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## Du Fu: Master Stylist of Chinese Poetic Language

Maja LAVRAČ\*

### Abstract

Du Fu (712–770) is one of the greatest wordsmiths among Tang poets. After his ambitions for a political career failed, he devoted all his energy to his poetry. Both, a theorist and experimenter, he was able to write in all the forms and styles of his time. He has been recognized as a master of *lǚshi*, i.e. regulated verse. His poetry covers an entire spectrum of human experience, and most of it is to some extent historical and autobiographical. The most exceptional features of his life as well as of his work are honesty and compassion for his people.

**Keywords:** Du Fu, master stylist, poetic language, historical, autobiographical, honesty, compassion, deep humanity.

### 1 Introduction

Du Fu, one of the greatest wordsmiths among Tang poets, was a man of protean talent and remarkable personality who spent most of his life painfully struggling for existence and whose health in later years suffered much from his past hardships. In comparison with Li Bai, who received literary acclaim in his lifetime, this never happened to Du Fu who despite the fact that he was an original and prolific poet remained largely unread by the reading public of that period. That was perhaps because he was in a way ahead of his time. After his ambitions for a political career failed, he devoted all his energy to his poetry. He was both a theorist and experimenter who were able to write in all the forms and styles of his time. He was an innovator who experimented boldly with poetic language. Due to its great compression which is densely packed with meaning, and the overlapping fragments of thought the reader quite often encounters problems in

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\* Maja Lavrač PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Asian and African Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. E-mail: maja.lavrac@guest.arnes.si

understanding his message immediately. Besides, this is also one of the reasons why his poetry is so difficult to translate.

Du Fu is generally acknowledged to be the master of *lüshi* or regulated verse, and in fact, most of his poems (two thirds of them) are written in this form, i.e., in eight lines composed of five or seven syllables employing the same rhyme on even-numbered lines and with lines three and four, and five and six forming parallel couplets.

His poetry covers entire spectrum of human experience, and almost all of it is to some extent historical and autobiographical. It reflects in a various and comprehensive way the social realities of the Tang Dynasty in its decline from strength to weakness. (Xie 1985: Preface) Among his work, we find poems of nature, friendship and family as well as poems referring to current events in the Empire, political and social problems, and particularly to his engagement with the events surrounding the An Lushan rebellion in 756 which besides his failure in the examination and his meeting Li Bai in 744 or 745 represents one of the most important influences on his poetry.

He was quite obviously a patriot in a “good” sense: he loved his country and its people (Davis 1971: 150). Thus both Confucian virtues, honesty and compassion, are the most exceptional characteristics of his work as well as of his life. Yet he never sank into self-pity nor did he diminish or exaggerate his emotions, but he always managed to preserve a sense of balance, not forgetting his sense of humour displaying playful wit. His sincere concern for the people around him made him a poet of fundamental questions, a poet of social protest exposing social injustice. His poems, often sad reflections on society, history and his own disturbed times, have been appreciated not only for their technical brilliance but first of all for their deep, abiding humanity. Indeed, his nature was completely devoid of egotism, and so was his poetry.

## **2 *Dreaming of Li Bai (1)***

The grief of death's partings has an end,  
The grief of life's partings remains forever.  
South of the Yangtze is a land of miasma,  
And I have received no news from your exile.  
You entered my dreams, old friend,  
Proving how often I think of you.

Though you are now caught in the net of the law,  
How come you have grown wings?  
I fear yours is not a soul of a living man  
Flying here so great a distance.  
When your soul came,  
The maple woods were green;  
When your soul left,  
The pass was covered by the darkness of the night.  
The setting moon shines on the rafters of my chamber,  
And I half believe it still illuminates your face.  
The river is deep, the waves are wide –  
Beware of water dragons!

The theme of friendship occupies a prominent place in Chinese poetry. Du Fu's most prominent friendship was that with his senior poet-friend Li Bai. It was indeed most moving though it seemed to be somehow onesided. The two met in Henan in 744 or 745. At that time, Li Bai was already a recognized poet while young Du Fu was yet to wait for his fame to come. The older man's fascinating personality immediately captured Du Fu's attention and he treasured the memory of their brief association for the rest of his life, addressing a number of poems to him at different times and from different places. (Hawkes 1990: 89)

Also the above poem is addressed to Li Bai, and is one of his most touching and passionate pieces. Its style that resembles the ballads of the Han Dynasty in a way symbolizes Du Fu's feelings for his friend since Li Bai is known for his masterful imitation of this poetic tradition. The exact date of the poem is unsure, though it has been generally recognized as the autumn of 759. A year ago, in the autumn of 758, Li Bai was banished to Yelang, a pestilential district in Guizhou. Yet in spring of 759, he was pardoned. Since Du Fu speaks of him in his poem as still in the net of the law, it is most possible that it was written before Li Bai was pardoned.

After the two friends separated, they never met again in their lifetime. Du Fu often longed for their reunion, and when the news came of Li Bai's banishment, he dreamt of him and was very worried. He wrote the above poem thinking of Li Bai as a

condemned man who had probably little or no chance of returning alive. He was almost convinced that his exile would cost him his life. And it was this misfortune that aroused his deep compassion. Besides this, the poem also expresses his profound yet unsatisfied desire to see his friend again, a friend whom he had admired so much.

The poem beautifully opens with a statement that after separation by death one can swallow one's grief, but if it is life that separates us, we feel constant sorrow, endless anguish. Li Bai was expelled to 'Jiangnan' which is a name for a vast area in Guizhou where malaria was spread, and Du Fu has not received any news from him. He even does not know if he is still alive. He is worried about his friend's fate and afraid that he might have already died in prison. For Du Fu this is a very painful experience, even more painful than if Li Bai did in fact die, i.e. if the two of them were indeed separated by death.

And so Du Fu, longing for his friend, eventually dreams of him. His dreams in fact confirm that Li Bai is always in his thoughts, that he all the time thinks of his absent friend and forever remembers him. Yet all this cannot disperse his fears. He wonders how he found wings to fly to him, how he managed to get to his place since he is trapped in the prosecutor's net, meaning imprisoned. Li Bai is here compared to a bird in a cage, thus being unable to use its wings and fly away. Du Fu is not sure if he really sees Li Bai's soul since he cannot believe that it could make such a long journey from 'Jiangnan' to the place where he lives while he is asleep, the distance being simply too great.

The image of green maples on the banks of Yangtze when Li Bai's soul appears is an allusion to a poem by Qu Yuan who was also banished, comparing him with another great Chinese poet who, like Li Bai, suffered injustice. It also announces the coming of spring and awakening of hopes in Du Fu's heart. Yet when his soul departs, it is already dark suggesting that also his hopes are vanishing in the darkness of the night.

When he finally wakes up and opens his eyes, he sees the light of the setting moon illuminating the rafters of his room. The dream had been so vivid, that when he opened his eyes and saw the whole room bathed in moonlight, he looked around half expecting the moonlight to reveal Li Po still standing in one of its corners. (Hawkes 1990: 92) It seems as if he can almost see his friend's face.

The deep river and its vast, wide waves at the end of the poem allude to the dangers and misfortunes in Li Bai's life. The last line is actually an omen for Li Bai to be always watchful. A dragon is a mythological creature which in spring rises into the sky and in autumn disappears into watery depths. Here, the image of water dragons

hints again at the poet Qu Yuan who threw himself into the river and thus committed suicide. Is Du Fu perhaps thinking that Li Bai could also end his life in this way?

From the beginning to the end, the poem reflects the poet's feelings and ideas about friendship and separation, distance and longing, but it is nevertheless also a remarkable contemplation on life and death.

### 3 *Gazing at Mount Tai*

Taishan, what is it like?

The endless greenth of Qi and Lu.

Here the Creator concentrated sacred beauty

Splitting the northside and southside into dark and light.

Sweeping past my heaving chest layers and layers of clouds,

Returning birds are cutting through my eyes.

I'd like to go all the way up to the peak

And see at a single glance all the tiny hills below me.

Written in 736, this is one of Du Fu's earliest poems. He was then twenty-four and made an excursion to the foot of Mount Tai, the Eastern Marchmount, one of the five sacred mountains of China which is situated in the eastern province of Shandong. It is devoted to the contemplation of the natural world in all its primeness and purity. It represents the poet's return to nature to be close to the source of all life, and hints at his desire to climb to the mountain's peak. Choosing simple, usual imagery he gives us a beautiful description of a mountain scene, yet not only this. His images are in a way misleading since there is much more complex meaning hiding below their surface, echoing with his personal voice.

Though the poem is composed of eight lines, with lines 3–4 and 5–6 displaying verbal parallelism, this is not a *lüshi* but a five-syllable old-style 'gushi'. The important features of Du Fu's art are his quick changes of style which are employed also in the poem discussed. In the first couplet we come across somehow prosaic style that in the middle of the poem shifts into dense poetical expressiveness, and at the end transforms again into a simple, straightforward language of expectation. The poet moves from the present observation to the reflection of the past, back to the present again and eventually to the future.

The title of the poem *Wang Yue* already indicates that the poem is about a view of the mountain and not about its ascent though the latter is being imagined by the poet. He may of course have climbed it a bit already. The poem merely tells us that he had never been to the top. (Hawkes 1990: 2) 'Yue' literally means a high mountain, a marchmount, referring here to the Mount Tai, one of the five holy mountains of China which was regarded as a supreme intermediary between Heaven and the Emperor protecting the state. Sacrifices were performed at its foot and on its summit.

The poem opens with an honorific kenning for Taishan, 'Daizong', which is one of the names given to Taishan as a god, and a question what it is like. The answer can be found in the following five lines. It is green, endlessly green. The names of Qi and Lu refer to the ancient states (the present-day Shandong) with Qi lying north of Taishan and Lu south of it. Here Nature, known as the Creator, created and concentrated divine, mystic beauty which affirms the sacred nature of the mountain, i.e. its perfect holiness. Actually, the mountain evokes some sort of mysterious feeling. According to Du Fu, he sees it in a cosmic position between Yin and Yang, the two opposing principles in nature, Yin representing the feminine cosmic force, being among others dark, cold, north, negative, and Yang standing for the male cosmic force, being among others light, hot, south, positive. According to the ancient Chinese belief, the universe operated on the basis of the interaction between the two of them in a complementary way. In the poem, Yin symbolizes the dark north slope and Yang the sunlit south slope of the mountain dividing night from day, i.e. the mountain is so high that one side is always bathing in the sun while the other one is forever being in shade. Yin-Yang symbolism in general plays an important role in Du Fu's poetry.

The following couplet, namely the lines 5 and 6 form the crux of the poem which is quite ambiguous, though its images are most probably referring to the poet himself. He imagines himself somewhere high up on the slopes watching the clouds drifting before him, and it seems to him as if they were born from his chest. In fact, a mountain does give birth to clouds, and Taishan is indeed famous for its cumulous clouds.

As we proceed to the sixth line, we come across a poetic inversion. Thus the reading of this line does not mean that his split eye-pupils enter homing birds, but that while he is closely watching the birds returning to the mountain he is straining his vision in order to follow their flight, and therefore he feels like his eyes were going to split.

After climbing the mountain with his eyes, Du Fu closes the poem with his imaginary ascent of its peak in the last couplet enjoying the breathtaking view. In comparison to

Taishan, all other mountains seem so tiny and small, thus proving the Marchmount's distinctiveness and superiority.

#### 4 *Writing Thoughts while Travelling at Night*

Tender grasses, slight breeze on the bank;  
The tall mast of my boat in the loneliness of the night.  
Stars hang down over the vast wild plain,  
The moon seems to be swimming in the great river's flow.  
Can literature bring me fame?  
Being old and sick, I must abandon my official post.  
Wandering, wandering, what am I like?  
A lonely gull between earth and sky.

Du Fu often refers to himself as a traveller, both literally and figuratively. Yet his poems about travel are not so much about travelling itself as they are expressions of his loneliness and nostalgia, two common features of the classical Chinese poetry. Especially the latter one seems to be a continuous inspiration for him.

The above poem is usually dated 765 and supposed to have been written on the two hundred and fifty mile journey down the Yangtze from Jung-chou to Chung-chou during June or July of that year, following Yen Wu's death in Ch'eng-tu. I prefer the dating of William Hung, who places it in the spring of 767 when the poet was travelling between K'uei-chou and Chiang-ling. The fine grass and the great expanse of level plain surely sound more like the central plain of the Yangtze in spring than the Yangtze gorges in July. The mood of resigned despair also belongs to the later period. (Hawkes 1990: 201)

The first impression we get reading the above poem is a mixture of sadness and irony, the poet's resigned despair while he is looking back on his life and its achievements. The poem, written in the form of regulated verse, which Du Fu developed to the degree of perfection, opens with a portrayal of landscape as seen from the boat. It is night-time, and he is travelling by boat, or it may be also that his boat is moored by the river bank. In his silent, lonesome observation of nature, he is perceiving the surrounding scenery in detail. Indeed, the first two couplets display a density of nature images which do not function only as a simple description, but first

of all display evocative powers arousing in the reader his wish to further explore their possible connotations. The absence of verbs in the first two lines is employed on purpose to emphasize the poet's loneliness and isolation, both feelings being even more intensified towards the end of the poem. The nature images are simple, yet direct and concrete: tender grasses, slight breeze, stars, vast plain, the surging moon, the river. They wonderfully interweave with one another into a mirror reflecting the poet's identity. Especially forceful and significant are the last two images, i.e. the moon and the river. The first, being a symbol of contemplation, represents a link across space and time, while the second symbolizes eternal motion, constant flow of time and ephemerality of all things. In comparison with it, human life seems all the more transient and insignificant.

As we move on to the lines 5 and 6, we suddenly experience a vivid turnover from a simple, plain description to a powerful, profound philosophical implication. We are faced with a couplet of retrospection in the form of the poet's honest and straightforward statement that his life has achieved nothing. He neither became a famous poet nor a successful official. Because of age and illness, he had to give up all his hopes of official service, and it is this antithesis between literature and official career that represents the central point of this poem as well as of his last reflective years.

The final couplet is an image of the poet himself. Asking himself a fundamental question: "What am I like?", Du Fu finds the answer in the form of a marvellous simile – a lonely gull that is wandering between earth and sky, thus summing up his own feelings of grief and despair. What Du Fu is saying, it seems to me, is that his life has achieved nothing, neither literary fame nor a successful career. From this moment of despair is born the magnificent simile of the last couplet. (Hawkes 1990: 202)

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