciousness as the Cosmos open to itself.

Here, this awakening first appears in the poem's strict Ch'an-imagist nature. From our Western perspective, it looks like poetic storytelling, and it is that in the Chinese context too; but given the Ch'an-imagist conceptual framework, it is experienced as empty-mind's mirror-deep clarity gazing into *tzu-jan* itself, that whole cosmology. And here, that clarity is so severe that it accepted this constellation of image-facts just as a more conventional poet accepted ennobling landscape image-facts. Indeed, Tu uses this language of awakening to ironize conventions of the Ch'an-imagist poetry practiced by his predecessors.

The first two couplets both begin with gestures one expects to find in Ch'an landscape poems. In the first, a vast perspective across ten prefectures seems almost idyllic: the strict beauty of late winter, the homes and children. But those children we might imagine playing happily are revealed in the second line to be in fact dead soldiers, their blood draining away into the marshes. Lines are always end-stopped in classical Chinese poetry, and here Tu Fu creates a startling ironic turn by breaking that rule. The children seem to be part of an idyllic landscape at the end of the first line, but reading across the line-break they suddenly become dead soldiers. And this

strategy continues in the second line. Seven-word lines like these always have a pause after the fourth word, and here that pause creates further irony, for in the phrase preceding the break, the children's "blood makes array-delight."

The second couplet begins with another landscape, one so decidedly Ch'an in its dramatic clarity and emptiness that we might expect to hear next about stars and a monastery bell. This time the reversal with its knife-blade irony comes quickly, after the mid-line pause, where the silence is not that of a meditation hall, mountain landscape, or awakened mind. It is instead an eerie silence that follows the cataclysmic soundscape of a daylong battle so vast and intense that forty thousand died on the Chinese side alone. And that landscape of Ch'an clarity is littered with the mangled bodies of those soldiers. By now, one cannot ignore the sense that Tu Fu is implicitly challenging the terms of Ch'an awakening by casting it against such a reality.

In its Ch'an-imagist poetics, the poem embodies that empty-mind awakening: empty mirror-deep mind, wherein outside becomes inside, defining identity itself. But what happens when that outside is devastation and death rather than ennobling mountains and rivers? Being open to all of that becomes a frightening kind of awakening that is perhaps the defining character of Tu Fu's poetic mind: frightening, but also magisterial in its liberating clarity, for it is the clarity of an awakened Cosmos open equally to its every possibility.

5

Trace Sky

對
facing

雪
snow

戰
war

哭
wail

多
many

新
new

鬼
ghosts

愁
grief

吟
chant

獨
alone

老
ancient

翁
old man

亂
disorder

雲
clouds

低
bottom

薄
slight

暮
dusk

急
frenzy

雪
snow

舞
dance

迴
revolve

風
wind

瓢
ladle

棄
abandon

樽
winejar

無
no

綠
green

爐

stove

存

retain

火

fire

似

seem

紅

red

數

several

州

prefectures

消

flow

息

ebb

斷

cut off

愁

grieving

坐

sit

正

simply

書

write

空

empty

Facing Snow

Enough new ghosts to mourn any war,
and a lone old grief-sung man. Broken

clouds at twilight's ragged edge, wind
buffets a dance of frenzied snow. Ladle

beside my jar drained of emerald wine,
flame-red illusion lingers in the stove.

News comes from nowhere. I sit spirit-
wounded, trace words empty onto sky.

THERE SEEMS NO END TO EMPTINESS. THE TERM FOR it in the final line of this poem (空) is synonymous with 虛, which we saw describing that *empty* boat adrift in “Inscribed on a Wall at Longbow’s Recluse Home” ([this page](#)), and here we find it has yet another meaning: “sky.” In fact, it seems likely this was the original meaning in the primal word-hoard, and that the other meanings slowly evolved from it. The open grammar of the line allows 空 to begin in that originary sense, and then resound with other dimensions of meaning. So, the two final words mean first of all “[I] write in the sky,” a fecund gesture of the despair and helplessness Tu felt while trapped in occupied Peace-Perpetua. But given that despair, the phrase can also mean “[I] write uselessly,” employing 空 in its other sense: “meaningless, pointless, purposeless, vain, useless.” The 空 could just as easily apply to Tu himself: “[I], pointless /useless, write.” And the resonance continues. The phrase also means to be empty in the Ch’an sense of empty-mind: “[I], empty-mind, write.” And like 虛, 空 (“empty”) is synonymous with 無 (wu: “Absence”) in Ch’an parlance, which adds yet another dimension: “[I], Absence, write.”

This kind of spiritual depth is by now familiar. But there is another dimension here that is, however frightening, profoundly liberating: that the content of writing—our human meaning-making and explanation and orientation—is wholly empty. As we have seen, this is the goal of Taoist/Ch’an practice, but here we see its dark side. Meaning-making is empty in the sense that it is a voice of the Cosmos with no more meaning than any other “voice”—foundering clouds, twilight, wind outside, blown snow ticking against the window—which is another way of saying that to write is “to write Absence” or “Absence writing.” These other “voices” are meaningless in that they are wild forms taken by the existence-tissue and not themselves part of our systems of human meaning, and since our linguistic human meaning-making is just one more of those forms, it too is wild and meaningless. Hence: the human is wild, and meaning is meaningless.

And so the poem, with its grammar empty of the need for a subject who writes, leaves Tu himself an empty presence inhabiting bottomless emptiness in all the senses of 空. But here, Tu emphasizes the pointless and meaningless cosmological depths that are nothing if not terrifying. In this, though, there is a liberation—a liberation that opens us beyond the order we impose on reality, opens us into the great transformation of things. And it is the liberation cultivated in Ch’an practice, with its strategies for breaking down our conceptual structures. All the devastation and grief Tu is facing here in this snow-flurried twilight—how bewildering that, in the end, it opens a breathtaking kind of liberation.

6

Ruins Lush

春 望
spring landscape

國 破 山 河 在
country ruined mountains rivers remain

城 春 草 木 深
city spring wildgrass trees deep

感 時 花 濺 淚
moved by times blossoms sprinkle tears

恨 別 鳥 驚 心
hating separation birds startle heart

烽 火 連 三 月
beacon-tower fire continue three months

家 書 抵 萬 金
home writing trade ten thousand gold

白 頭 搔 更 短
white head scratch more deficient

渾 欲 不 勝 簪
confusion nearly not equal to hairpin

Spring Landscape

The country in ruins, rivers and mountains
continue. The city grows lush with spring.

Blossoms scatter tears for us, and all these
separations in a bird's cry startle the heart.

Beacon-fires three months ablaze: by now
a mere letter's worth ten thousand in gold,

and worry's thinned my hair to such white
confusion I can't even keep this hairpin in.

THE COSMOS CAN'T HELP BUT SMILE. ITS MYSTERIOUS generative energy—*tzu-jan*, the ten thousand things relentlessly burgeoning forth—always replaces even the worst of tragedies with something

fresh and bright. Still trapped in the capital, Tu Fu watched that smile come to the city. It's easy to recognize in the Cosmos's smile a vast indifference to human suffering, and that bitter sense of abandonment is where the poem begins in the archetypal first line (possibly the most famous line in Chinese poetry), followed by a description of spring's beauty coming to the devastated capital. But in the flat matter-of-fact statement of these lines, Tu reveals himself as a master of that same indifference. And indeed, that indifference leads to a particular kind of humor that explains why this is one of the most revered poems in the Chinese tradition.

It begins with the too-beautiful sense of lush spring overrunning the ruined city, and it continues in the facetious irony of the second couplet. After describing the heartless indifference of the Cosmos in the first couplet, the poem clearly knows that blossoms and birds don't care about the city's dire predicament. And yet, we see blossoms scattering tears for the devastation of Tu's war-torn times, and birds crying startling laments for the separations people were enduring: separations of the living and newly dead, separations of loved ones kept apart by the fighting, especially the separation of Tu himself and the family he left in a northern village that might easily have been overrun by war. It's an endearing fairy-tale view of the world, sweetly naive and funny—but also, in the knowledge of its falsity, heartbreaking.

With these poetic gestures, Tu Fu makes the Cosmos's smile into his own—a singular reweaving of consciousness and Cosmos. And in the final couplet, Tu acts out that humor. In such dire circumstances, his gesture here seems bafflingly trivial, making us laugh in sympathy for this hapless white-haired man who can't seem to manage a more forceful response. To scratch the head is a stock image for anxious worry, and so: his hair thinning from so much worry and grief. This is already a comic exaggeration, as if his hair could turn white and fall out in a few months' time. And it continues in the feeble helplessness implied in Tu's claim that he can't even manage the simple feat of keeping a hairpin in the long hair he wore twisted into a topknot, as was the custom.

Within the human context, it would be perfectly natural for Tu to be consumed with worry and grief—not only because of the devastated country and his own hardship in the ruined city, but also because his family was far away and their situation so tenuous. And he was. But here as the poem ends, he is smiling at that worry and grief, just as the Cosmos smiles at it. And so Tu, again an empty presence in the grammar, has become the awakened Cosmos smiling heartbroken at itself.

7

Emptiness Dragon

宿	贊	公	房
overnight	illumine	master	house

仗	錫	何	來	此
staff	tin	how	arrive	here

秋	風	已	颯	然
autumn	wind	already	moan	such

雨	荒	深	院	菊
rain	tangled	deep	courtyard	chrysan- themum

霜	到	半	池	蓮
frost	topple	much	pond	lotus

放	逐	寧	違	性
exile	expel	never	abandon	nature

虛	空	不	離	禪
empty	empty	not	distant	ch'an

相	逢	成	夜	宿
mutual	meet	complete	country	overnight

隴	月	向	人	圓
ridge- dragon	moon	face	people	round

Overnight at Master Illumine's House

How did your abbot-staff ever get you here?
Autumn winds already a desolate moan, rain
tangles depths of courtyard chrysanthemums,
and in the pond, frost topples lotus blossoms.

Cast into exile, you never abandon original-
nature. Emptiness empty, you keep close to

ch'an-stillness. All night long, we share this
ridge-dragon moon facing us round and full.

TU FU ENDURED LIFE IN THE OCCUPIED CAPITAL FOR nearly a year before managing to slip away. He somehow made his way to the

exiled court and took up his position as advisor to the new emperor. But he hadn't heard from his wife in over a year, and he had no idea what had become of the family he had left in an area said to have been overrun by fighting. So when a letter arrived saying the family was alive but in desperate poverty, he set out on a difficult and dangerous two-week-long journey to join them. Once there, Tu was able to support them in some comfort with his government salary. Then a few months later, when loyal armies retook the capital and drove rebel forces back into the east, Tu went to share the emperor's joyful return to the capital. He settled with his family there and began working as an imperial advisor. It was a bright moment in Tu's life—but within a few months, the emperor exiled Fang Kuan, Tu's friend who led the army to defeat at Array-Delight. Fang Kuan's associates too were soon exiled, among them Tu himself, who was sent to a position east of the capital.

Before long, resurgent rebel armies in the east began a new campaign—quickly winning a number of decisive victories and advancing close to Tu's new home. Tu's situation was especially precarious, for he was living in the region those rebel armies would cross through if they decided to attack the capital again. Fed up with the frustrations of a bureaucratic career and leery of the looming danger, Tu resigned and moved his family to Thresh-Grain, a beautiful area of remote highlands on the western frontier where he thought they would be safer. This break with the government and his homeland in the capital region came in 759, and it was the beginning of his refugee life: eleven years of considerable hardship, but also of great artistic achievement. He wrote nearly all his major poems during those years, and the depth and complexity of those poems increased dramatically, transforming the possibilities of Chinese poetry.

Master Illumine was abbot at Great-Cloud, a Ch'an monastery in Peace-Perpetua. He and Tu Fu became friends during Tu's year in the occupied capital, when Tu had hidden at Great-Cloud. Now, Illumine too had been exiled. Here in this poem, surprised to find themselves together in Thresh-Grain, their lives now quite tenuous,

the two friends cultivated whatever spiritual depth might sustain them. What they found was nothing at all, but a dazzlingly rich kind of nothing that was shaped by the culture's deep conceptual framework—the Taoist/Ch'an assumptions that surface here in the third couplet as "original-nature" and "emptiness."

Consciousness empty of all contents, the open space prior to thought and emotion, memory and identity: for Tu and Illumine, that is mind's deepest and most primal nature. Hence: "original-nature." And applied to consciousness, as it is in the couplet's second line, "emptiness" also describes consciousness empty of all content: that empty-mind these poems shape and animate through their empty grammar and conceptual framework. In Illumine's monastery, meditation was one of two primary methods by which adepts cultivated this empty-mind, mind returned to its original mirrored clarity. In this clarity, the Cosmos looking out at itself, Tu and Illumine inhabit the sheer thusness of things free of human meaning-making and therefore perfectly mysterious and enigmatic: wild. This enigma is central to the other method of cultivating empty-mind: paradox.

Paradox was at the heart of Taoist thought from the beginning, as in Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, where we find paradoxical statements like these collaged together in the book's fragmentary structure that itself embodies paradox in its discontinuous juxtapositions:

If you aren't free of yourself
how will you ever become yourself?

Give up self-reflection
and you're soon enlightened.

Give up self-definition
and you're soon apparent.

Knowing not-knowing is lofty.
Not knowing not-knowing is affliction.

The Tao of heaven...
never speaks
and so answers perfectly.

And in Ch'an it took the form of enigmatic sayings and wild antics. Patriarch Sudden-Horse Way-Entire (Ma Tsu), one of the most influential of all Ch'an masters and a contemporary to Tu and Illumine, was famous for this. When a monk asked the meaning of Bodhidharma coming to China (bringing Ch'an from India), Sudden-Horse kicked him in the chest, knocking him to the ground, whereupon the monk was enlightened. And when a monk asked what Buddha is, he replied: "This very mind is Buddha." Then another time, when asked the same question, he responded: "Not mind, not Buddha," an answer that has several effects: First, it perfectly contradicts his first answer. And second, it erases Buddha and all he means to Buddhism, then simply dismantles the question itself.

These strategies were deployed by Ch'an masters to upend reason and logical thought, thereby dismantling meaning-making and opening consciousness to its original-nature as emptiness, as the wild Cosmos awake to itself. Taoist paradox was part of Tu's deep cultural inheritance, and both meditation and paradox would have been the heart of his youthful Ch'an training. The deeper insight cultivated through paradox was that occurrence, the ten thousand things we encounter in everyday life, is fundamentally enigmatic and beyond our human categories of meaning-making. Indeed, Tu speaks in one poem of "ponder[ing] the question cloud-lost peaks pose."

Tu seems to have absorbed this Ch'an insight wholly and taken it as the framework within which he approached the day-to-day immediacy that dominates his poetry. Hence, he inhabits in his everyday refugee life the enigmatic and inexplicable thusness of things as they are in and of themselves. Tu's mastery is such that he sees always with the clarity of the Cosmos itself, a clarity that is of course without meaning-making. It is the perspective of Ch'an empty-mind, as we saw in "Array-Delight Lament" ([this page](#)), the perspective that allows him to accept everything into his poems. And

it complicates his admiration of Illumine in this poem's third couplet.

In the couplet's first line, Tu admires how Illumine's grounding in original-nature is so deep that he can abide in it even through the existential exposure of war and poverty and refugee life (which is no less a description of Tu himself). This admiration takes on philosophical depth in the couplet's second line, where Tu's pairing of 虛 ("empty") and 空 ("empty") describes Illumine's *ch'an* wisdom as something more profound even than empty—as emptiness within emptiness, or prior to emptiness. In Ch'an, emptiness means without explanation or conceptual content—but that is itself explanation, conceptual content. So Tu is suggesting here an emptiness prior to that Ch'an concept of emptiness, prior therefore to conceptual content. Inhabiting emptiness empty means Illumine has seen completely through meaning-making, gone completely wild.

And what would he see there? *Emptiness* is synonymous with *Absence*, the generative existence-tissue, and that formless tissue is only available to us outside of language. Because language only deals with forms, and because it is itself a system of forms (that have grown out of that formless tissue). So the only way to dwell as integral to that tissue is to step beyond language. To call that tissue *emptiness* or *Absence* is to remain within the form-full realm of language. If Illumine is "emptiness empty," he has moved past names to inhabit that generative existence-tissue immediately. This whole problematic was recognized from the beginning, in Lao Tzu, who invented a word for what Tu calls "emptiness empty": *dark-enigma* (玄), which meant the generative ontological tissue of Tao before it is distanced and divided up by names, before even *Absence* and *Presence* give birth to one another. Hence, a region beyond name and ideation where consciousness and the empirical Cosmos share their source. And as with all Taoist/Ch'an concepts—Tu infuses landscape, his own experience, and the social situation too with this dark-enigma, as in this late poem:

Yin-Dark Again

Dark-enigma winter bleeds through dark-enigma's *yin*-dark
frontiers. Yesterday, skies cleared late. Today, they're black,
lit thistledown blown ten thousand dusk-flared miles across.
On a lone city-wall, feathered war-flags trail out downwind.
River-swells rake across shorelines, tear yellow sand away.
Cloud and snow bury mountains. A wild silver-ash ox roars.

Has no one seen,
come so far from that Tu family village to these southlands,
this old-timer: teeth half fallen out, left ear deaf as dragons?

As we now know, in addition to emptiness in the Taoist/Ch'an senses, 虛; and 空 also mean "pointless, purposeless, hopeless, valueless, meaningless," a definition that resonates here as well. At first glance, it seems the same kind of admiring complement as in the couplet's first line: even though emptiness seems meaningless (given the dire situation), Illumine still abides in the emptiness meditation opens—the emptiness of "*ch'an*-stillness" (the literal meaning of *ch'an* is "meditation"). But here in his openness to all of reality rather than selecting out convenient aspects, Tu accepts that *ch'an* emptiness is itself meaningless, pointless, valueless. This is a deeper level of Ch'an understanding, for Ch'an is all about seeing through stories and explanations, including its own (as with empty emptiness)—and so, it cultivates its own meaninglessness. Here, Ch'an offers nothing, really, no answers to the predicament in which Tu and Illumine find themselves, no solace or sustenance, nor will it as Tu's life of refugee wandering unfolds from this beginning. Remarkably, however, this depth opens a way into a more profound kind of wisdom. Rather than the safe meaninglessness cultivated through *ch'an* practice in a monastery like Illumine's Great-Cloud, Tu here cultivates the existential meaninglessness of a Cosmos that can unleash the chaos and devastation of war, cultivates that meaninglessness as his very own original-nature. Indeed, that

meaninglessness is another way of describing “emptiness empty” or “dark-enigma,” for it is experience free of language and its meaning-making.

Original-nature/empty-mind attends to the ten thousand things with mirror-like clarity, making the act of perception a spiritual act. Here, what these two mirror-mind friends share is the scene of autumn dying: cold wind and rain, ruined chrysanthemum and lotus blossoms, the seasonal equivalent of their situation amidst war and exile. In the final line, Tu identifies this landscape ravaged by autumn as 隴, one name for the region where he was. Of the many place-names and adjectives he could have chosen to modify *moon*, Tu no doubt chose 隴 because the ideogram’s left- and right-hand components mean “ridge” + “dragon” respectively. Existence, the Cosmos: it’s all dragon, all generative transformation driven by a restless hunger. It includes peace and plenty and the flourishing of spring and summer, and includes also the devastation of war and exile and the dying of autumn—and the indifferent/meaningless Cosmos doesn’t value one over the other.

Ch’an offers no answers to life’s problems. Ancient China’s artist-intellectuals weren’t interested in the delusions and easy answers of religious thinking. Indeed, the purpose of Ch’an practice is to free the mind of meaning-making, explanation, values, ideas, answers—to liberate it into wild *original-nature* as empty and integral to the generative tissue of the dragon-Cosmos. What that liberation offers Tu and Illumine is the simple *thusness* of a full moon: utterly itself and utterly beyond words, the resounding completion and sufficiency of it alive in the mirror-deep perception of Ch’an empty-mind, for which the content of perception is itself identity. Sharing that inner wilds, Tu and Illumine share identity itself: hence, theirs is a friendship deeper even than the identities we think of as the subjects of friendship. And indeed, in the poem’s empty grammar they exist together as absent presences, with no strict distinction between them. That shared identity is the awakened existence-tissue Cosmos looking out at itself, perfectly empty, its utter indifference and meaninglessness become the very tissue of consciousness. As we

have seen, this is another meaning of 虛 and 空, the “emptiness empty” of line six: “Absence,” the formless source of forms, source of both thought and the ten thousand things, realm of dragon and its transformations. And so, in gazing at that dragon-ridge moon, mirror-deep minds perfectly and pointlessly empty, Tu and Illumine inhabit together the source that brings forth all things—life and death, peace and war. It is a dragon-realm terrifying and disorienting—and yet, exquisitely beautiful in its sheer existential clarity. Words, words: in the end, there are no words for such a dazzlingly rich kind of nothing.

8

Lucent Dark

初

first

月

moon

光

radiant

細

thin

弦

crescent

初

begin

上

rise

影

shadow

斜

slant

輪

wheel

未

not yet

安

settled

微

sparse

升

ascend

古

ancient

塞

frontier

外

beyond

已

already

隱

hidden

暮

evening

雲

cloud

端

edge

河

river

漢

Star River

不

not

改

change

色

color

關	山	空	自	寒
border- land	mountain	empty	of itself	cold

庭	前	有	白	露
courtyard	before	has	white	frost

暗	滿	菊	花	團
dark	whole	chrysan- themum	blossom	clump

First Moon

Thin slice of ascending light, radiant arc
tipped aside bellied dark—the first moon
appears and, barely risen beyond ancient
frontier passes, edges into clouds. Silver,
changeless, the Star River spreads across
mountains empty in their own cold. Lucent
frost dusts the courtyard, chrysanthemum
blossoms clotted there with swollen dark.

WHEN THE MOON APPEARS HERE IN THE ENGLISH version of this poem, it describes a physical event Tu Fu witnesses very early on a cold morning in the same autumn that he and Illumine gazed together at a full moon. It is this in Chinese, too, but it's also much more: like a landscape painting, it shapes and animates the cosmological/ontological emptiness suffusing its words, thereby rendering dimensions quite inaccessible to conventional English translation. The title's 初 ("first") contains two pictograms: a blade on the right, and cloth on the left (full form 衣, from the ancient form , portraying robes with their shoulders and sleeves above loose skirts). Hence, "to cut a pattern from cloth, to make a form appear." Normally in this usage, the word simply means "new"—a "new moon"—but here that would be incorrect because we never see a new moon rising in darkness as a crescent. It's possible Tu Fu (or later editors) simply got it all wrong. But the only time we see a rising crescent moon in darkness is the waning crescent rising in morning ("evening" in line four must be a textual error: the frosty scene can only be morning). That suggests the more primitive meaning of 初: "beginning, appearing, first," as in that form cut from shapeless cloth. And this points to the added dimensions alive in the Chinese. There, the moon is also emerging into existence for the first time, *appearing* at its origins—a small miracle possible because of a fundamental difference in the way classical Chinese poetic language works.

In the literate West, language is a mimetic structure in which words refer to things by pointing at them as if from some transcendental outside realm, the same outside realm in which the Western spirit-center seems to exist. This assumption about language began with the advent of writing, when thought began to feel like a timeless realm outside the world of change, creating our sense of being a center of identity separate from natural process (hence, mimetic language and the spirit-center are practically synonymous). Writing began as pictographic, manifesting a direct connection to the empirical world; but with the exception of Chinese, it became alphabetic, wherein words have an arbitrary and distant

relationship to the things they name. When language functions in a mimetic sense, as it always does for us, it embodies an absolute ontological separation between material reality and an immaterial spirit-center. That separation structures the most fundamental level of our experience, but a poem like Tu Fu's shapes experience very differently. Such a poem is a spiritual practice that returns us to a primal level of experience wherein consciousness is woven wholly into Cosmos.

To read such a poem in its native conceptual context is to empty mind of all assumption and belief, all thought and idea, emptying it finally of language with its meaning-making and naming. This is not unlike the meditative practice Tu and Illumine practiced, for it returns consciousness to its original-nature emptiness, its inner wilds. There lie the mirror-deep perceptual dimensions of empty-mind that shape a typical Chinese poem with its focus on Ch'an-imagist clarity. "First Moon" is a quintessential Chinese poem in this sense, for it is constructed entirely of images without any discursive statement—rendering poetic depths that are, as we have seen, also erased in English, where the imagism appears as simple description. In this, the poem returns us to a place where language functions non-mimetically, and that changes everything.

The empty-mind original-nature Tu and Illumine shared in their meditative gaze at the rising moon: it reveals a very different and much more primal form of empirical reality. Rather than an assemblage of things, reality appears as a single tissue—that magically generative source-tissue of Tao or Absence—within which the moon was regarded not as an astronomical body, but as a bright distillation of, or embryonic origin of, *ch'i*-tissue. This source-tissue is only divided into individual things when we name them. Here lies the explanation for how, at this foundational level, the moon emerges into existence for the first time, how it *appears* at origins: it is only when the word *moon* appears that the moon appears as an independent entity in the field of existence. The moon itself exists prior to the naming, of course, but it isn't separated out conceptually as an independent entity. This is the inner wilds where non-mimetic

language operates—each word associated with a thing not because of a mimetic pointing at the thing, but because it shares that thing’s embryonic source.

Non-mimetic language assumes Taoism’s primal generative cosmology, and the more elemental experience of time inherent to that cosmology. Not linear, the familiar metaphysical river flowing past, nor even cyclical, as time in primal cultures is imprecisely described—it is an all-encompassing generative origin-moment, a constant burgeoning forth in which the ten thousand things emerge from the generative source-tissue of existence and return to that same source. Indeed, this generative process (*tzu-jan*) is referenced in the poem’s third line by 微 (“sparse”), a favorite term of Tu Fu’s having a philosophic meaning that resonates in the poem: things ever so slightly on the emergent side of that origin-moment, just barely coming into existence as differentiated entities or not quite vanished back into the undifferentiated ground. 微 forms a pair with 幽, which as we saw on [this page](#) describes things ever so slightly on the not-yet-emergent side of the origin-moment—just as they are about to emerge from the formless ground of Absence (cf. the formless cloth in 初), or just after they vanish back into that ground. It is only in this experience of reality as an all-encompassing emergent present that non-mimetic language can exist, for each word needs to operate at that very origin-moment, word and thing emerging into existence simultaneously.

This non-mimetic principle shapes the deep structure of Chinese poetic language, its empty grammar wherein words emerge from the generative empty space that surrounds them. This wide-open minimalist structure makes the poem a form of spiritual practice in which a reader must fill in all this Absence with Presence, empty-mind at the boundaries of its true, wordless form. There, one inhabits a place where each time the word *moon* is uttered, the word and the moon itself emerge together into existence at that generative origin-moment. And this makes the poem a wondrous thing, for it moves always at that origin-moment, each instant a small miracle of creation where word and thing come into existence simultaneously.

The poem's empty grammatical space resounds with the entire Taoist/Ch'an cosmology. As we have seen, classical Chinese poetry doesn't simply share, but actually participates in the deep structure of that Taoist/Ch'an Cosmos and its dynamic process. The non-mimetic words of a Chinese poem function in the same way as Presence's ten thousand things (a fact emphasized in the pictographic nature of characters), and the grammatical emptiness that surrounds characters functions as Absence. In this, the language too is part of the cosmological process of *tzu-jan*, a fact we have seen Lao Tzu describe like this: "Keeping words spare: occurrence appearing of itself [*tzu-jan*]." Words emerge from the grammar's generative emptiness in exactly the same way that thoughts emerge from the empty ground of consciousness and things emerge from the generative emptiness at the heart of the Cosmos. And of course, the generative source in all three realms is one and the same. Hence, a Ch'an-imagist poem like Tu's renders a unity of language/poem, thought/identity, and Cosmos.

In this radically different conception of language, we encounter the tantalizing fact that to translate a Chinese poem into English is to fundamentally misrepresent it, because the mimetic function of English inevitably erases that generative cosmology with its altered sense of time. It also conjures our illusory transcendental spirit-center, and that erases the wide-open form of consciousness that is inherent to Chinese poetry. In other words, it forecloses the Taoist/Ch'an inner wilds, with its inherent dwelling as integral to that generative Cosmos.

A Western reader might assume Tu Fu is deploying the poem's images as a metaphoric or symbolic complex to render an inner state of mind. But the poem's native cosmology makes the role of landscape quite different, essentially reversing how a poem means, how it is read. There is no question of the outside world seen from inside a "spirit-center" and shaped into the expression of an inner state of mind. That instrumental relationship to landscape is missing here. A Chinese poem is normally, by convention, about the poet's immediate experience. Here, the only hint of Tu's presence is the

word “before” in the penultimate line, which suggests a viewer looking out onto a courtyard scene (traditional Chinese houses had a walled-in courtyard garden in front of the main house, with an entrance gate opposite the house in the courtyard wall). So we register his presence in the poem as images, as a particular constellation of the ten thousand things. This makes the poem much more than the mere description of a scene, as it appears in translation. It is the mirror-deep state of mind that presumably kept him awake all night long, or perhaps woke him very early in the morning.

Independent, existing in and of themselves rather than serving as metaphor or symbol or stage-setting for the human drama, those images fill the mirrored opening of consciousness, which is to say they quite simply are Tu’s mind and identity at that moment. The poem obviously renders an emotional complex, but it’s not an inner emotional state represented by a series of images. Instead, it’s an identity made of the entire Cosmos, from the Star River (our Milky Way) to courtyard chrysanthemums. Tu becomes the weave of dark and light that are manifestations of *yin* and *yang*. He becomes the frontier passes beyond which lurk menacing Tibetan armies that will soon invade China, and he becomes the cold and timeless indifference of a sparkling Star River. He becomes the chrysanthemums blooming in autumn, last splendor against earth’s dying return into winter’s pregnant emptiness, and the dew clotting their blossoms, shimmering darkness of death. When Tu Fu speaks for himself here, the entire Cosmos speaks for itself.

But there’s something more, something deeper still: for in this empty-mind mirroring, Tu inhabits that origin-place where non-mimetic language operates—where language/poem, thought/identity, and Cosmos arise together. Hence, the poem doesn’t just render Tu’s original-nature; it creates that primal identity at the origin-moment where it is wholly integral to the generative tissue of Tao, *tzu-jan*, *ch’i*. When Tu Fu speaks for himself in the non-mimetic linguistic world of this poem, the Cosmos not

only speaks for itself—it speaks as a single generative tissue, and it speaks at origins.

9

Loom Origins

獨

alone

立

stand

空

empty/
sky

外

beyond

一

one

鷲

hawk

鳥

bird

河

river

間

among

雙

pair

白

white

鷗

gull

飄

float

飄

drift

搏

attack

擊

strike

便

convenient

容

laze

易

ease

往

go

來

come

遊

wander

草

wildgrass

露

frost

亦

more

多

much

溼

wet

蛛	絲	仍	未	收
spider	silk	still	not yet	gathered in

天	機	近	人	事
heaven	loom	enter	human	affairs

獨	立	萬	端	憂
alone	stand	ten	source	sorrow

thousand

Standing Alone

Empty skies. And beyond, one hawk.
Between river banks, two white gulls

laze wind-drifted. Fit for an easy kill,
to and fro, they follow contentment.

Grasses all frost-singed. Spiderwebs
still hung. Heaven's loom of origins

tangling our human ways too, I stand
facing sorrow's ten thousand sources.

HEAVEN'S LOOM OF ORIGINS IS A MYTHOLOGICAL account describing that origin-place where language/poem, thought/identity, and Cosmos arise together, the generative tissue that speaks at

origins in a poem. Chuang Tzu describes it in terms of Tao's generative cosmological/ontological process:

The ten thousand things all emerge from a loom of origins, and they all vanish back into it.

The same patterns shape every aspect of reality—human and nonhuman alike—and the loom of origins explains the source of those patterns, for it weaves out the fabric of reality. But they are not only the patterns of creation, they are also the patterns of destruction and indifference that Tu here recognizes as the unavoidable nature of things: emptiness, predator and prey, frost-singed grasses, spiderwebs still awaiting victims.

Here, still in Grain-Thresh, first stop in his refugee wandering through a land ravaged by war, Tu recognizes that however much we may struggle against them with our ethics and legal systems, altruistic ambitions and idealistic hopes—those same patterns of destruction and indifference define the very nature of our human realm as well. We are in the end, as Tu says in another poem, “powerless to right / those ancient ways of Heaven and Earth.” And Tu sees the patterns of those “ancient ways” manifest everywhere in the war-torn land: rebel armies were again threatening the capital from the east, Tibetan armies were threatening from just west of Thresh-Grain, and local rebellions were breaking out throughout the country.

A poem is made of words, but words are only where this poem begins—for it thinks its way back to that origin-place Tu touched while gazing at the rising crescent moon and courtyard chrysanthemums, origin-place where language/poem, thought/identity, and Cosmos arise together. It is an origin-place miraculous in its inexplicable generative energy, home ground, but also the origin of tragedy and sorrow. And it is an origin-place we feel viscerally in the fabric of this poem, that empty grammar where words themselves *emerge from* a field of generative silence and emptiness.

Although we can describe that origin place or tell stories about it—stories like this poem and its loom of origins—to actually dwell there is to inhabit a place prior to thought and language, an inner wilds about which nothing can be said. And that is where this poem ends—a depth of dwelling in which Tu can only say that he is standing alone there. Or is he? “I” seems at first the most obvious way to fill in the empty grammatical space at the beginning of the last line, Tu as an absent presence in the full Ch’an sense. But the subject of the penultimate line also carries over as a possible subject for the final line: “loom of origins.” And so, Tu is returned to his most primordial self as that loom of origins itself gazing into the reality it perpetually weaves out.

This is again Tu open to the dark side of Taoist/Ch’an insight, and an unnerving, even terrifying, moment. For Tu is here an absent presence indistinguishable from the loom of origins, that origin-place that so heartlessly weaves such catastrophe: the wild catastrophe of ruthless killing that keeps the predator-prey food-web vital, and the human catastrophe ravaging Tu’s country, not to mention his own life. But it is at the same time an exquisite moment—the beauty of the Cosmos knowing itself in all that heartbreaking complexity. Words, words: yet again, there are no words for it.

10

Mystery Sparse

江 村
river village

清 江 一 曲 抱 村 流
clear river one curve enfold village flow

長 夏 江 村 事 事 幽
long summer river village business business quiet

自 去 自 來 梁 上 燕
of itself go of itself come eaves on swallow

相 親 相 近 水 中 鷗
mutual kin mutual near water center gull

老 妻 畫 紙 為 碁 局
old wife paint paper as chess game

稚 子 敲 針 作 釣 鈎
young child tap pin make fishing hook

多 病 所 須 惟 藥 物
many sick that which need only herb stuff

微 軀 此 外 更 何 求

sparse

self

this

outside

more

what

search

River Village

In a lone curve, cradling our village, the clear river flows past. All summer long, the business of quiet mystery fills this river village. Nesting in the eaves, carefree swallows come and go. On the water, gulls nestle together. My wife draws a paper chessboard, and tapping at needles, the kids contrive fishhooks. Often sick, I need drugs and herbs—but what more, come to all this, what more could a sparse man ask?

TU FU HAD MANY WEALTHY AND POWERFUL FRIENDS, and he had apparently hoped to find assistance from one of those friends in Thresh-Grain. Instead, he found poverty and hunger and menacing Tibetan armies nearby. So after only two months, he set out south with his family, away from the devastation consuming China's northern plains. It was only after a five-hundred-mile journey that he finally found assistance in Altar-Whole (today's Chengdu), the largest city in southwest China. The family had little food, and the journey was grueling: they had to make a perilous mountain crossing on a road so precarious that part of it was actually a wooden structure suspended on the side of a cliff.

Because of its remote location, Altar-Whole was by now full of refugees from the ravaged north. Fortunately, when he arrived there in 760, Tu received financial support and literary employment from well-placed friends and relatives in the area. Their assistance was generous enough that he was able to establish a comfortable life for his family. The Tu family soon moved out of the city to a small village nearby—a village that was rustic and simple, but that also included a Ch'an monastery and a number of like-minded artist-intellectuals. The family stayed in the monastery while a house was built for them.

Once they were settled, the house must have felt like a remarkable gift for Tu: an idyllic reprieve from a frighteningly tenuous life amidst the devastation overtaking his world, a tenuousness intensified by his ongoing and debilitating struggle with malaria and severe forms of asthma and rheumatism.

Tu almost seems to take the precarious struggle of the past five years as a blessing in this poem. For those difficult years are why Tu describes himself as 微 (“sparse”) in the final line—“simple and humble, frail and sparse”—and 微 functions as a kind of cosmological blessing here. Although the poem seems to be a straightforward celebration of the ease and beauty and security Tu had found—the quiet village “cradled” by a river, his family content in a house shared with nesting swallows—the Taoist/Ch’an conceptual framework infuses such dwelling with deeper dimensions, dimensions apparent in the more philosophical meaning of 微 that we have already encountered ([this page](#)): things ever so slightly on the differentiated (emergent) side of the ongoing origin-moment: forms just barely coming into existence as differentiated entities or not quite vanished back into the undifferentiated ground. This moment of vanishing back describes Tu, who at this point felt close to death in many ways. Hence, “sparse and humble” not only in the sense of his impoverished and tenuous life, or a sage simplicity and humility in which simple things at hand are wholly sufficient, but also in the ontological sense of verging back into that origin-mystery—a place where the sheer thusness of things, of the village’s quiet “business,” becomes incandescent with its own presence and sufficiency. And indeed, this final couplet renders Tu as “sparse” indeed: an absent presence, the empty subject for the verbs “need” and “search.”

微 forms a terminological pair with 幽, which is how village life is described in line two. As we’ve seen ([this page](#)), 幽 suggests most simply “quiet solitude” or “dark/secret/hidden/mystery,” but also things ever so slightly on the undifferentiated (not-yet-emergent) side of the ongoing origin-moment: forms not quite come into existence as differentiated entities or just barely vanished back into the undifferentiated ground. Hence, the village is infused with that

origin-mystery, for this terminological pair (微 and 幽) returns us to that ongoing origin-moment in the generative process where differentiation occurs, a process that is alive always there in the day-to-day life of the village. The poem is therefore not just about welcome dwelling in a quiet village, it is also about dwelling deeply in the generative ground, dwelling at origins in the cosmological/ontological process. It weaves the village into its broader cosmological/ontological setting; and at the same time, it reveals daily domestic life as always already awakened: the inner wilds of consciousness in the open there at origins, where language/poem, thought/identity, and Cosmos emerge together.

Return Crows

出

leave

郭

city-wall

霜

frost

露

frost

晚

late

淒

icy

淒

icy

高

high

天

heaven

逐

follow

望

gaze

低

descend

遠

distant

烟

smoke

鹽

salt

井

mine

上

rise

斜

slant

景

shadow

雪

snow

峯

peak

西

west

故

ancient

國

homeland

猶

still

兵

soldier

馬

horse

他
far-off

鄉
land

亦
also

鼓
drum

鼙
war-drum

江
river

城
city

今
today

夜
night

客
guest

還
return

與
to

舊
old friend

烏
crow

唬
shriek

Leaving the City

It's bone-bitter cold, and late, and falling
frost traces my gaze all bottomless skies.

Smoke trails out over distant salt mines.
Snow-covered peaks slant shadows east.

Armies haunt my homeland still, and war
drums throb in this far-off place. A guest

overnight here in this river city, I return
again to shrieking crows, my old friends.

TU FU'S TRANQUIL VILLAGE LIFE WAS INTERRUPTED after two years, when a military rebellion broke out in Altar-Whole City. Tu was close to the governor and other high officials there, so he was forced to flee for his safety. He spent two uneasy and somewhat precarious years living in outlying towns before returning to his house in the river village. Though it wasn't so peaceful a time as his first two years, Tu remained there for another year. The rebellion had been put down, but soon the long-threatening Tibetans invaded China, occupying the capital and parts of the Altar-Whole region. Village life was now quite different for the family: they lived under military threat, and Tu began working in Altar-Whole as a military advisor to his friend the governor. Such was the situation when Tu walked away from the human realm of the city and into the crow-haunted night.

It's a strange kind of liberation, to give yourself over to the worst. Refugee flight is the very nature of things, destruction balancing creation, and we try to defy that for a time with our meaning-making, our self-identity and storytelling, human shelter and community, poems and cities. At bottom, the forms that defiance takes are what defines our humanity. And it's a strange kind of liberation to give up

everything that makes us human, to give up that struggle against the inevitable and accept that we belong finally to that onslaught of destruction.

Here Tu not only accepts the onslaught—he welcomes it, seeks it out. Crows are black and raucous, they flock together in large bands and scavenge on dead things: a compelling image for a time of such wholesale devastation, and one that recurs in Tu’s work. But Tu calls those crows his “old friends.” He sets out into their community as if for solace and companionship. To welcome all this is to welcome his belonging to something larger than the human realm, a belonging Tu deepens in line six, where 鄉 (“land” or “countryside”) also means “ancestral village.” This was a resonant concept in ancient China where people still felt profoundly rooted to the farming villages where their families had lived for generations, and it suggests that when Tu sets out through the dark night to join his “old friends” the crows, he is returning to his “ancestral village,” his deepest roots.

The Ch’an practice of empty-mind that structures this poem with its images in a field of grammatical emptiness: it is a practice of paring away thought and memory, meaning-making and storytelling, and finally even self-identity. That return to inner wilds essentially means paring away the human in us, and with that the mental strategies of defiance against those destructive forces. It leaves consciousness empty and without human content, wild consciousness as an elemental thing, part and parcel with the harsh and indifferent existence-tissue Cosmos: a mind that could call those menacing crows its “old friends.” How terrifying, but also exhilarating and even solacing for artist-intellectuals like Tu Fu: exhilarating because freed from the limitations of self-identity and our human ordering of things, and solacing because that acceptance of the worst was a kind of return to our truest nature as integral to the ongoing process of Tao.

“Leaving the City” maps this return. The first two couplets animate mirror-deep empty mind in the form of empty sight and expansive images, beginning with frosty dew falling down bottomless skies through the deep-sky gaze of empty-mind. Or perhaps it is

bottomless frost-chilled skies that are falling through his gaze. Either way, it gives sight a feeling of being wide-open and exposed and scoured with cold: breathtaking, though compounded by the precise meanings of 逐. The first meaning of 逐 is “to follow” especially in the sense of “to pursue,” so dew/skies following his gaze down carries a sense almost of threat or assault. And the word’s second meaning is “exile,” so that gaze wide-open with exposure is cast-away, displaced, abandoned, refugee. This is followed by the concise images of the second couplet. Operating in the context of Ch’an’s empty mirror-deep mind, those distances and mountain peaks emphasize the sense of sight/mind as an open expanse. Again: breathtaking liberation.

The mapping continues. Tu’s place in the human realm is tenuous, a refugee in a far-off place, war everywhere near and far—all of which makes it easier to slip outside the cocoon of human culture, to feel kinship with crows rather than humans. And in the grammar of the final line, he is an absent presence returning to the malignant darkness, darkness that is in the very nature of the existence-tissue Cosmos, and against which humans struggle to maintain a circle of light within which to live. And as that absence, he is liberated into his most elemental nature as integral to that Cosmos. When he leaves the city, site of shelter and human companionship, setting out into the evening dark and that murder of shrieking crows, he is walking into the wild and terrifying worst—resigned to it but taking refuge in it, embracing it, finding solace and companionship in it.

12

Brimmed Whole

漫 成
brim-over complete

江	月	去	人	只	數	尺
river	moon	go	person	only	several	feet
風	燈	照	夜	欲	三	更
wind	lamp	shine	night	nearly	third	night- watch
沙	頭	宿	鷺	聯	拳	靜
sand	head	overnight	egret	related	fist	peace
船	尾	跳	魚	撥	刺	鳴
boat	tail	leap	fish	scatter	slash	cry

Brimmed Whole

River moon cast mere feet away, wind-lamps
alight late into the second watch.... Serene

flock of fists along sand—egrets asleep when
a fish leaps in the boat's wake, shivering, cry.

AFTER A YEAR IN THE FARM VILLAGE NEAR ALTAR-WHOLE City, Tu lost his most powerful friend and chief benefactor when the governor died. In the political vacuum, another rebellion began to form. So Tu left his treasured village and sailed with his family down the Yangtze River to Amble-Awe, pausing for six months along the way when his health deteriorated. Somewhere along this river-journey, at the end of the second night-watch (a little before 1 a.m.), he found the reprieve portrayed in this poem. The exigencies of survival (cf. "Standing Alone," [this page](#)) are suspended for a few moments, a suspension signaled by the fish-hunting egrets asleep while a fish leaps out of the water, announcing its presence.

In evolutionary terms, language enables us to make the distinctions that help us survive more successfully. Tu's own struggle with survival, and that of his war-torn country, echoes behind the poem's image-complex. And yet, in this moment of reprieve, those distinctions essential to survival begin blurring, a blurring that carries us into profoundly ontological depths.

Virtually synonymous with Absence, Tao is reality seen as a single formless tissue that, in its mysteriously generative nature, shapes itself into the ten thousand forms. This Tao cannot be seen in the formless, for there is no form to see there. And of course the formless cannot be seen in forms. So, Tao can only be glimpsed at that edge where form and formlessness blur together. This is rendered everywhere in Chinese landscape paintings like those on [this page](#): forms half-vanished in mist, individual elements (people, mountains, lakes, rocks, etc.) not modeled with realistic definition as in Western

paintings, a single background color infusing many different elements in the landscape. And it is the very fabric from which Chinese poems are made, the minimal grammar where images and meaning itself seem so tenuous, wavering between appearing from and disappearing into the empty tissue surrounding the words. It is especially evident here in this poem, almost a kind of subject matter, though it is quite invisible in English translation.

This blurring of form and formless appears most forcefully in the last word: 鳴. Made up of the graphs for bird (鳥, from the early form 𪇑) and mouth (口, from the early form 𠂔), the term means most strictly “a bird-cry.” But its meaning broadens to include any sudden sound, and here the grammar insists that 鳴 is describing the leaping fish. But the suspicion is left open that it is egrets, hungry in their sleep for fish, crying out as the sound of a leaping fish half rouses them from their dreams of fish. The struggle for survival suspended, 鳴 blurs egret and fish, predator and prey, together. And further, it begins a process by which the other elements of this world are recognized as blurring into a single whole.

Reading back, there is the odd “tail” (尾). Seemingly describing the boat’s wake, it should more likely describe the fish leaping from smooth water in the wake, which is not impossible grammatically. But the blur continues, for one of the graph’s two elements is 毛, meaning “fur” or “feathers” (from the ancient pictograph depicting a feather: 毛), which suggests the tails of those drowsing egrets. And there is a more atmospheric blurring as well, beginning with the title suggesting a fullness brimming over and flooding out, subsuming things into its single whole. Just what is brimming over seems to be a vague blur of riverwater, Tao’s formless ontological tissue, and Tu’s emotions (emotions elicited by the suspension of violence, the beauty of the moment, and the sudden opening of ontological depths).

But moonlight too is brimming over in a number of ways. The moon is somehow nestled close to the river, its pale light melding dark distances together. In the strange 去 (“go”), there is a blurring of perspective that confuses Tu and the moon: it is from the moon’s

perspective that the light “goes” to the boat, and from Tu’s perspective that the moon is mere feet away. Suffusing everything in the faintly lit night, moonlight suspends the world between forms and a single formless dark. And because moonlight was seen as an image of the cold and empty light of consciousness, this moment reveals empty-mind awareness in its most elemental state, mirror-deep in the wide-open space where the formless blurs into form, form into formless: an inner wilds that is, as the title suggests, a kind of *completion* or *wholeness*.

13

Skies Vacant

閣 夜
tower night

歲 暮 陰 陽 催 短 景
year evening yin yang hasten brief light
天 涯 霜 雪 霽 寒 宵
heaven shore frost snow clearing cold night

五 更 鼓 角 聲 悲 壯
fifth night-watch drum horn sound grieve robust

三 峽 星 河 影 動 搖
three gorges star river shadow move shake

野 哭 幾 家 聞 戰 伐
country-side sobbing how many homes hear war attack

夷 歌 是 處 起 漁 樵
tribe song this place rise fishermen wood-cutters

臥 龍 躍 馬 終 黃 土
sleep dragon leap horse all/end brown earth

人	事	音	書	漫	寂	廖
people	history	sound	book	brim-over	vacant	silent

Night at the Tower

Yin and *yang* cut brief autumn days short. Frost and snow clear, leaving cold night wide-open at the edge of heaven.

Marking the fifth watch, grieving drums and horns erupt. Star River, shadows trembling, drifts Triple-Gorge depths.

War's pastoral weeping filling homes far and wide, tribal woodcutters and fishermen trail wild song here into skies.

Slumber-Dragon, Leap-Stallion: all dark earth in the end. And the story of our lives just opens away—vacant, silent.

THERE'S AN ANCIENT LEGEND THAT INFUSES CHINA'S Yangtze and Yellow Rivers with cosmological dimensions. After flowing east and out to sea, the rivers ascend and rarify, according to this legend, becoming the Star River (our Milky Way). From there, the Star River crosses the heavens westward and descends into western mountains to form the Yangtze and Yellow River headwaters. Hence, China's rivers were essentially an extension of the Star River, creating the sense that people inhabited a cosmological cocoon. This cosmic geography complements other descriptions that integrate the human into a cosmological tissue in more philosophical ways. Tao and *tzu-jan*, for instance. Or *ch'i*, which nestles humankind within the ten thousand things seen as a single living tissue: notably here, stars that were described as the embryonic origins of *ch'i*, and so, of all reality. (As we have seen, this description is no different than contemporary cosmology's account, in spite of the terminological differences—for in death, stars create the chemical composition of matter; and in life, they provide the energy that drives earth's web of life processes). All of these descriptions function as cultural assumptions for ancient China's artist-intellectuals, and they create a profound sense of existential belonging. But it was most especially this cosmological

geography, this Star River cocoon, within which Tu set out with his family down the Yangtze in late spring or early summer of 765, leaving behind his years of refuge outside Altar-Whole City.

When Tu arrived in Amble-Awe, he found a city perched dramatically atop cliffwalls overlooking the spectacular Triple-Gorge, a two-hundred-mile-long series of three deep gorges formed where the river cut its way through the formidable Shamaness Mountains. Tu was now on the very edge of Chinese civilization. Although traces of Chinese culture reached cities along the river, the area was otherwise inhabited by aboriginal tribes speaking a language indecipherable to Tu. And it seems Tu was now afflicted by diabetes, in addition to his other chronic illnesses. But after struggling on a rented farm for six months, Tu found a new benefactor in the chief local official, Amble-Awe's prefect and military commander. Tu worked in a token position with few real responsibilities, which afforded him financial security and the use of an apartment atop the city-wall, in a tower overlooking the gorges.

This combination of financial security and existential exposure (edge of his home civilization, ill health, wild landscape) made the two years he spent in Amble-Awe by far his most productive period. "Night at the Tower" was written on the tower, Tu looking out across a dramatic and elemental landscape of rugged mountains above and gorges below, gorges legendary for the river's violence and the towering cliffs alive with shrieking gibbons. There, that night, Tu stood in full view of that cocoon Cosmos, facing the Star River in its heavenly manifestation above and its earthly manifestation below.

In his tower on the edge of Chinese civilization, Tu was suspended between the *form* of culture (human meaning-making) and the *formlessness* of everything outside our naming and meaning-making: a viewpoint from which it was possible to gaze long into the formless generative tissue of Tao. He invests the moment with its cosmological dimensions at the outset, placing himself in the dying moments of the seasonal cycle driven by the two aspects of *ch'i*: *yin* and *yang*, whose dynamic intermingling carries the seasons from winter (pure *yin*) to summer (pure *yang*) and back. There at the edge

of heaven, he watches snowy skies clear, opening his world into the star-grained expanses of that cocoon Cosmos. And in the fourth line, he is cast adrift somewhere in those expanses, for the Star River sprawled out from horizon to horizon above is suddenly also spread out and seething beneath him. The cocoon Cosmos seems suddenly turned inside out, or perhaps even emptied of all dimension: a liberation as breathtaking as it would have been disorienting and frightening.

The Star River is a path of light stretched across the serene darkness of the heavens, but in the gorge it floats among the surging darkness of a wild river tumbling past at the bottom of cliffwalls where gibbons will soon wake and begin their eerie calls. And in the poem's grammar, it could be the Star River itself that is shadow, which combines with the more obvious reading to suggest how the river's swells and ripples would blur its darkness through the Star River's light: mystery churning within mystery, and all troubled by a sense that the Star River itself might suddenly tumble apart and cascade away. Meanwhile, noises interrupting the nighttime quiet rise away into those empty expanses, all of them marking the margins of civilized order: drums and horns announcing the fifth night-watch (last watch of the night, lasting from five to seven in the morning), and "grieving" because in those war-torn times, the night-watch also had a military component, the guard announcing that all was well; people mourning loved ones lost in the culture-destroying warfare; songs of tribal people up early to start their day of work, their primal culture no doubt more or less hostile to the Chinese as an occupying force. All of that deeply felt human experience simply drifts away into deep-sky emptiness, revealing that even as it was a nurturing cocoon, the Cosmos was also stark and indifferent to our human concerns.

Slumber-Dragon and Leap-Stallion were well-known figures from Chinese history, both of whom were associated with Amble-Awe: the first was a great cultural hero, and the latter a great cultural villain. In our cultural moment, one might find equivalence in Gandhi and Hitler, which gives a sense of the stark existential clarity Tu is

unearthing here. The nobility of Gandhi and evil of Hitler: it must be the vast and elemental perspective of a vacant and indifferent Cosmos to equate the two, and almost impossible really to contemplate.

In the end, this is the perspective of radical Taoist/Ch'an awakening—wild mind empty of all meaning-making and integral to that emptiness at the heart of the wild Cosmos, emptiness that is at once generative and destructive and, through it all, indifferent. There is terror here in the very nature of primal consciousness (original-nature), a terror scarcely mentioned in the Taoist or Ch'an traditions. This is Tu Fu's greatness, the way he carries Taoist/Ch'an insight into new dimensions, teasing out its most unnerving implications, implications others leave unexplored. And here he follows that insight into its darkest beauties when the "story of our lives"—the whole history of our human endeavors and concerns, thoughts and aspirations, the very definition of what we are as centers of identity or as human culture—when all of that simply opens away, vacant and silent, into the empty heavens. As it does, in the end—as it does.

Trust Ablaze

八	月	十	七	夜	對	月
eight	moon	ten	seven	night	facing	moon

秋	月	仍	圓	夜
autumn	moon	again	round	night

江	村	獨	老	身
river	village	lone	old	body

抱	簾	還	照	客
raise	blinds	return	illumine	guest

倚	杖	更	隨	人
lean on	cane	more	follow	person

光	射	潛	虬	動
radiance	emit	hidden	dragon	rouse

明	翻	宿	鳥	頻
brilliance	flutter	overnight	bird	hurried

茅	齋	依	橘	柚
thatch	study	trust to	orange	citron

清	切	露	華	新
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clarity

ache

dew

splendor

fresh

8th Moon, 17th Night: Facing the Moon

The autumn moon is still round tonight.
In this river village, isolate old wanderer

hoisting blinds, I return to its brilliance,
and propped on a cane, follow it further:

radiance rousing hidden dragons, bright
scatters of birds aflutter. Thatched study

incandescent, I trust to this orange grove
ablaze: clear dew aching with fresh light.

IN “NIGHT AT THE TOWER,” TU FU HAS COME TO AN intensity of existential exposure in which the darkness of a “cold night wide-open at the edge of heaven” is perfectly meaningless, its indifference vast and empty and awakening. And how could light be any different? Light infuses the world with its invisible clarity, its vast and empty radiance—and it too is perfectly, even exquisitely, meaningless. Facing the moon here, having seen through all our human meaning-making, Tu returns to meaningless light—a radiance whose philosophical intensity derives from the existential dark of that “cold night wide-open at the edge of heaven.”

Tu doesn't explain in the poem how light is the opposite of that existential night, or just what that could mean. Existential light is no more explainable than existential dark. Here we are beyond meaning-making, though a hint of the philosophical assumptions at work can be found in two of the terms he uses for bright light. 照 (line 3) includes the pictograms for sun on the left (日, from the ancient ☉) and fire on the bottom (灺, abbreviated form of 火, which is a simplified version of ancient images such as 𤇀)—and in addition to “illumine,” it means “insight, illumination, to see with perfect clarity” in the Ch'an sense. The second term, 明 (line 6), is

constructed from that same pictogram for sun together with moon (月, from the ancient 𠄎), which gives its primary meaning of “brilliant” or “radiant.” But 明 also means “enlightenment” or “to fathom illumination.” Rather than explain, Tu simply opens himself to light in the Ch’an sense suggested by these terms, in which the insight/enlightenment/illumination of empty-mind clarity is the bright light of consciousness wild and free from the meaning-making machinery. This begins at levels that can be translated conventionally—but it happens even more dramatically in the poem’s grammatical structures, and those levels cannot be translated directly.

The stage is set in the first line. Simple word order is the foundational grammar of classical Chinese, and it suggests the first line be read: “The autumn moon is still full tonight.” But that reading is strained because the word is simply “night.” Modifiers precede the noun in classical Chinese, and they can be long, which suggests: “Still-full-autumn-moon night”: an identity of night and still-full-autumn-moon. This begins that blur of forms into a single formless whole, and it continues through the poem as light infuses a world of darkness.

That interpenetration of light becomes a revelatory sense of belonging to light in the second couplet. Tu seems the implied subject for the first two words of the couplet. But in five-word lines, there is always a pause after the second word, an empty grammatical space that often needs to be filled in—and the magic of this couplet is that it isn’t clear whether we should read Tu or light into this empty space as the implied subject for the last three words. Normally, Tu would continue as the subject: “Raising the blinds, I return to light, a guest. / Propped on a cane, I follow it further, a person.” But the odd redundancy of the last words in the lines frustrates this reading, and suggests light as the implied subject: “I raise the blinds, and light returns to shine on a guest [me]. / I lean on a cane, and light follows further a person [me].”

So Tu and light become quite indistinguishable in the empty grammatical space of the poem—and, too, in the formless existence-

tissue. The following couplet expands and intensifies this radiance and its interpenetration. Here, the radiance is so penetrating that it rouses hidden dragons. Then in the next line, it is as much moonlight fluttering as it is the birds agitated by its radiance: again that blur of form and formless. Indeed, in the parallel structure of these two lines, the second line suggests a rereading of the first in which it is dragon—embodiment of all change, all creation and destruction—emitting radiance. And it is no accident that here, just before Tu trusts himself to light, the word he uses is 明: “brilliance,” but also “enlightenment.”

Tu Fu’s health had deteriorated again (cf. “propped on a cane”), forcing him to leave his position in Amble-Awe. Luckily, his benefactor had helped him buy two farms that he managed on the mountain slopes outside town, farms that included the orange groves of this poem. His health improved and he was financially secure, but by now he was permanently haunted: by refugee displacement, by age and ill-health and so much loss, by war. And by implacable longing for return to the capital—center of the social universe, where he could earn a salary and contribute to stabilizing and rebuilding the country by working as an advisor in the government. He was also thinking of his ancestral village on the mountain slopes just south of the capital, where he still owned a family farm. But return was impossible: that home was so far away and the fighting continued, including another Tibetan invasion into the capital region. And so Tu was stranded there on the fringes of a war-torn civilization: suspended between the “form” of civilization and the “formlessness” of everything else.

In the penultimate line of the poem, Tu (again an absent presence in the grammar) simply declares his trust in light, in this particular kind of light: moonlight illuminating darkness. He does not explain how or why he trusts himself to it, or what it offers him against refugee displacement and the existential darkness he has begun to explore. Instead, he simply renders this light in a remarkable image that is not only visually powerful, but also suggests a radiance of such intensity that it almost takes on a flavor—the bright flavor of

oranges. It's an image that invests light with those Ch'an definitions of 照 and 明: "enlightenment, illumination, to see with perfect clarity," a clarity that "aches" in the final line. Just as there is a beautifully desolate liberation in the Cosmos's stark existential depths of meaningless darkness, there is also a beautifully ecstatic liberation here in its existential depths of meaningless light.

15

Clarity Touch

曉

dawn

望

landscape

白

white

帝

emperor

更

watch

聲

sound

盡

finished

陽

yang

臺

terrace

曙

bright

色

color

分

spread

高

high

峯

peaks

寒

cold

上

rise

日

sun

疊

layer

嶺

range

宿

overnight

霾

mist

雲

cloud

地

earth

圻

border

江

river

帆

sail

隱

hidden

天
heaven

清
clear

木
tree

葉
leaves

聞
listen

荊
bramble

扉
gate

對
face

麋
deer

鹿
deer

應
surely

共
altogether

爾
you

為
act as

羣
kindred

Dawn Landscape

The last watch has sounded in Amble-Awe.
Radiant color spreads above Solar-Terrace

Mountain, then cold sun clears high peaks.
Mist and cloud linger across layered ridges,

and earth split-open hides river sails deep.
Leaves clatter at heaven's clarity. I listen,

and face deer at my bramble gate: so close
here, we touch our own kind in each other.

CONSCIOUSNESS AS THE WILD COSMOS AWAKENED to itself: that is a return to our most primal natures. In translation, this hardly seems at issue in “Dawn Landscape.” But the Chinese title suggests in advance that there is more here than meets the eye. In addition to “dawn,” 曉 means “to understand,” or more fully: “to understand with lit clarity.” And as we’ve seen, 望 has two different meanings: “to gaze” and the “landscape seen”—a remarkable conflation reflecting the spiritual dimensions of perception, that Ch’an mirroring in which inner and outer (gaze and landscape) are indistinguishable: the Cosmos awakened and open to itself.

The poetics of Ch’an-imagism, empty-mind mirroring the world perfectly, shapes the poem’s first three couplets. The images animating these lines describe a Ch’an landscape-practice meant to open that empty-mind awareness, consciousness in its primal nature as the Cosmos open to itself, preparing for the insight that appears at the end of the poem. And this primal nature of consciousness is embodied, again, in the structure of the poetic language itself, where things exist in the open space of empty-mind grammar.

At the same time, the poem animates that edge where form and formless blur together, allowing consciousness to witness or inhabit

the formless generative tissue of Tao. This happens perhaps first and foremost, as always in such poems, in the poetic language itself with its wide-open grammar: words (forms) seemingly just appearing out of the formless and generative emptiness surrounding them and on the verge of vanishing back into that formlessness. And at the poem's narrative level, Tu is out in his courtyard at the moment when forms appear out of formless darkness, morning lighting up the world, and the things he encounters there blur together or vanish (form into formless). It begins with the drums and horns marking the end of the last night-watch falling silent (meaning it's seven in the morning). Then light in the second line seems at first to be the mountain's light: "Solar-Terrace Mountain light spreads." And the *solar* in the mountain's name is *yang*, the elemental principle of light (as opposed to *yin*, the principle of dark). But the combination 曙色 generally refers to dawn light, and the context of the poem encourages us to read it that way: "At *Yang*-Terrace Mountain, dawn light spreads." Hence, light infusing both mountain and dawn sky at once: light as a single tissue. And the reference to "*yang*" identifies this as the living *ch'i*-tissue.

In the second couplet, the Cosmos blurs together in the cold of line three, which grammatically describes both the landscape of mountain peaks and also the rising sun. And in line four, form and formless intermingle: mist and cloud drift layered mountains, sometimes erasing their forms, sometimes revealing them (a ubiquitous strategy in Chinese landscape paintings). In the third couplet, sails are hidden, and autumn leaves clattering down would be loud one moment and silent the next, thereby tracing the border of sound and silence, form and formless.

All of this, as spiritual practice, prepares Tu for the realization he finds at his courtyard gate in the countryside out beyond the peopled realm of a city (White-Emperor in line 1 is another name for Amble-Awe). The courtyard gate is a charged space in recluse poetry: recluses sweep the gate-path in anticipation of a sage guest, implying it's the first such guest in some time; they welcome those guests at the gate; and often in such poems, those recluses close the gate

because their recluse solitude is so deep they have no interest in visitors. Here the guests are deer, and they are sage indeed. They have no need of that Ch'an-imagist spiritual practice. They are always already awakened. Because they are free of our reflexive self-identity, that mirrored opening is the nature of their everyday experience. And also, because they exist without the naming that divides reality into its ten thousand forms, they inhabit reality as a single formless existence-tissue. Hence, the deer are teachers in a Ch'an sense. And facing them as an absent presence in the grammar at the end of the poem—not unlike his intimacy with crows in “Leaving the City” ([this page](#))—Tu is returned to his most primal nature, that inner wilds where we are indeed kindred to deer, for we too are the awakened landscape gazing out at itself.

16

Stars Absence

夜
night

白	夜	月	休	弦
white	night	moon	rest	crescent

燈	花	半	委	眠
lamp	blossom	half	abandoned	sleep

號	山	無	定	鹿
howl	mountain	not/ Absence	settled	deer

落	樹	有	驚	蟬
falling	tree	is/Presence	startle	locust

暫	憶	江	東	鱠
suddenly	remember	river	east	mince

suddenly

remember

river

east

mince

兼

also

懷

cherish

雪

snow

下

falling

船

boat

蠻

tribe

歌

song

犯

invade

星

stars

起

rise

空

empty

覺

aware

在

at

天

heaven

邊

edge

Night

A sliver of moon lulls through clear night.
Half abandoned to sleep, lampwicks char.

Deer roam, uneasy among howling peaks,
and falling leaves startle locusts. Suddenly,

I remember mince treats east of the river,
and that boat drifting through falling snow.

Tribal song trails out, rifling the stars. Here
at the edge of heaven, I inhabit my absence.

“**N**IGHT” READS LIKE A SEQUEL TO “NIGHT AT THE Tower” ([this page](#)). Tu is again facing the emptiness of a clear night “wide-open at

the edge of heaven,” but here he inhabits the exhilarating and unnerving clarity that remains after *the story of our lives opens away—vacant, silent*. The story of our lives is what we are, who we are. This poem has all but replaced story with immediate experience: the empty-mind awakening that is cultivated in Taoist/Ch’an practice, where the goal is to bring that clarity to everyday life. The most foundational stories are the assumptions we depend on in that everyday life. These are assumptions so deep they remain unspoken, assumptions about the nature of things around us and our relationship to them.

“Night” begins by challenging those assumptions—and so, the foundations of identity—through infusing the clarity of Ch’an imagery with disorientation and mystery. In the first couplet, Tu’s sleepiness blurs into the things he sees: the moon is oddly described as “resting,” and the lamp-flame as “half abandoned to sleep.” This mental blurring continues in the grammar itself (again a blurring of form and formless). The adjectives “white” and “crescent” in the first line should apply to the moon, but here they are distributed across the line. And in the second line, the disorientation comes in the pause after the second ideogram. The line seems at first to say: “the lamp-flame is half abandoned to sleep.” But since that sounds odd, one is encouraged to read an “I” in the pause, hence something like: “In the lamp light, I am half abandoned to sleep.” The end result is a blurring of Tu and the lamp-flame as might happen in half-sleep or Ch’an’s mirror-deep perception.

The second couplet invests this experience with cosmological dimensions. The two lines are grammatically parallel, and the most apparent reading is:

Among wailing mountains, deer are not settled.

Among falling leaves, locusts are startled.

The second line is especially striking, as the image of locusts startling up with brightly-colored wings clattering is almost the exact opposite of brightly-colored autumn leaves clattering down. But the third

ideograms in the two lines have second meanings in addition to “not” and “are”: “Absence” and “Presence,” that cosmological pair. This gives something like:

Among wailing mountains, Absence-settled deer.

Among falling leaves, Presence-startled locusts.

And compounding these sudden depths, the word *settled* also means “samadhi,” the deepest empty-mind meditation, which gives: “Among wailing mountains, deer in *Absence-samadhi*” (echo of the deer that appeared at Tu’s bramble gate as sage guests) or “Among wailing mountains, in my *Absence-samadhi*: deer.” Here we encounter *samadhi* as Absence, generative tissue of empty-mind (rendered in the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit term as “three-shadowed earth”). Hence, *samadhi* in which Tu does indeed *inhabit his absence*. And it is in the mirror-deep clarity of that Absence-samadhi that Tu witnesses a revelatory moment of Presence occurring (*tzu-jan*, occurrence appearing of itself) in all its singular clarity: falling leaves startling locusts up.

In the empty-mind awareness of this *Absence-samadhi*, two seemingly random memories appear and disappear in the third couplet. Fleeting scraps from the story of Tu’s life, scraps of self-identity, they emerge as *tzu-jan* from the generative ground of *samadhi*-consciousness (Absence) and vanish back into it. That is followed by another disconnected event, another scrap of *tzu-jan*, but this time a return to present reality: tribal songs, reminder as in “Night at the Tower” of Tu’s precarious position at the edge of the civilization that orders his life and identity, looking out into the emptiness of a vast and indifferent Cosmos (this would of course be inverted for the tribal peoples).

And finally, Tu simply states the terms of that exposure with almost spine-tingling clarity, the grammar clear and direct: “I am emptiness aware at the edge of heaven.” This line fails absolutely in translation, where we need to add “I” with all the metaphysics that entails. In the original, Tu appears as that absent-presence typical of

classical Chinese poetry and accurate to the inner wilds of Ch'an awakening: "Emptiness aware at the edge of heaven." And here it is worth remembering the Ch'an resonances in 空 ("empty"), and how it is a Taoist/Ch'an synonym for *Absence*. Tu is home on an ordinary night at his farm out beyond Amble-Awe. He is standing outside under a clear autumn sky. And yet, he isn't there at all. Awakened to his original-nature in its fullest cosmological/ontological dimensions, he inhabits his absence: Ch'an empty-mind mirroring that is perhaps unnerving, but also exhilarating and exquisite in its beauty and boundless dimensions. The awakened Cosmos, in other words, open to its own immensity.

17

Home Dance

夜	歸
night	return

夜	半	歸	來	衝	虎	過
night	half	return	come	road	tiger	pass

山	黑	家	中	已	眠	臥
mountain	dark	home	within	already	sleep	lie down

傍	見	北	斗	向	江	低
side	see	north	dipper	toward	river	descend

仰	看	明	星	當	空	大
look up	see	bright	star	in	empty/sky	huge

庭	前	把	燭	喚	兩	炬
courtyard	before	hold	candle	summon	two	torches

峽	口	驚	猿	聞	一	箇
gorge	mouth	startled	gibbon	hear	one	instance

白	頭	老	罷	舞	復	歌
white	head	old	weary	dance	further	sing

杖	藜	不	睡	誰	能	那
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

cane goosetoot not sleep who can equal

Returning Late

Past midnight, eluding tigers on the road, I return
home in mountain darkness. Family asleep inside,

I watch the Northern Dipper drift low to the river,
and Venus lofting huge into empty space, radiant.

Holding a candle in the courtyard, I call for more
light. A gibbon in the gorge, startled, shrieks once.

Old and tired, my hair white, I dance and sing out:
goosefoot cane, no sleep...*Catch me if you can!*

TO BE ANXIOUS OR WORRIED, AS TU HAS BEEN THROUGHOUT his refugee life, is 𧈧, a pictograph constructed of two elements. On top and extending down both sides is: 𧈧, “tiger,” an image showing a head at the top right, tail at bottom right, and left of the body curving between them, four legs. This graph can be traced back through more organic forms, such as 𧈧, where the whole image has the fluid feel of a tiger in motion, to earlier incarnations rendering the thing in and of itself: 𧈧. And beneath that tiger is 𧈧, “to think,” constructed of “heart-mind” (心: image of the heart muscle, with its chambers at the locus of veins and arteries) + “fieldland” (田). Hence, “thought in the frightening Presence of a tiger,” or “heart-mind when there is a tiger nearby in the fields,” or “the fieldland of heart-mind with a tiger in it.” But here, deep in the existential night of his recent poems, Tu eludes all that worry and anxiety and somehow slips free.

In the Chinese, Tu Fu is a perfectly absent presence here—in the poem’s grammar, and in the mountain dark surrounding his house. The poem enacts empty-mind, consciousness woven into the generative Cosmos—and yet, wondrously, it is at the same time Tu’s delighted celebration of himself. Ch’an awakening requires that we

see through self-identity as illusory and contingent, that we inhabit empty-mind as our truest self, see ourselves as the Cosmos open to itself, looking out at itself. But there it always is: the machinery of self won't go away. Although Ch'an practice seems to be a struggle against that machinery, empty-mind awakening opens the possibility of inhabiting that self not as an isolated center of identity radically separate from the world around it, but as also woven wholly into the Cosmos. This insight is embodied in the classical Chinese poetic language, where the self is simultaneously absent and acting in the world: the fabric of awakening that is the very structure of poems. It was a goal of Taoist/Ch'an practice, and Tu seems to have mastered it in his early Ch'an practice, which makes the often desperate engagement with self in his refugee poems even more profoundly infused with Ch'an awakening than poems of pure image that are limited to a selfless Ch'an awakening of empty-mind.

If empty-mind is the Cosmos aware of itself, thought is the Cosmos thinking itself, feeling is the Cosmos feeling itself. This is the insight cultivated in the *wu-wei* practice of acting with the spontaneous energy of the Cosmos ([this page](#) ff.). The full constellation of selfhood—it too is wild, the Cosmos experiencing itself in a singular way from a particular point of view, thereby opening new possibilities for itself. It does this anew with each person, each center of consciousness. So it's true of anyone, but especially of those whose lifework is engaging with mind and Cosmos, with creating new possibilities for our human experience of the Cosmos: poets like Tu Fu, painters, Ch'an adepts, philosophers, calligraphers. And again, this is the perspective of most all classical Chinese poems, for they are at once selfless (the grammatically absent "I") and full of the concerns of selfhood.

This selfhood is in fact quite mysterious and wondrous—a sense Tu captures in the multiple readings suggested by the poem's last phrase, all of which evoke a sense of Tu's wonder at himself. The richness in this phrase comes from the range of meanings in the last word (那), beginning with "that": hence, "Who can do that (dance and sing wild with liberation)" or "Who/what am I that I can be so

old and still dance and sing wild with liberation?” A second cluster of meanings for 那 is “to manage, to bear, to be equal to, to rival.” This suggests, first, a challenge to others: “can anyone keep up with me,” or “can anyone equal this (wild liberation),” a bold and funny question coming from an “old and tired” man. But a question that is to the point, in any case, for our normal unenlightened attachment to self precludes such an experience of liberation. And finally, Tu’s phrase suggests “who could bear it (to be so wild with liberation),” with its sense that Tu’s own exhilaration is almost unbearably intense.

Translation of Chinese poetry fails fundamentally because English grammar itself erases everything that is embodied in the minimal and empty grammar of Chinese poetry: the whole Taoist/Ch’an ontology/cosmology, its generative Cosmos, and empty-mind woven into that Cosmos. This failure seems most dramatically evident in the need to insert a first-person pronoun: *I*. How strange and unexpected, then, that this imposed *I* expresses the further Ch’an understanding that self, too, is awakened: empty and woven into the Cosmos. This understanding changes everything, transforming selfhood into something luminous and wild. Luminous and wild, awakened and so empty that a similar ending in an earlier poem becomes:

hair all white, goosefoot cane: what joy,
mind and life gone perfectly transparent!

18

Open Alone

舟	月	對	驛	近	寺
boat	moon	facing	post-station	near	monastery

更	深	不	假	燭
night- watch	deep	not	use	candle

月	朗	自	明	船
moon	clear	of itself	radiant	boat

金	刹	青	楓	外
gold	monastery	green	maple	beyond

朱	樓	白	水	邊
red	tower	white	water	beside

城	烏	嗆	眇	眇
city	crows	cry	faint	faint

野	鷺	宿	娟	娟
wild	egret	sleep	graceful	graceful

皓	首	江	湖	客
luminous	head	river	lake	guest

鈎	簾	獨	未	眠
hook	blinds	alone	not	sleep

*Opposite a Post-Station, My Boat Moonlit Beside a
Monastery*

The boat mirroring crystalline moonlight
deep into the night, I leave candles unlit.

Golden monastery beyond green maples,
crimson post-tower beside lucent water:

faint, drifting from the city, a crow's cry
fades. Full of wild grace, egrets drowse.

Hair lit white, guest of rivers and lakes,
I tie blinds open and sit alone, sleepless.

IN SPITE OF THE RELATIVE PEACE OF HIS LIFE ON THE farms, Tu was eventually overcome by the longing born of displacement and homesickness. After a year outside Amble-Awe, return seemed a possibility when Tu heard that the latest Tibetan assault on the capital had been beaten back, so he set out in March of 768. But the only way back to his home in the northwest was to travel still further away from home, down the Yangtze toward the southeast. From there he could sail up the Han River and make a short overland journey to the capital. Somewhere on his way down the Yangtze—old, wandering distant realms, heartsick—he paused for a night. And there in the boat's cabin, he tied window blinds open and sat alone, sleepless.

At some point, there is simply nothing more to say. Those concerns of selfhood that normally occupy a poem lose their consequence. Things simply are what they are. What has come has come, and the urge to struggle at shaping what is yet to come ends. Empty-mind Ch'an-imagery in late Tu Fu takes on a different feel because of his age and exposure: it is now heightened by loss and ruin, all that vanishing. Still, it's a kind of refuge or liberation,

everything suddenly so perfectly simple: just the mirror of empty awareness and things incandescent with their own presence.

As with all classical Chinese poems, this immediacy is replicated in the poem's pictographic images—for in its non-mimetic language ([this page](#) ff.), those images share the same source, the same ontological status, as the things themselves. This poem is alive with these pictographic images. The title alone, for instance, contains a plethora of them, more recognizable in their earlier forms. *Boat*: , from the older oracle-bone version, . *Moon*: . *Flowering shrub* growing out of the earth on the left side of  (*facing*), and on the right a *hand* (fingers at the top of the wrist, with thumb on the side below), both readily visible in this older version:  *Horse*, on the left side of  (*post-station*)—shown here in increasingly older forms: , , —and an *eye* at the top right, from this early form: . *近*, the graph for *near*, combines a stylized image for a foot on the left (derived from , which is a schematic picture of a foot, perhaps showing heel on the bottom left, toes to the right, leg above with an ankle indicated to one side), suggesting motion or walking (and so, coming “near to”), with the image for an axe formed of the tool itself and perhaps, on the right, a curling chip of wood falling away from the blade:  (a phonetic element, but which is also the very image of nearness and immediacy: the blade cleaving cleanly into wood). *Monastery* is portrayed as : a hand below (showing wrist with fingers and thumb) touching a seedling above (showing stem and branches growing up from the ground). This seedling image suggests “earth” as the generative source, so the graph's full etymological meaning becomes something like: “touching the generative.” The term originally meant “temple”—so putting it all together gives the early meaning “hand at the earth-altar,” or simply “earth-altar.”

This is poetry that aspires to silence. Once we speak, the identity-center replaces the silent mystery of the Cosmos with our constructions of it, and the result is a breach between consciousness

and Cosmos. Ancient poets, shaped as they were by Taoist and Ch'an thought, were acutely aware of this. They knew that in writing a poem they necessarily lost the deepest insight, and they therefore sometimes spoke of poetry as a curse. Although the center generated by linguistic thought was never seen as a realm ontologically separate from the empirical, as in the West, China's ancient spiritual traditions recognized a need to keep reweaving that center back into the generative silence of landscape and Cosmos. It was at the heart of spiritual practice, and a crucial part of that practice was an understanding that language and thought are what most fundamentally separate us from Tao. This understanding was there from the beginning, embodied in the empty space of the language's minimal grammar. It was there from the earliest levels of the textual tradition as well, in Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, and it eventually became the essence of Ch'an Buddhism, with its emphasis on silence, empty-mind, direct transmission of (empty-) mind outside texts and institutions, and its enigmatic sangha-case (*kung-an*: Japanese *koan*) practice that teases the mind outside normal conceptual structures. And Tu Fu shared this assumption about language and thought, as in these lines of realization in which he reweaves consciousness and landscape in a radical way:

Sun-bright Absence transmits the lamp;
yellow-gold Presence reveals the earth.

No more this song-wild old man, I turn
and look away into mind nowhere it is.

In this passage, the reweaving of the final couplet takes place in the cosmological context of Absence and Presence: wordless Absence transmitting the lamp (Ch'an metaphor for absolute insight, which is passed from teacher to student directly, outside of word and text, idea and institution) and Presence as the ten thousand things wordlessly in and of themselves.

It was this distrust of language with its explanation and story that gave rise to Ch'an-imagist poems in the Chinese tradition. A

landscape poetry of images weaves the center into landscape as accurately as language can, by rendering a larger identity, an identity that is made of landscape. It renders the opening of consciousness and lets the ten thousand things speak for themselves as part of that opening, that wild identity. It remains true that we can say nothing about the world without opening in some sense a breach between consciousness and landscape, but thoroughgoing Ch'an-imagist poems like this (and, for example, "First Moon" on [this page](#)) come as close as language can to silence as integration of consciousness and the existence-tissue Cosmos.

It is an integration established at the beginning of the poem. As we have seen, moonlight is an image for the clarity of empty consciousness awake to the world; and in the title and second line, Tu takes this one step further. 月 can mean "moonlight," which gives the more familiar reading in the translation, where the boat is "moonlit," the first meaning of 月 is simply "moon." This establishes an identity of boat and moon, both in the title ("moon-boat") and in the second line, which suggests that Tu's boat is the moon "radiant of itself." Hence, Tu adrift on/as the moon somewhere out in the deep-sky Cosmos; and at the same time, consciousness as that deep-sky Cosmos awakened.

The elemental silence of things was the perfect wisdom that ancient artist-intellectuals like Tu Fu cultivated in their spiritual practices, and that silence shapes classical Chinese poetry not only in its Ch'an-imagist poetics but also in its empty grammar and pictographic vocabulary. Indeed, it makes poetry nothing less than a sacred medium for those ancients, capable of bringing us as close as language can to that elemental wisdom of silence. In fact, the primary word for poetry is constructed by adding an element meaning "spoken word" to the graph we saw above meaning originally "earth-altar," then "temple" or "monastery." Hence: 詩 in standard form, derived from the early form . That "spoken word" element on the left () portrays words rising out of a mouth; and with its addition, the etymological meaning of *poetry* becomes

something like “words spoken at the earth-altar (where one touches the generative source),” which becomes by Tu Fu’s time “words spoken in/from the sacred space of a monastery,” place of meditative silence where one inhabits the generative source in empty consciousness.

And when they function as poetry in the deepest sense, words are indeed almost capable of voicing silence, that wisdom-language of the ten thousand things themselves. This is such a poem, made entirely of that Ch’an mirror of empty awareness and things incandescent with their own presence. When Tu raises the window blinds and sits gazing out—he is adrift on/as the moon, empty consciousness awake and nothing other than the wild Cosmos itself gazing out at its own existence: a magisterial and bewildering refuge amidst the loss and ruin and vanishing.

Radiance Limitless

宿	白	沙	驛
overnight	white	sand	post-station

水	宿	仍	餘	照
water	overnight	again	remnant	illumine

人	烟	復	此	亭
people	smoke	again	this	thatch-hut

驛	邊	沙	舊	白
post-station	beside	sand	old	white

湖	外	草	新	青
lake	beyond	wildgrass	new	green

萬	象	皆	春	氣
ten	forms	all	spring	ch'i

thousand

孤

lone

槎

raft

自

of itself

客

traveler

星

star

隨

follow

波

waves

無

not

限

bounds

月

moon

的

lucent

的

lucent

近

entering

南

south

溟

dark

Overnight at White-Sand Post-Station

Another night on water: lingering light,
thatch-hut cook-smoke. Ancient white

sand beside a post-station. And beyond
this lake, fresh green wildgrass. Spring

ch'i: here among its ten thousand forms,
my lone raft is another Wandering Star.

Radiance following waves of moonlight
limitless, I shade into Southern Darkness.

IN NORTHERN DARKNESS THERE LIVES A FISH called Bright-Posterity. This Bright-Posterity is so huge that it stretches who knows how many thousand miles. When it changes into a bird it's called Two-Moon. This Two-Moon bird has a back spreading who knows how many thousand miles, and when it thunders up into flight its wings are like clouds hung clear across the sky. It churns up the sea and sets out on its migration to Southern Darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven.

So begins the *Chuang Tzu*, second of the seminal Taoist texts. Tu Fu alludes to this fable because he himself arose in the north, made a vast and mysterious journey through life, and has now late in life entered "southern darkness" in the form of a large southern lake at night. He had hoped to sail up the Han River and make his way back home to the capital region, but yet another Tibetan invasion in the northwest made that impossible. He paused several times on his journey down the Yangtze from Amble-Awe, finding refuge each time for a few months. Then, rather than continuing downstream to the Han when he reached Goddess-Court Lake, Tu headed south across

the lake with his family. This poem was written some evening in the spring of 769, on the southern shore of the lake.

Tu continued southward, up the Appearance River, where he struggled for another year and a half: The promise of a benefactor there vanished shortly after his arrival, when the local governor died. His poverty deepened. War broke out, forcing him to flee. A baby daughter died. Unable to support his family and still haunted by the beacon of home, Tu returned to Goddess-Court Lake and sailed north with his family, still hoping to make his way back to home ground in the north. There, on a boat crossing the lake's "southern darkness" waters, he described his imminent death in a final poem:

When my spirits ebb away, I feel relieved.
And when grief comes, I let it come. I drift

shorelines of life, both sinking and floating,
occurrence now a perfect ruin of desertion.

After telling the Two-Moon bird fable, the *Chuang Tzu* continues for several pages with variations and comments on the fable of Two-Moon's journey to Southern Darkness, then it describes a sage who is essentially a human version of the Two-Moon bird:

Lieh Tzu rode the wind and set out, boundless and clear, returning after only fifteen days. To be so blessed is rare—and yet, however free that wind made him, he still depended on something. But if you mount the source of heaven and earth and the ten thousand changes, if you ride the six seasons of *ch'i* in their endless dispute—then you travel the inexhaustible, depending on nothing at all. Hence the saying: *The realized remain selfless. The sacred remain meritless. The enlightened remain nameless.*

This is the complete text for a passage we've seen before ([this page](#)), and here in its full form it suggests that there is a way to live more vast and free even than the Two-Moon bird: to move wild through

life as a “selfless” and “nameless” part of *ch’i*, generative source-tissue in the vast cosmological drift of transformation. In “Inscribed on a Wall at Longbow’s Recluse Home” ([this page](#)), Tu described this awakened Taoist experience as drifting on a boat: “the way / home lost—I feel it drifting, this whole empty boat,” where the empty boat seems to describe that cosmological process of transformation. And here in this poem, Tu is on an actual boat adrift in the great transformation of *ch’i*’s ten thousand forms.

To move as that *ch’i*-tissue, that more expansive self, is to move freely, “depending on nothing at all”—a freedom embodied in “Overnight at White-Sand Post-Station” as the very structure of Tu’s mind. It begins in the Ch’an empty-mind mirroring of the poem’s imagism, where as an absent presence in the grammar he becomes the landscape around him: cook-smoke and thatch-hut, post-station and white sand, lake and wildgrass and indeed all ten thousand forms of spring. Becomes in fact the wild Cosmos looking out at itself, which is a death of the self. But this “selflessness” doesn’t only happen in the Ch’an-imagist mirroring. In the first line, where it’s unclear if it’s Tu or remnant end-of-day light that stays overnight, Tu is indistinguishable from that light (照: meaning, in addition “to illumine,” “to see with perfect clarity”: “illumination” in the Ch’an sense of “enlightenment”). In the penultimate line where Tu is again an absent presence in the grammar, it is empty-mind that drifts the lake boundless with moonlight. And in the final line, echoing the first, he is radiance itself entering Chuang Tzu’s Southern Darkness. So he really does seem in these untranslatable inner wilds of the poem to “travel the inexhaustible, depending on nothing at all.”

As that radiance, Tu is cast adrift on the *ch’i*-tissue, drifting out into its cosmic movements, his boat transformed into a *Wandering Star*. This *Wandering Star* is an extension of the cosmological description ([this page](#)) of the Yangtze and the Star River as a single circular flow, nestling the world in the comfort of a cosmic cocoon. The “Wandering Star” legend tells of a Yangtze fisherman who one day saw a strange raft floating past his house. It was empty, so he climbed aboard, wondering where it might take him. The raft carried

him downstream and eventually up into the Star River, where it became the *Wandering Star* slowly drifting back across the sky toward the west. Here, Tu has cast himself adrift out in the starry heavens, the dark lake beneath him become the *Lake of Heaven*, limitless in its expanses of deep-sky moonlight. It was a recurring figure for Tu Fu. In an earlier poem, he spoke of being “appointed to an empty journey on that Star River raft.” And in a poem written just before his final poem, also on Goddess-Court Lake as he made that last attempt at returning home in the north, he places himself in the same cosmological setting:

I fear dusk light, but this dazzling
lake ranges into far heavens, and on this
Wander-Star raft, I’m sailing away there.

What did death mean for Tu Fu? Taoist/Ch’an practice cultivates consciousness as integral to that generative *ch’i*-tissue from which we are born and to which we return in death, that tissue from which each of the ten thousand things emerges as a kind of refugee amidst the boundless transformation, always on its way somewhere else. And Tu was a master of that practice, as in this poem (cf. [this page](#)) where he imagines himself wandering Buddha’s death-grove, a landscape of Buddha’s death.

Gazing at Ox-Head Mountain Monastery

It’s Buddha’s White-Crane death-grove:
Steps wind into depths quiet in mystery

here, spring colors float beyond peaks,
Star River fills meditation-hall shadow.

Sun-bright Absence transmits the lamp;
yellow-gold Presence reveals the earth.

No more this song-wild old man, I turn
and look away into mind nowhere it is.

Death was a consummation of that Taoist/Ch'an practice, for it was a return home to one's most expansive and wild identity as that cosmological tissue. And that is what Tu poetically describes in "Overnight at White-Sand Post-Station"—a return to stars not as astronomical bodies, but as embryonic origins of *ch'i*. Adrift here on his "lone raft," Tu is liberated to move wholly with "the source of heaven and earth and the ten thousand changes," to "ride the six seasons of *ch'i*." Returned to his original wild nature as that *ch'i*-tissue itself, returned *nameless* and *selfless* to Southern Darkness—a refugee Tu Fu sets out without himself to wander a refugee Cosmos.



Phil Dera

DAVID HINTON has published numerous books of poetry and essays and many translations of ancient Chinese poetry and philosophy. These translations have earned wide acclaim for creating compelling contemporary texts that convey the literary texture and philosophical density of the originals. This work earned Hinton a Guggenheim Fellowship, numerous fellowships from NEA and NEH, and both of the major awards given for poetry translation in the United States: the Landon Translation Award (Academy of American Poets) and the PEN American Translation Award. The first translator in over a century to translate the five seminal masterworks of Chinese philosophy—*I Ching*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Chuang Tzu*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*—Hinton was recently given a lifetime achievement award by the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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