What Are You, Really?/Afar, Gazing at the Holy Mountain by Du Fu

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Cover Page Footnote
Translation by Mike Zhai / Kidder Smith

This poems/commentary is available in Transference: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol8/iss1/20
Dear Reader,

We have translated the earliest known work by Du Fu (712–770), the greatest poet of ancient China. But before you read our translation and commentary, we would like you to make a try yourself at translating the original Chinese. For this purpose, we have made a rough rendering of its forty characters in all their flavors. So please get out your pen and notebook.

First, a word about how classical Chinese poems work. Chinese characters are only partially “words” as we understand them, serving a function related by syntax to other words. They are also clouds, constellations of meanings and feelings that hover in space, electrified by proximity to one another. Often questions we expect English grammar to settle for us, like the subject of a sentence, the singularity or plurality of objects, the distinction between verbs, nouns and adjectives, are left unresolved in Chinese classical poems, and the reader may clear his or her own path through the poem.

Here is a warm-up exercise, taken from another early poem by Du Fu.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>陰</th>
<th>影</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shadow, hidden; dark, cool</td>
<td>shadow(s); shape(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>壺</td>
<td>生</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gully(ies); valley(s)</td>
<td>birth; arise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>虚</td>
<td>虚</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unreal; empty</td>
<td>absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>籽</td>
<td>籽</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pipes; orchestra; music</td>
<td>music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>月</td>
<td>林</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moon</td>
<td>woods; forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>散</td>
<td>散</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scatter; diffuse</td>
<td>clear; transparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>清</td>
<td>影</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Michael Zhai

What Are You, Really?
Here are two possible renderings of the lines. Try composing your own:

1. Am I hearing things? What is this singing
   of dark valley voices?
   Transparent shapes wandering
   through moonlit woods?

2. Shadowy valleys give birth to a phantom music
   The moon scatters clear shadows through the woods.

3. ______________________________________
   ______________________________________
   ______________________________________
   ______________________________________

Now on to our poem. Written when Du Fu was twenty-four, it recounts his visit to Mount Tai on China’s east coast. Mount Tai is not just a mountain but one of the five “Pillars of Heaven” in traditional Chinese cosmology, places of communion between the earthly and the transcendent.
You will find the Chinese characters of Du Fu’s poem and their rough rendering in English below. In the fourth line the characters “yin” and “yang” are used. They are, as you may know, cosmological duality, light and shade, known and unknown, the basis of traditional Chinese thinking. But in their origins, and particularly in this poem, they are also literally the northern (shady) and southern (sunny) sides of a mountain. That is all the background information you need. Make of the language what you will. Play around with the possibilities—make it a ballad, make it free verse, make it a rap song... make it what you think Du Fu meant or something else entirely. Our translation appears on the following page.
望
Wàng
Gaze from afar; Marchmount;
Perspective;
Prospect
(one of five Sacred Peaks of China)

岱
Dài
Supreme; ancestor; indeed; really
Paramount
progenitor

齊
Qí
(Qi and Lu, ancient kingdoms of eastern China)

陰
Yīn
(Yin and Yang, the alternating dual bases of reality; light and shade; male and female; bright and dark sides of a mountain)

蕩胸生曾雲
dàng xiōng shēng céng yún
let loose; let hang; breast; chest; give birth; layer(s); tier(s); cloud(s)
drift; dissolve heart; feelings generate; terrace(s)
& thoughts; produce what’s “on your chest”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>決</th>
<th>略</th>
<th>入</th>
<th>歸</th>
<th>烏</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jué</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td>rù</td>
<td>guī</td>
<td>niǎo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breach dyke or dam; pierce; break; to pop a water balloon</td>
<td>corner(s) of eye; enter eye socket(s); eye(s)</td>
<td>returning home</td>
<td>bird(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>會</th>
<th>當</th>
<th>凌</th>
<th>絕</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>huì</td>
<td>dāng</td>
<td>lìng</td>
<td>jué</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will</td>
<td>should; must</td>
<td>mount; climb; sheer; break off; approach</td>
<td>uttermost; extreme approach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>一</th>
<th>覽</th>
<th>異</th>
<th>山</th>
<th>小</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yī</td>
<td>lǎn</td>
<td>zhòng</td>
<td>shān</td>
<td>xiǎo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>survey; scan; many; crowd; mountain(s)</td>
<td>to make small</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(at a single glance) | Panorama | multitude | to make small | (at a single glance)
Michael Zhai  
_Afar, Gazing at the Holy Mountain_  

Du Fu  
_望嶽_

What are you, Great Ancestor?  
Two kingdoms can’t hold this boundless greening.

Your cauldron seethes with Creation’s splendor.  
Dusk your north—your south the dawn.

Shake the clouds from your breast,  
let homing birds burst your eyes!

Should I reach your highest summit,  
one glance—and multitudes of mountains dwindle.

**Commentary**

Du Fu asks right away, “what are you, really?” Brash confrontation is followed by a feint, slipping out the side. The next line does not really answer the question, or even speak directly of the mountain (The syntax would suggest that the subject of the second line is _Qi_ and _Lu_ rather than the mountain). Like a Daoist adept who, with the aid of secret maps, enters the inner Mountain beyond the visible one, Du Fu knows that when one questions Nature, one should not expect a straight answer. The secrets of the real Mountain, which is neither a describable object nor the sea of hazy green, can only be divulged by words arranged into a kind of spell. The brashness and evasion of the opening lines are both part of a strategy for entering it through a side door.

But the weirdest lines by far are the fifth and sixth, which collapse the distance between climber and mountain, inverting the perspective. Is the human being speaking to the mountain here, or is it the mountain speaking to, or through the human being? Whose heart, whose eyes, whose body, whose clouds? Some commentators, armed with common sense, have insisted
that the subject remain the mountain, so that the eye sockets are
caves where the birds roost. I take the line in a more surrealist-
cinematic sense—as birds fly away from the viewer and vanish
in the distance, their reflected images on the eyes move inward,
bursting the lens and disappearing into the pupils. So the open-
ing question, “What are you, really?” questions the perceiver, as
well as what is perceived.

Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose heart leapt one
morning for a falcon whirling in the sky, the young Du Fu one
morning took the trail up toward one of China’s great moun-
tains, and the experience burst the limits of the available lan-
guage, demanding a new one. Hopkins’s “The Windhover”
happens to be a sonnet, and Du Fu’s poem an eight-line “regu-
lated verse”—both forms central to their literary traditions, so
overladen with history, so rigorous in technical demands, that
they practically write themselves. Yet in both these works, the
forms become brittle containers for some elemental force:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

On a first reading, the language of “The Windhover” seems as
foreign to English as Du Fu’s poem to classical Chinese. Both
are translations, in that sense, of a power outside of language.
Like all great translations, they have brought this power into
their host languages, and transformed them in the process.

The translator wishes to express his gratitude to Kidder Smith
for his help and guidance translating Du Fu.

Sources:

Du Fu. “Wang Yue” 望嶽, Du Fu Quan Ji Xiao Zhu 杜甫全集校 人民文學出版社 2014, p. 3