
2020

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

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Recommended Citation

Zhai, Michael (2020) "*What Are You, Really?/Afar, Gazing at the Holy Mountain by Du Fu*," *Transference*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol8/iss1/20>

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

Cover Page Footnote

Translation by Mike Zhai / Kidder Smith

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.

陰	壑	生	虛	籟
Shadow, hidden, dark, cool	gully(ies); valley(s)	birth; arise	unreal; empty absence	pipes; orchestra; music
月	林	散	清	影
Moon	woods; forest	scatter; diffuse	clear; transparent	shadow(s); shape(s)

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	嶽			
Wàng	yuè			
Gaze from afar; Perspective; Prospect	Marchmount; Heaven's pillar; (one of five Sacred Peaks of China)			
岱	宗	夫	如	何
Dài	zōng	fū	rú	hé
Supreme; Paramount	ancestor; progenitor	indeed; really	like	what; how
齊	魯	青	未	了
Qí	lǔ	qīng	wèi	liǎo
(Qi and Lu, ancient kingdoms of eastern China)		transparent blue-green; color of springtime	not yet	end; resolve
造	化	鍾	神	秀
Zào	huà	zhōng	shén	xiù
Create; make	change; Transform; Transfigure	to cast metal; concentrate; bell; wine vessel	divine; marvel; spirit; holy	elegant; splendor; beauty; delicate
陰	陽	割	昏	曉
Yīn	yáng	gē	hūn	xiǎo
(Yin and Yang, the alternating dual bases of reality; light and shade; male and female; bright and dark sides of a mountain)		cut; cleave; divide	dusk	dawn
蕩	胸	生	曾	雲
dàng	xiōng	shēng	céng	yún
let loose; let hang; drift; dissolve	breast; chest; heart; feelings & thoughts; what's "on your chest"	give birth; generate; produce	layer(s); tier(s); terrace(s)	cloud(s)

決	眦	入	歸	鳥
<i>jué</i>	<i>zì</i>	<i>rù</i>	<i>guī</i>	<i>niǎo</i>
breach dyke or dam; pierce; break; to pop a water balloon	corner(s) of eye; eye socket(s); eye(s)	enter	returning home	bird(s)
會	當	凌	絕	頂
<i>huì</i>	<i>dāng</i>	<i>líng</i>	<i>jué</i>	<i>dǐng</i>
will (will definitely)	should; must (will definitely)	mount; climb; confront; approach	sheer; break off; uttermost; extreme	top; peak
一	覽	眾	山	小
<i>Yī</i>	<i>lǎn</i>	<i>zhòng</i>	<i>shān</i>	<i>xiǎo</i>
One (at a single glance)	survey; scan; Panorama (at a single glance)	many; crowd; multitude	mountain(s)	small; dwindle; to make small

Michael Zhai
Afär, 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 opening 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 mountains, and the experience burst the limits of the available language, demanding a new one. Hopkins’s “The Windhover” happens to be a sonnet, and Du Fu’s poem an eight-line “regulated 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:

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