Friedrich Hölderlin: Little Knowledge but Joy Enough

Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) was one of Germany's greatest lyric poets. He was exquisitely sensitive to the beauties of the natural world, and thoroughly enamoured to the glories of Ancient Greece. His verses are strikingly beautiful in their sound, and have been set to music by many composers. As a young man he was very productive, writing poems and the epistolary novel *Hyperion* (1799). He also made important new translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and *Antigone*. However, in 1806 he lapsed into madness. From 1807 until his death, he lived alone in a room overlooking the Neckar River in Tübingen. He mumbled to himself in many languages, and occasionally wrote brief fragments of verse for visitors, signing them with various pseudonyms and fictitious dates. This posting considers some of his poetry.The text of the poems can been enlarged by clicking on them to get a separate window.

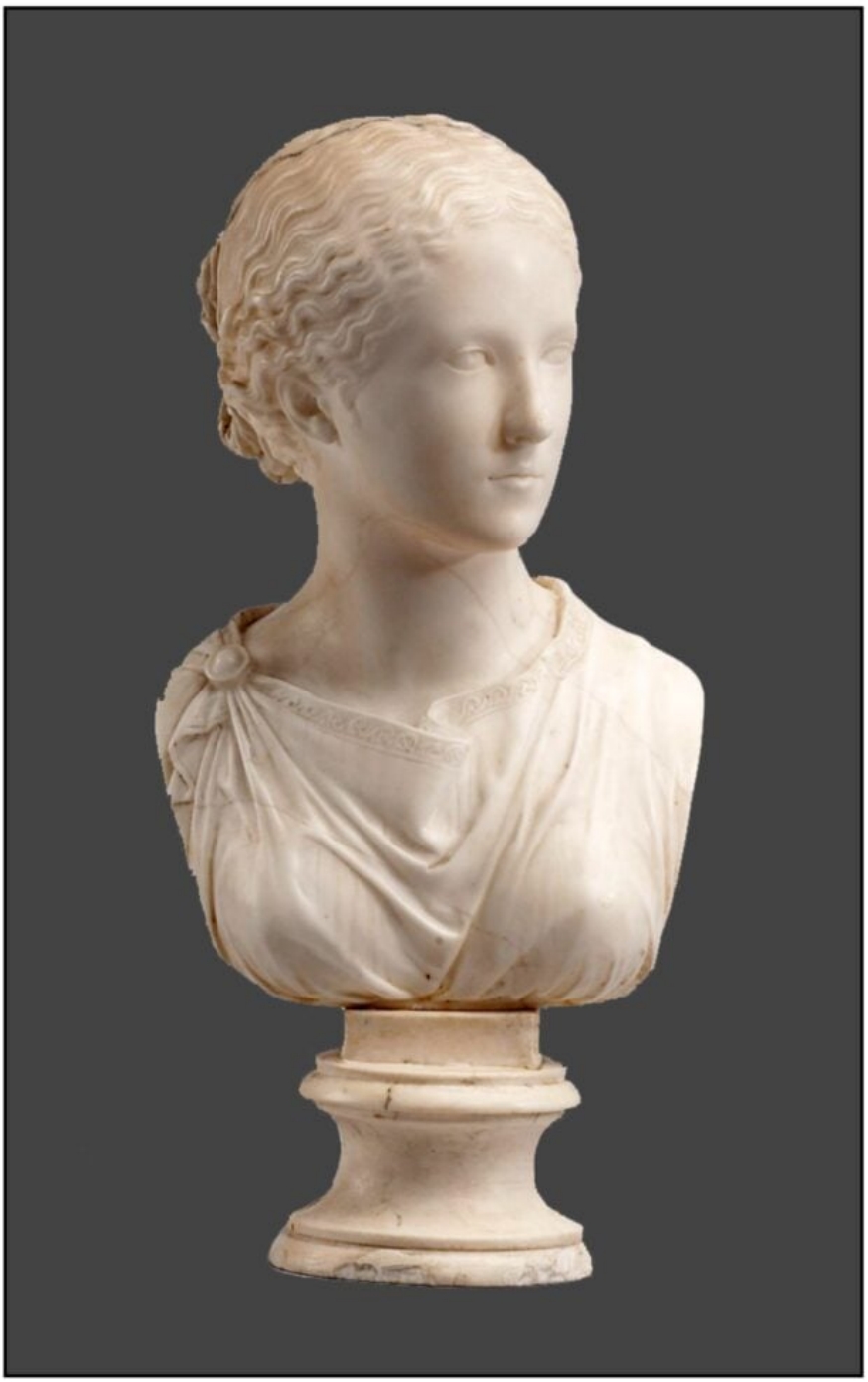
Life

Friedrich Hölderlin was born in 1770 in Lauffen am Neckar a village just south of Heilbronn in the Duchy of Württemberg. (That year also marked the birth of Wordsworth, Beethoven, and Hegel). His father died in 1772 and his mother married Johann Gok and moved to Nürtingen. Hölderlin attended school at the monastery of Denkendorf, and then began studies for the clergy at the monastery of Maulbronn. Founded as a Cistercian monastery in 1147, Maulbronn had become a Lutheran institution after the Reformation. In 1788 Hölderlin began to study theology at the *Tübinger Stift* (seminary). Among his fellow-students in Tübingen were the philosophers Georg Hegel and Friedrich Schelling. Hölderlin and most of the Tübingen

students were more fascinated by the ideals of the French Revolution (1789) than by the logic of theology. These were revolutionary times: what might be yet possible was replacing what always had been.

The pastel portrait (illustrated above) by Franz Carl Hiemer dates from 1792, when Hölderlin was in his final days as a student. It is the very picture of a young romantic poet: sensuously beautiful, clear-eyed and idealistic. Who could not fall in love with him?

Having decided against a career in the church, Hölderlin found employment as a tutor in the houses of the bourgeoisie. Though he was not a good teacher, these positions allowed him time to write poetry. When serving as tutor in the Gontard household in Frankfurt from 1796 to 1798, Hölderlin fell passionately in love with Susette Gontard (1769-1802), the wife of his employer. Susette returned Hölderlin’s affections. The illustration below shows a small alabaster bust of Susette by Landolin Ohmacht from around 1795.



Dismissed from his position, Hölderlin moved to Homberg, where he attempted to edit a new journal. He continued to write to Susette, and occasionally arranged secret meetings with her. She became immortalized as Diotima, the great love of the hero in Hölderlin’s novel *Hyperion* which was published in two parts in 1797 and 1799.

In January, 1802, Hölderlin accepted a position as tutor in the household of a German consul in Bordeaux, France.

Penniless, he traveled to Bordeaux on foot, a distance of over 1000 km. The position did not work out, and he traveled back to Tübingen in May. We do not know what happened to him on the journey. He may have been robbed; he was clearly exhausted by his travel, and he was close to starvation. When he arrived in Stuttgart in June, a friend described him as "an emaciated man, pale as death, long-haired and bearded, wild-looking, habited like a beggar" (Zweig, 1939/2017, p 356). At this time, he was informed that Susette had died. She had contracted German measles from her children Though the children recovered easily, Susette who probably had some underlying lung disorder, perhaps tuberculosis, did not. Hölderlin was devastated.

Despite his despair, Hölderlin was able to complete his translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and *Antigone.* However, when they were published in 1804, these translations were derided as monstrous, and considered the work of a lunatic. For example, in the opening scene of Antigone, the verb *kalchainein* (from *kalche,* the purple limpet), which means "to become dark red," is metaphorically used to describe disturbed thoughts. Hölderlin, directly translated the Greek *dēloīs gār ti kalchaínousa' éposas* as *du scheinst ein rotes Wort zu färben* ("you seem to dye your words red") rather than decorously translating it as "you appear to be troubled." His choice of words is strange and exciting (de Campos, 2007; Carson, 2008). Hölderlin's radical translations have prevailed. Carl Orff used them for his operas *Antigonae* (1949) and *Oedipus der Tyrann* (1959), and Bertolt Brecht adapted them for his 1948 play *Antigone*.

Hölderlin's grief after the death of Susette was overwhelming, and he began his descent into madness. Isaac von Sinclair, a close friend, arranged an undemanding position for him as court librarian in Homberg in 1804. However, in 1805, von Sinclair, who was a fervent supporter of the ideals of the French Revolution, was accused of treason against the Elector

of Württemberg, arrested and brought to trial in Stuttgart. Hölderlin was initially considered a co-conspirator, but was soon deemed too mad to stand trial. Ultimately, von Sinclair was found not guilty. The mad Hölderlin left Homberg to return home. However, his mother could not take care of him and in 1806, the poet was admitted to the University Hospital in Tübingen where he was treated by Professor Johann von Autenreith.

In 1807 he was discharged as incurably insane into the care of a carpenter Ernst Zimmer, who took in student boarders. For the next 36 years (one half of his lifetime) Hölderlin lived in the first-floor room in a tower overlooking the Neckar River. His upkeep was supported by a small annuity from the state of Württemberg. The tower had at one time been part of the city's medieval fortifications but was then merged into the houses on Bursagasse. The following illustration shows the tower as viewed from the Neckar River:

In the 1820s, Hölderlin was visited by a young poet, Wilhelm

Waiblinger (1804-1830), who describes his experience visit in his 1830 memoir *Friedrich Hölderlin's Life, Poetry and Madness:*

> One ponders, wondering whether or not to knock, and feels a sense of uneasiness. After finally knocking, a loud and forceful "Come in!" can be heard. Opening the door, one finds a haggard figure standing in the middle of the room, who bows as deeply as possible and will not stop bestowing compliments, and whose mannerisms would be very graceful were there not something convulsive about them. One admires the profile, the high forehead heavy with thought, the friendly, lovable eyes, extinguished but not soulless; one sees the devastating traces of the mental illness in the cheeks, the mouth, the nose, above the eyes where an oppressive and painful wrinkle has been etched. With regret and sadness, one observes the convulsive movement which sometimes spreads throughout the entire face, forcing his shoulders to jerk and his fingers to twitch. He wears a simple jacket and likes to keep his hands in his pockets. One says a few introductory words which are then received with the most courteous obeisance and a deluge of nonsensical words which confuse the visiting stranger. Gracious as he was and, for the sake of appearance, still is, H. now feels obliged to say something friendly to the guest, to ask him a question. One comprehends a few words of his question, but most of these could not possibly be answered. Nor does Hölderlin in the least expect to be answered. On the contrary, he becomes extremely perplexed if the visitor attempts to follow up a train of thought.

Hölderlin was also visited by other students and tourists. When given paper, Hölderlin would write fragments of verses and give them to his visitors. He would sign these with various pseudonyms, one of the most popular being "Scardanelli." Some of them would be dated with fictitious dates. On most days Hölderlin would go for walks in the city,

but he would not recognize or interact with anyone. He had been given a piano, and would often improvise music for prolonged periods.

We do not know the nature of Hölderlin's madness William Dilthey (1910) attributed his symptoms to spiritual weariness: "that form of dispersion of spirit produced from enormous exhaustion." He likened Hölderlin to Robert Schumann. For both, creativity came at too great a cost: they flew too close to the sun. Some writers have concluded that Hölderlin was schizophrenic (Blanchot, 1951; Jakobsen et al, 1980). Others have refrained from any definite diagnosis (Agamben, 2023; Robles, 2020). Horowski (2017) has proposed that his symptoms might have been due to mercury intoxication since von Autenreith treated him with very high does of calomel. However, Hölderlin's symptoms clearly preceded his treatment in Tübingen. The illustration shows an etching of Hölderlin based on a sketch by J. G. Schreiner in 1826.

Alcaic Verses

Hölderlin's German odes were composed using Alcaic verses, traditionally believed to have been invented by the Greek lyric poet Alcaeus around 600 BC (Warren, 1996). Stress in Ancient Greek is mainly related to the duration of the vowel sound, whereas stress in both German and English is more complex and can be affected by the duration, pitch and intensity of the syllable, as well as by semantics. Nevertheless, the Alcaic verse form works well in both German and English.

Alcaic verses consist of four lines. The first two lines contain 11 syllables, the third 9 syllables and the fourth 10 syllables. The stress pattern was complicated, and could be varied slightly. In the following diagram the stressed syllables are denoted by **/** and the unstressed by **–**. Syllables denoted by **x** could be either stressed or unstressed.

x / – / x / – – / – /
x / – / x / – – / – /
x / – / x / – / /
/ – – / – – / – / /

To illustrate this form, we can look at the brief poem *Ehmals und Jetzt*, shown below with a translation by Michael Hamburger which uses the same alcaic form:

Ehmals und Jetzt

In jüngern Tagen war ich des Morgens froh,
Des Abends weint' ich; jetzt, da ich älter bin,
Beginn' ich zweifelnd meinen Tag, doch
Heilig und heiter ist mir sein Ende.

Then and Now

In younger days each morning I rose with joy
To weep at nightfall; now in my later years,
Though doubting I begin my day, yet
Always its end is serene and holy.

The following shows the stress pattern in the German verse :

– / – / – / – – / – /
In jüngern Tagen war ich des Morgens froh,

– / – / – / – – / – /
Des Abends weint' ich; jetzt, da ich älter bin,

– / – / – / – / /
Beginn' ich zweifelnd meinen Tag, doch

/ – – / – – / – / /
Heilig und heiter ist mir sein Ende.

The following is a musical setting of the ode by Josef Matthias Hauer (1883-1959), sung by tenor Holger Falk accompanied by Steffen Schleiermacher on piano.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/hauer-ehmals-und-jetzt.mp3

To the Fates

Greek mythology postulated that human life was controlled by three sisters known as the Fates (*Moirai* in Greek; *Parcae* in Latin): Clotho, the spinner, spun the thread from her distaff onto a spindle; Lachesis, the allotter, measured out the destined amount life; and Atropos, the inflexible, cut the thread and ended the life. The following shows an image of the Fates in a tapestry created in 1983 by Patricia Taylor from a 1948 drawing by Henry Moore:

This is Hölderlin’s ode *To the Fates.* The translation is by Elizabeth Henderson

An die Parzen

Nur Einen Sommer gönnt, ihr Gewaltigen!
Und einen Herbst zu reifem Gesange mir,
Daß williger mein Herz, vom süßen
Spiele gesättiget, dann mir sterbe.

Die Seele, der im Leben ihr göttlich Recht
Nicht ward, sie ruht auch drunten im Orkus nicht;
Doch ist mir einst das Heil’ge, das am
Herzen mir liegt, das Gedicht, gelungen,

Willkommen dann, O Stille der Schattenwelt!
Zufrieden bin ich, wenn auch mein Saitenspiel
Mich nicht hinabgeleitet; einmal
Lebt ich, wie Götter, und mehr bedarfs nicht.

To the Fates

One summer only, powerful fates, accord
Me, and one autumn only of ripened song,
That, sated by sweet play, my heart then
May less unwillingly face its dying.

The soul deprived on earth of its right to know
Divine fulfilment, cannot in Orcus rest;
Yet let but once my heart's desire,
Let but my poem succeed, the sacred,

Then welcome, silent calm of the world of shades!
I am content to go, even though my harp
Cannot conduct me down; I lived that
Once as the gods do, and more I need not.

As the years pass, it would be a blessing to remember that once one had lived as the gods even if only for a short time.

One could not ask for more.

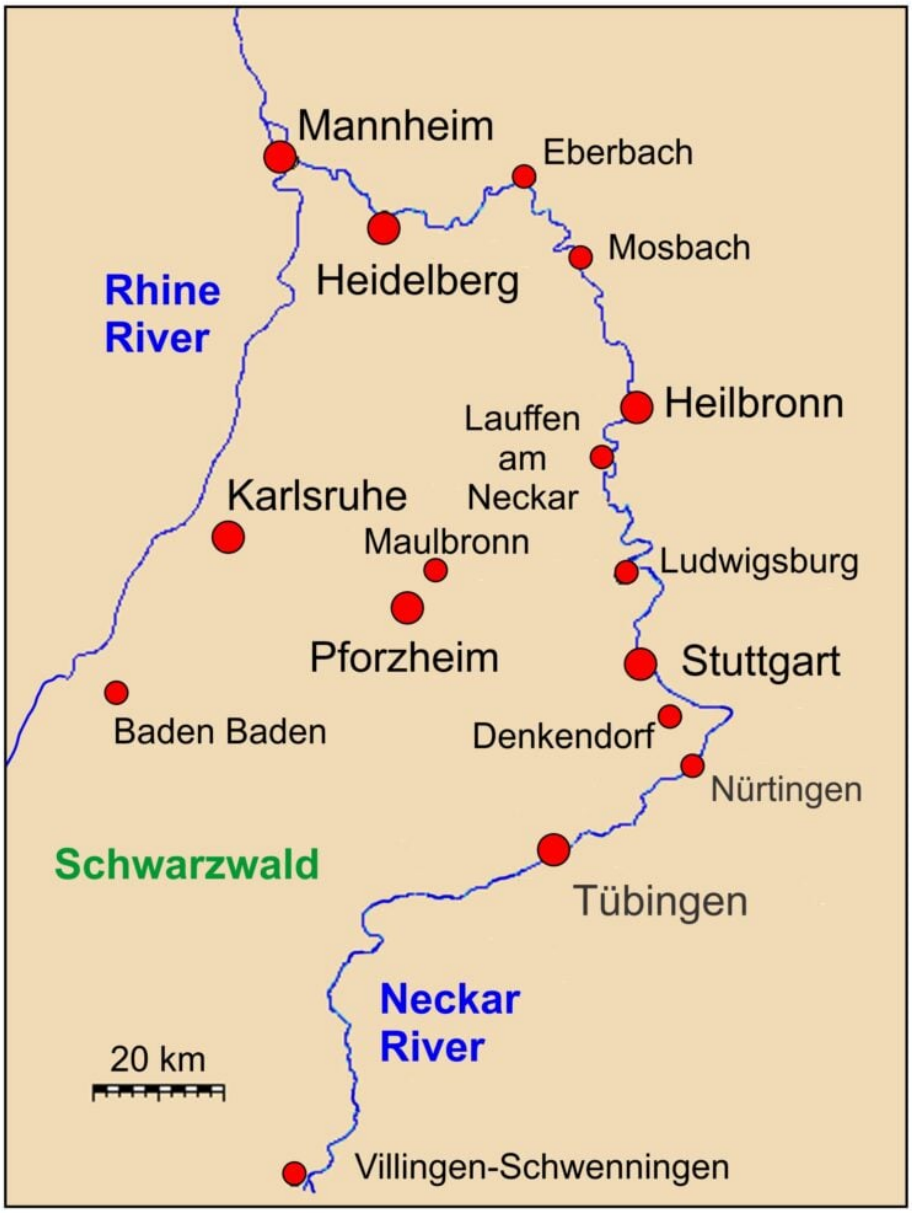
The following is a recitation of the poem by Matthias Wiemann and a musical setting by Paul Hindemith (1895-1963), sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau with Aribert Reimann accompanying him on piano.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/An-die-Parzen-matthias-wiemann.mp3

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hindemith-An-die-Parzen-Fischer-Dieskau.mp3

The Neckar

Hölderlin was born on the banks of the Neckar River. As shown in the map, this river arises in the Black Forest and flows down to join the Rhine River. Many stretches of the river are freely navigable.



The first half of Hölderlin's poem describes how the river brought him joy and peace. The second half tells how the beauties of the river inspire him to consider what it might be like to visit the wonders of Ancient Greece: Pactolus, a river in Ionia described by Sophocles as a "golden stream;" Smyrna the great coastal city of Western Ionia, now known as Izmir; Ilion, the ancient name for Troy; Sunium on the southernmost point of the Attic peninsula, with its temple of Poseidon; and Olympia, the site of the Olympic Games.

At the time that Hölderlin was writing his poem, it was impossible to visit Greece since it was part of the Ottoman

Empire. He could only visit in his imagination. Greece attained independence in 1832, but by then Hölderlin was mad.

Below is the text of the poem with a German translation by James Mitchell, followed by a recitation by Burno Ganz The translation follows the meaning but not the alcaic form of the German poem.

Der Neckar

In deinen Tälern wachte mein Herz mir auf
Zum Leben, deine Wellen umspielten mich,
Und all der holden Hügel, die dich
Wanderer! kennen, ist keiner fremd mir.

Auf ihren Gipfeln löste des Himmels Luft
Mir oft der Knechtschaft Schmerzen; und aus dem Tal,
Wie Leben aus dem Freudebecher,
Glänzte die bläuliche Silberwelle.

Der Berge Quellen eilten hinab zu dir,
Mit ihnen auch mein Herz und du nahmst uns mit,
Zum stillerhabnen Rhein, zu seinen
Städten hinunter und lustgen Inseln.

Noch dünkt die Welt mir schön, und das Aug entflieht
Verlangend nach den Reizen der Erde mir,
Zum goldenen Paktol, zu Smyrnas
Ufer, zu Ilions Wald. Auch möcht ich

Bei Sunium oft landen, den stummen Pfad
Nach deinen Säulen fragen, Olympion!
Noch eh der Sturmwind und das Alter
Hin in den Schutt der Athenertempel

Und ihrer Gottesbilder auch dich begräbt,
Denn lang schon einsam stehst du, o Stolz der Welt,
Die nicht mehr ist. Und o ihr schönen
Inseln Ioniens! wo die Meerluft

Die heißen Ufer kühlt und den Lorbeerwald
Durchsäuselt, wenn die Sonne den Weinstock wärmt,
Ach! wo ein goldner Herbst dem armen
Volk in Gesänge die Seufzer wandelt,

Wenn sein Granatbaum reift, wenn aus grüner Nacht
Die Pomeranze blinkt, und der Mastixbaum
Von Harze träuft und Pauk und Cymbel
Zum labyrinthischen Tanze klingen.

Zu euch, ihr Inseln! bringt mich vielleicht, zu euch
Mein Schutzgott einst; doch weicht mir aus treuem Sinn
Auch da mein Neckar nicht mit seinen
Lieblichen Wiesen und Uferweiden.

The Neckar

My heart awakened to life in your valleys,
Your waves played around me.
And all of the fair hills that know you,
Wayfarer, are known to me as well.

On those peaks the winds from the sky
Relieved me from pains of bondage,
And silver-blue waves shone forth from the valley,
Like the joy of life pouring out from a chalice.

Mountain springs hurried down to you,
My heart with them, and you took us along
To the quietly splendid Rhine, down
To its cities and pleasant islands.

The world seems to me yet beautiful, and my eyes
Break out with desire to the charms of the earth,
To golden Pactolus, to Smyrna's shores,
To Ilion's woods. How I'd like to

Go ashore at Sunium, and ask for the silent path
To your pillars, Olympia! Before age
And stormy winds bury you as well
In the ruins of Athens' temples,

Along with the statues of its gods. For you
Have long stood alone, pride of a world
That no longer exists. And the beautiful
Islands of Ionia, where sea air

Cools the hot shores and rushes through the woods
Of laurel, when the sun warms the grapevines,
And, oh, where golden autumn changes
The sighs of the poor people into songs,

When the pomegranate ripens, when the orange trees
Nod in a green night, and the gum trees drip
Resin, and drums and cymbals resound
To labyrinthine dances.

Perhaps someday my guardian deity will bring me
To these islands, but even then my thoughts
Will remain loyal to the Neckar
With its lovely meadows and pastoral shores.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Der-Neckar-Bruno-Ganz.mp3

Josef Matthias Hauer composed a set of brief piano pieces based upon lines from Hölderlin's poems (Barwinek, 2023). The

following are two of these pieces deriving from the poem *Der Neckar*, played by Anna Petrova-Foster:

> *Deine Wellen umspielten mich*
> Your waves played about me

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hauer-deine-Wellen.mp3

> *wo die Meerluft*
> *die heißen Ufer kühlt und den Lorbeerwald durchsäuselt*
> where the sea breeze
> cools the hot shores and rustles through the laurel forest

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hauer-wo-die-Meerluft.mp3

Hyperion

Hölderlin published his novel *Hyperion, oder der Eremit in Griechenland* in two parts in 1797 and 1799. It consists of a series of letters between Hyperion, a young Greek, to his German friend Bellarmin, with some occasional letters between Hyperion and his beloved Diotima. Epistolary novels were very popular in the 18th Century: Rousseau's *Julia, ou la nouvelle New Héloise* (1761), Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774) all used the format. Those were the days when those who were literate wrote letters.

Hyperion is short on plot and long in thought. The novel presents a general theory of beauty as the guiding light for harmonious society and of union with nature as the goal of the

individual person. Hyperion participates in an insurrection against the Ottoman rule with the rebel Alabanda (modeled on Isaac von Sinclair). Later he almost dies fighting with the Russians against the Turks in the great sea battle of Chesma in 1771. Although the Russians were victorious, the Greeks remained subjugated. Hyperion's great love Diotima, modeled on Susette Gontard, dies soon afterwards. Hyperion finally retires to live as a hermit in unspoiled nature. His concluding comment is one of reconciliation (Unger, 1984, p 36):

> *Wie der Zwist der Liebenden, sind die Dissonanzen der Welt. Versohnung ist mitten im Streit und alles Getrennte findet sich wieder. Es scheiden und kehren im Herzen die Adern und einiges, ewiges, gliihendes Leben is Alles*
>
> [The dissonances of the world are like the quarrel of lovers. Reconciliation is in the midst of strife, and all things divided find each other again. The veins depart from and return to the heart, and a unified, eternal, glowing life is All.]

Hyperion's *Schicksalslied* occurs after the battle of Chesma (Unger, 1984, p 36). It begins in awe of the gods and ends in despair.

Schicksalslied

Ihr wandelt droben im Licht
Auf weichem Boden, selige Genien!
Glänzende Götterlüfte
Rühren euch leicht,
Wie die Finger der Künstlerin
Heilige Saiten.

Schicksallos, wie der schlafende
Säugling, atmen die Himmlischen;
Keusch bewahrt
In bescheidener Knospe,
Blühet ewig
Ihnen der Geist,
Und die seligen Augen
Blicken in stiller
Ewiger Klarheit.

Doch uns ist gegeben,
Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn,
Es schwinden, es fallen
Die leidenden Menschen
Blindlings von einer
Stunde zur andern,
Wie Wasser von Klippe
Zu Klippe geworfen,
Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab.

Song of Destiny

You wander above in the light
on soft ground, blessed spirits!
Blazing, divine breezes
brush by you as lightly
as the fingers of the harpist
on her holy strings.

Fateless, like sleeping
infants, breathe the gods,
chastely protected
in modest buds,
blooming eternally
in spirit,
and their holy eyes
gaze in silent,
and eternal clarity.

Yet we are is granted
no place to rest;
we suffering humans
fall and vanish -
blind from one
hour to another,
like water thrown down
from rock to rock,
for years into the abyss.

Brahms' Opus 54 (1871) provides a choral setting of this song. The following are two extracts as performed by the Runfunkchor Berlin conducted by Gijs Leenars with the Deutsche Symphonie Orchester: settings of the first and last verses:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/schicksalslied-I.mp3

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/schicksalslied-II.mp3

Brahms added a beautiful adagio at the end of the song. Though criticized for trying to attenuate Hyperion's despair, this movement fits the novel, which ends with a sense of reconciliation.

Fragments from the Tower

Most of the slivers of poetry that have been preserved from Hölderlin's time in the tower have little meaning. Occasionally there are flashes that recall the aphorism of the younger poet:

> *Und wenig Wissen, aber der Freude viel*
> *Ist Sterblichen gegeben*
>
> And little knowledge, but joy enough
> Is given to mortals.
> *Stuttgart Hölderlin Ausgabe* 2.323
> translated by Chernoff & Hoover

And some of the poetry from that time is genuinely beautiful. Much of it is in the form of simple rhymed verse, unlike the unrhymed hymns and odes of earlier days. One of his last poems, entitled *Aussicht* (Perspective), likens human life to the necessary passage of the seasons, a theme that recurs in much of Hölderlin's poetry. Like much of his late work it is signed "Scardanelli" and dated to the preceding century:

> Wenn in die Ferne geht der Menschen wohnend Leben,
> Wo in die Ferne sich erglänzt die Zeit der Reben,
> Ist auch dabei des Sommers leer Gefilde,
> Der Wald erscheint mit seinem dunklen Bilde.
>
> Daß die Natur ergänzt das Bild der Zeiten,
> Daß die verweilt, sie schnell vorübergleiten,
> Ist aus Vollkommenheit, des Himmels Höhe glänzet
> Den Menschen dann, wie Bäume Blüt umkränzet.

24 Mai 1748 Mit Untertänigkeit

Scardanelli.

When the life that men live in passes faraway,
Into that future season when the vines gleam,
And the harvested fields lie empty,
Then emerges the dark shadow of the forest.

Nature completes her picture of the seasons,
And lingers while they quickly glide away,
Out of perfection, and the high heavens then shine
On men as if garlanding the trees with blossoms.

24 May 1748 Your humble servant

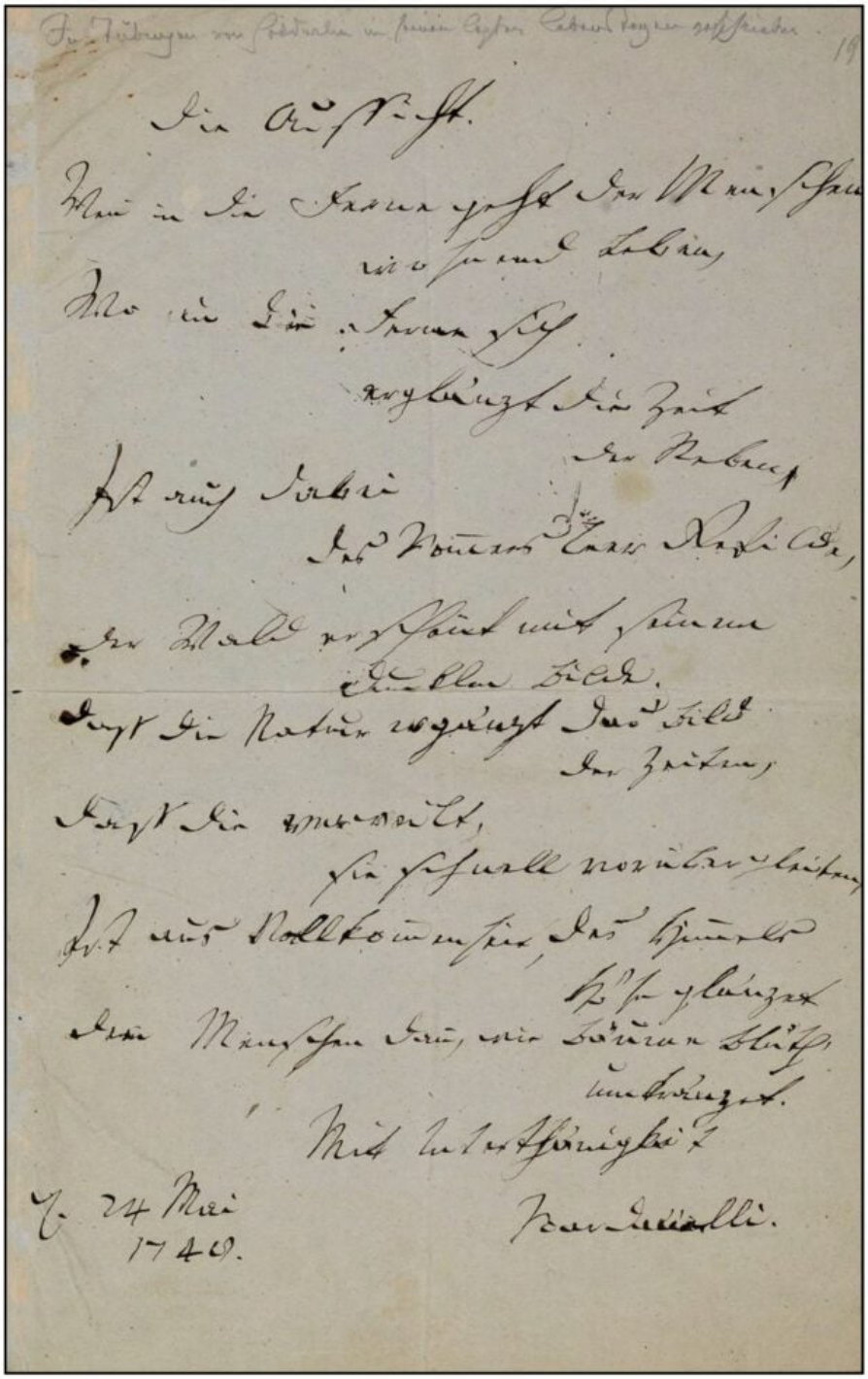
Scardanellli

The above translation is mine. There are few other translations available, but see Agamben (2023, p 289), and Aleksi Barrière for versions in both French and English.

The following is a recitation of the poem by Hanns Zischler:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/aussicht-hanns-zischlers.mp3

And a photograph of the actual manuscript of the poem:



Agamben (2023, pp 295-329) considers the various meanings of the phrase *wohnend Leben* (dwelling life) in the first line of the poem. He relates it to the idea of Christ's incarnation from *John* 1:14:

> And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us …

We live in life for a brief time. Perhaps we come from elsewhere, and return there when we die. Agamben also

considers the word “habit,” which comes from the word “inhabit,” which is close to “dwell” in its meaning. In German, the word *gewohnt* means “usual” or “habitual.” In a life of habit, one is affected by the world but does not try to change it. Such was Hölderlin’s time in the tower.

Stefan Zweig on Hölderlin’s Poetry

Hölderlin created some of our most exalted descriptions of nature and of the gods. His poetry is beautiful to read and to listen to. However, it often lacks the specificity of normal human experience. Hölderlin preferred the eternal to the everyday. His poetry may help us to understand the infinite, but provides little insight into our own finite lives. Stefan Zweig (1939, p 342) noted

> Of the “four elements” known to the Greeks – fire, water, air, and earth – Hölderlin’s poetry has but three. There is lacking to it earth, the dark and clinging element, connective and formative, the emblem of plasticity and hardness. His verse is made of fire, the symbol of the ascent heavenward; it is light as air, perpetually athrill like the rustling breeze; it is transparent as water. In it scintillate the colours of the rainbow; it is ever in motion, rising and falling, the unceasing respiration of the creative mind. His poems have no anchorage in experience; they have no ties with the fertile earth; they are homeless and restless, scurrying clouds, sometimes tinged with the red dawn of enthusiasm and sometimes darkened with the shadow of melancholy, sometimes gathering into dense masses from which flash the lightnings and thunders of prophecy. Always they climb towards the zenith, towards the ethereal regions far from solid ground, beyond the immediate range of the senses.

Heidegger and Hölderlin

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was a German philosopher who contributed significantly to the existentialist movement. In *Being and Time* (1927), he focused on what it means to "be." This question cannot be solved analytically but requires creative intuition. Thus, Heidegger was led to the idea that poetry determines the world through the words we use to describe it. The word "poetry" derives from the Greek *poiesis* making.

In his essay *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry* (1941), Heidegger discussed the meaning of the concluding lines to Hölderlin's poem *Andenken* (Remembrance) which dealt with his visit to Bordeaux. The last sentence of the poem reads

> *Es nehmet aber*
> *Und giebt Gedächtniss die See,*
> *Und die Lieb' auch heftet fleissig die Augen,*
> *Was bliebet aber, stiften die Dichter*.
>
> [But it is the sea
> That takes and gives remembrance
> And love no less keeps eyes attentively fixed,
> But what is lasting the poets provide.
> translated by Hamburger, 1998]

Another translation of the last line is "But what remains is founded by the poets." Heidegger's interpretation follows:

> This line throws light on our question of the essence of poetry. Poetry is a founding by the word and in the word. What is established in this way? What remains. But how can what remains be founded? Is it not that which has always already been present? No! Precisely what remains must be secured against being carried away; the simple must be wrested from the complex, measure must be opposed to excess. What supports and dominates beings as a whole must come into the open. Being must be disclosed, so that beings may

> appear. . . .
>
> The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet’s naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known as beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word. What endures is never drawn from the transient. What is simple can never be directly derived from the complex. Measure does not lie in excess. We never find the ground in the abyss. Being is never a being. But because being and the essence of things can never be calculated and derived from what is present at hand, they must be freely created, posited, and bestowed. Such free bestowal is a founding.
>
> But when the gods are originally named and the essence of things comes to expression so that the things first shine forth, when this occurs, man’s existence is brought into a firm relation and placed on a ground. The poet’s saying is not only foundation in the sense of a free bestowal, but also in the sense of the firm grounding of human existence on its ground. If we comprehend this essence of poetry, that it is the founding of being in the word, then we can divine something of the truth of that verse which Hölderlin spoke long after he had been taken away into the protection of the night of madness. Heidegger (1941, pp 58-59)

As the Nazis came to power in Germany, Heidegger became an enthusiastic supporter. A major problem in evaluating his philosophy is to determine whether it can be considered independently of his politics. Did his philosophy make him more susceptible to fascism? When one poetically creates an idea of a perfect society, one must be careful to consider the means used to bring it into being.

Hölderlin and Nazi Propaganda

In Hölderlin's time, the Holy Roman Empire no longer existed. Germany was a ragtag conglomeration of kingdoms, duchies, bishoprics and city-states. In many of his poems, Hölderlin yearned for a unified Germany, a country that could carry on the ideas of both ancient Greece and revolutionary France. His patriotism was both fervent and critical: he was upset by the petty bourgeois squabbling of his countrymen. The following is the beginning of his *Gesang des Deutschens* (Song to the Germans) with a translation form Sharon Krebs:

O heilig Herz der Völker, o Vaterland!
Allduldend, gleich der schweigenden Mutter Erd,
Und allverkannt, wenn schon aus deiner
Tiefe die Fremden ihr Bestes haben!

Sie ernten den Gedanken, den Geist von dir,
Sie pflücken gern die Traube, doch höhnen sie
Dich, ungestalte Rebe! daß du
Schwankend den Boden und wild umirrest.

Du Land des hohen ernsteren Genius!
Du Land der Liebe! bin ich der deine schon,
Oft zürnt ich weinend, daß du immer
Blöde die eigene Seele leugnest.

Oh holy heart of the nations, oh fatherland!
Forbearing all, like the silent Mother Earth,
And utterly misjudged, even though strangers have
Exploited you, taking the best from your depths.

From you they harvest the thought, the spirit,
They gladly pick the grape cluster, but they scoff
At you, ill-formed vine, that you
Straggle about on the ground, swaying and wild.

You land of lofty, more solemn genius!
You land of love! although I am already yours,
Often I raged, weeping, that you always
Witlessly deny your own soul.

The following is the last verse from Hölderlin's *Der Tod fürs Vaterland* (Death for the Fatherland). It embodies the poet's dedication to his idealized country:

Und Siegesboten kommen herab: Die Schlacht
Ist unser! Lebe droben, o Vaterland,
Und zähle nicht die Toten! Dir ist,
Liebes! nicht Einer zu viel gefallen.

The Nikes of Victory descend; the battle
Is ours! Live on up there, O Fatherland,
And do not count the dead! For you,
My Beloved, not one man too many has fallen

The last three lines of this verse were engraved on the wall of the Langemarck-Halle, a memorial to the German soldiers who had died in World War I, included in the buildings for the 1936 Olympic Games.

During World War II, the Nazi government arranged for 100,000

copies of a special field edition of Hölderlin's poetry to be printed and sent to soldiers at the front (Unger, 1988, pp 130-131; Savage, 2008; pp 6-7; Corngold & Waite, 2009). The poetry increased the morale of the soldiers and provided them with an excuse to die for their country.

How could Hölderlin's poetry be dragooned into military service? As Savage (2008, p 6) asks

> How then did the Nazis transform this scarcely militaristic poet, who never took up arms for his country, and spent the last four decades of his life in a state of spiritual benightedness, into a paragon of Prussian masculinity and patriotic self-sacrifice?

Hölderlin was not a proto-fascist. His poetry was popular not because it urged his readers toward the goals of the Nazis, but because it provided a respite from the suffering of the war:

> He offered an inner sanctuary to which his readers could retreat to lick their wounds when confronted with the material deprivation, physical danger, and increasingly evident lack od freedom of everyday life under the Third Reich. (Savage, 2008, p 7).

Constantine (1988) remarked

> There can be no doubt that Hölderlin was a patriot, but his patriotism was humane and not in the least militaristic. It included also—which is often overlooked—the wish first to *achieve* a homeland it would be a joy and a privilege to live in, one in which the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity would have been realized. (pp 221-222)

Hölderlin did not really care for politics. He could describe his poetic ideals but he was unable to state how they should be attained. Constantine (1988) remarks that the general tendency of German writers to be concerned with the spiritual

rather than the political has been catastrophic:

> The disparagement of politics by Germany's artists and intellectuals left that sphere free for the men of blood and iron to run riot in. (p 222)

Paul Celan

Paul Celan (1920-1970) was born in Czernowitz, Romania, into a German-speaking Jewish family. His parents died in German concentration camps, and he was forced to work in a labor camp. After the war he made his way to Paris, where he lived until his suicide in 1970.

He wrote poetry in German, his mother tongue, despite the fact that the language had come to embody the evil and the suffering of Nazism. He fractured and distorted the language so that he could find the truth behind the words. Celan visited Tübingen in January (Jänner in dialect), 1961, and felt a great sympathy for Hölderlin, who also wrote in fragments and could not make himself understood. The result was the poem entitled *Tübingen, Jänner, 1961*

The poem is cryptic, and understanding may be helped by some notes from Joris (Celan, 2020, pp 469-471), and from Felstiner (1995, pp 172-174):

The first lines refer to the Hölderlin's hymn *Der Rhein,* which states that the sons of God are the blindest of us all. Seeking to understand heaven may make one unaware of the real world. The poem then directly quotes (though in fractured form) that the source of purity is a mystery. Both Hölderlin and Celan relate the German word *rein* (pure) with the name of the river.

The next lines describe the tower in which Hölderlin spent the last half of his life: reflected in the Neckar River and

circled by gulls.

Then we are introduced the carpenter Ernst Zimmer who was responsible for his basic care and who listened to his words.

The final verse likens Hölderlin to a patriarch or prophet with a beard that glowed. This may be a reference to the story that the face of Moses shone brightly when he came down from Sinai

> And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him.
> And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him.
> (*Exodus* 34:29-30)

Although Moses was able to communicate the will of God to his people, the people of the present world cannot understand the words of their prophets or poets. We only hear and incoherent babbling. *Pallaksch* is a nonsense word that Hölderlin used to mean "yes" or "no," or simply uttered as an exclamation.

The following is Celan's poem together with a translation by Pierre Joris and a reading by Bruno Ganz:

Tübingen, Jänner 1961

Zur Blindheit über-
redete Augen.
Ihre – "ein
Rätsel ist Rein –
entsprungenes" –, ihre
Erinnerung an
schwimmende Hölderlintürme, möwen-
umschwirrt.

Besuche ertrunkener Schreiner bei
diesen
tauchenden Worten:

Käme,
käme ein Mensch,
käme ein Mensch zur Welt, heute, mit
dem Lichtbart der
Patriarchen: er dürfte,
spräch er von dieser
Zeit, er
dürfte
nur lallen und lallen,
immer-, immer-
zuzu.

("Pallaksch. Pallaksch.")

Tübingen, January, 1961

Eyes con-
vinced to go blind.
Their – "a
riddle is pure
source" –. Their
remembrance of
swimming Hölderlin-towers, gull-
circled.

Visits of drowned carpenters by
these
diving words:

If,
if a man,
if a man was born, today, with
the lightbeard of
the patriarchs: he could,
speaking of these
days, he
could
but babble and babble,
all-all, way-ways
agagain.

("Pallaksch. Pallaksch.")

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Tubingen-Janner-Ganz.mp3

Farewell

And so we take our leave of Hölderlin, a poet who described the indescribable to a people who failed to understand him. He was one of the main exemplars of the romantic tradition (de Man, 2012), a movement that considered subjectivity as paramount. He combined the new ideas about nature that began with Rousseau with the ideals of beauty that came from Ancient Greece. The French Revolution led not to a society of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, but to the Terror of Robespierre and the wars of Napoleon. Hölderlin's dream that melding the beauty of

Greece to the revolution of France might bring forth a new and harmonious German society came to naught. Madness overtook his person; and a century later madness overtook Germany in the form of fascism. Yet the original dream was vivid and powerful, and it remains so.

Hölderlin's Poems and Translations

Hölderlin, F. (translated Henderson, E., 1962) *Alcaic poems*. Oswald Wolff.

Hölderlin, F., & Mörike, E. F. (translated by Middleton, C., 1972). *Selected poems.* University of Chicago Press.

Hölderlin, F. (translated by Sieburth, R., 1984). *Hymns and Fragments*. Princeton.

Hölderlin, F. (edited by Santner, E. L., 1990). *Hyperion and selected poems*. Continuum.

Hölderlin, F. (translated Hamburger, M., 1998). *Selected poems and fragments*. Penguin Books.

Hölderlin, F. (translated by Chernoff, M., & Hoover, P., 2008). *Selected poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*. Omnidawn.

Hölderlin, F (translated by Mitchell, J., 2022). Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin.

Hölderlin, F. (accessed 2025) Friedrich Hölderlin: Gedichte.

Hölderlin, F. (accessed 2025) Stuttgarter Hölderlin Ausgabe.

References

Agamben, G. (translated by A. L. Price, 2023). *Ho¨lderlin's madness: chronicle of a dwelling life, 1806-1843*. Seagull

Books.

Barwinek, B. (2023). Expression in Josef Matthias Hauer's piano music as exemplified by Klavierstücke mit Überschriften nach Worten von Friedrich Hölderlin Op. 25. *Polski Rocznik Muzykologiczny*, *21*(1), 106–128.

Blanchot, M. (1951, reprinted 1995). Madness par excellence. In M. Holland (Ed.) The Blanchot Reader. (pp 110-128). Blackwells.

de Campos, H. (2007). Holderlin's red word. In de Campos, H. (edited by A. S. Bessa & O. Cisneros). *Novas: selected writings*. (pp 327-333). Northwestern University Press.

Carson, A. (2008). Variations on the right to remain silent. *A Public Space*, Issue 7

Celan, P. (translated by Joris, P., 2020). *Memory rose into threshold speech: the collected earlier poetry*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

Constantine, D. J. (1988). *Ho¨lderlin*. Clarendon.

Corngold, S., & Waite, G. (2009). A question of responsibility: Nietzsche with Hölderlin at war, 1914–1946. In Wistrich, R. S & Golomb, J. (Eds) *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?* (pp. 196-214). Princeton University Press.

Dilthey, W. (1910, translated by A. Grugan, reprinted, 1993). Hölderlin and the causes of his madness. *Philosophy Today*, *37*(4), 341–352.

Felstiner, J. (1990). *Paul Celan: poet, survivor, Jew*. Yale University Press,

Heidegger, M. (1927, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson,1962). *Being and time*. Blackwell.

Heidegger, M. (1941, translated by Hoeller, K., 2000).

Elucidations of Hölderlin's poetry. Humanity Books.

Horowski, R. (2017). The "madness" of Friedrich Hölderlin: an iatrogenic intoxication. *Journal of Neural Transmission*, *124*(6), 761–763.

Jakobson, R., & Lübbe-Grothues, G. Ein Blick auf die Aussicht von Hölderlin. (1980/2010). In Jakobson, R. (ed. Rudy, S.) *Selected Writings. Volume III, Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (pp. 388–448). De Gruyter. [Part of this essay translated in Jakobson, R., Lübbe-Grothues, G., & Kitron, S. (1980). The language of schizophrenia: Hölderlin's speech and poetry. *Poetics Today*, *2*(1a), 137–144.]

de Man, P. (2012). Hölderlin and the romantic tradition. *Diacritics*, *40*(1), 100–129. [original lecture 1959]

Robles, N. (2020). Hölderlin's madness. *Hektoen International*.

Savage, R. (Robert I. (2008). *Hölderlin after the catastrophe: Heidegger, Adorno, Brecht*. Camden House.

Unger, R. (1984). *Friedrich Hölderlin*. Twayne Publishers

Waiblinger, W. (1830, translated by S. J. Thompson) *Friedrich Hölderlin's Life, Poetry and Madness*

Warren, R. (1996). Alcaics in exile: W.H. Auden's "In memory of Sigmund Freud." *Philosophy and Literature*, *20*(1), 111–121.

Zweig, S. (1939, translated 2017). *Hölderlin, Kleist, and Nietzsche: the struggle with the daemon*. Routledge.

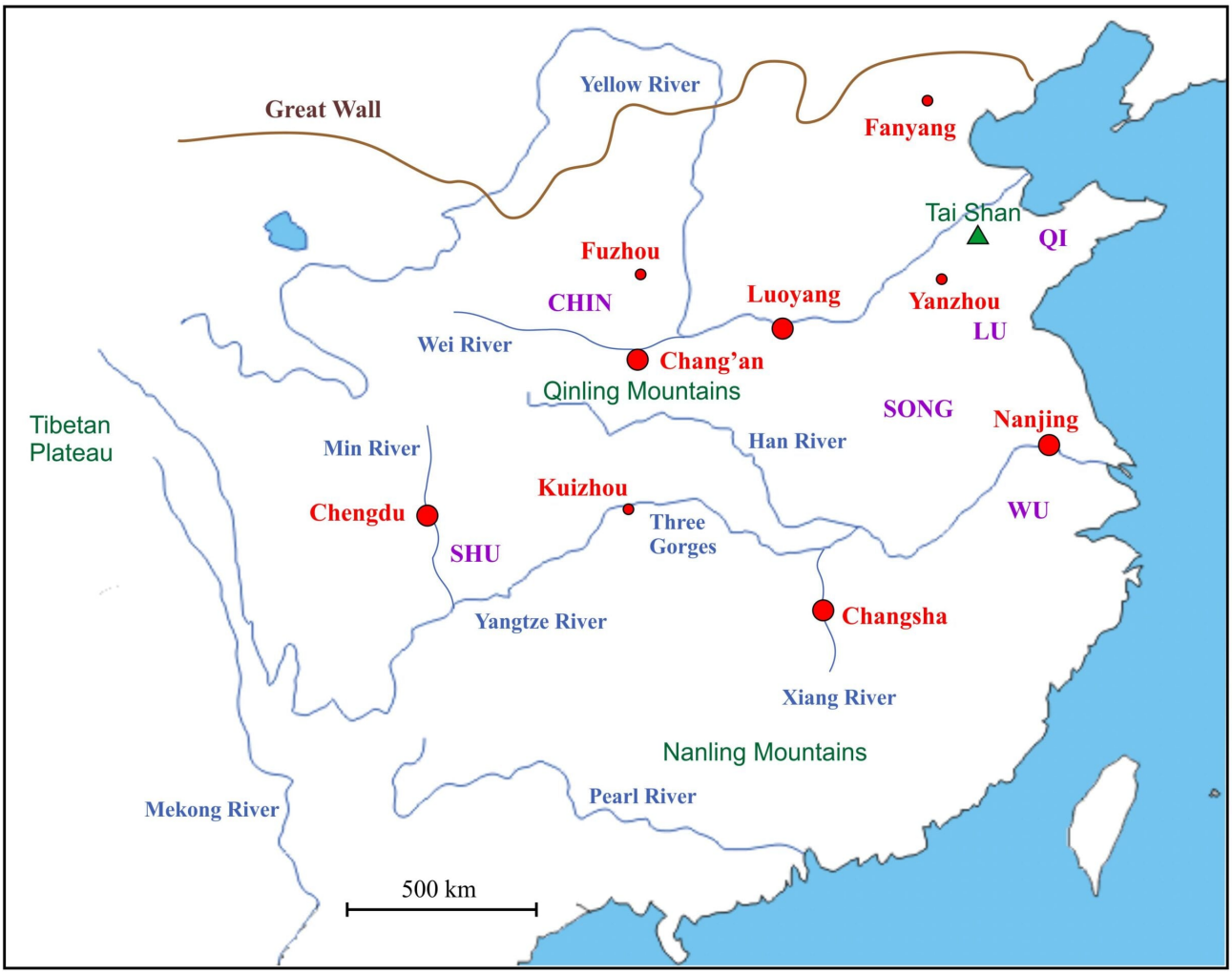
Du Fu: Poet, Sage, Historian

Du Fu: Poet, Sage, Historian

Du Fu (712-770 CE) was a poet during a time of great political upheaval in China. He was born near Luoyang and spent much of his young adulthood in the Yanzhou region, finally settling down to a minor official position in Chang’an, the imperial capital. In 755 CE, An Lushan, a disgruntled general, led a rebellion against the Tang dynasty. The emperor was forced to flee Chang’an (modern Xian), and chaos reigned for the next eight years. For more than a year Du Fu was held captive in Chang’an by the rebels. After escaping, he made his way south, living for a time in a thatched cottage in Chengdu, and later at various places along the Yangtze River. His poetry is characterized by an intense love of nature, by elements of Chan Buddhism, and by a deep compassion for all those caught up in the turmoil of history. This is a longer post than usual. I have become fascinated by Du Fu.

Failing the Examinations

Du Fu (Tu Fu in the Wades Gilles transliteration system, the family name likely deriving from the name of a pear tree) was born in 712 CE near Luoyang, the eastern capital of the Tang Dynasty (Hung, 1952; Owen, 1981). The following map (adapted from Young, 2008, and Collet and Cheng, 2014) shows places of importance in his life:



Du Fu's father was a minor official. His mother appears to have died during his childhood, and Du Fu was raised by his stepmother and an aunt. Du Fu studied hard, but in 735 CE he failed the *jenshi* (advanced scholar) examinations. No one knows why: politics and spite may have played their part. He spent the next few years with his father who was then stationed in Yanzhou,

Du Fu met Li Bai (700-762 CE) in 744 CE. Despite the difference in their ages, the two poets became fast friends. However, they were only able to meet occasionally, their lives being separated by politics and war.

Du Fu attempted the *jenshi* examinations again in 746, and was again rejected. Nevertheless, he was able to obtain a minor position in the imperial civil service in Chang'an. This

allowed him to marry and raise a small family.

Taishan

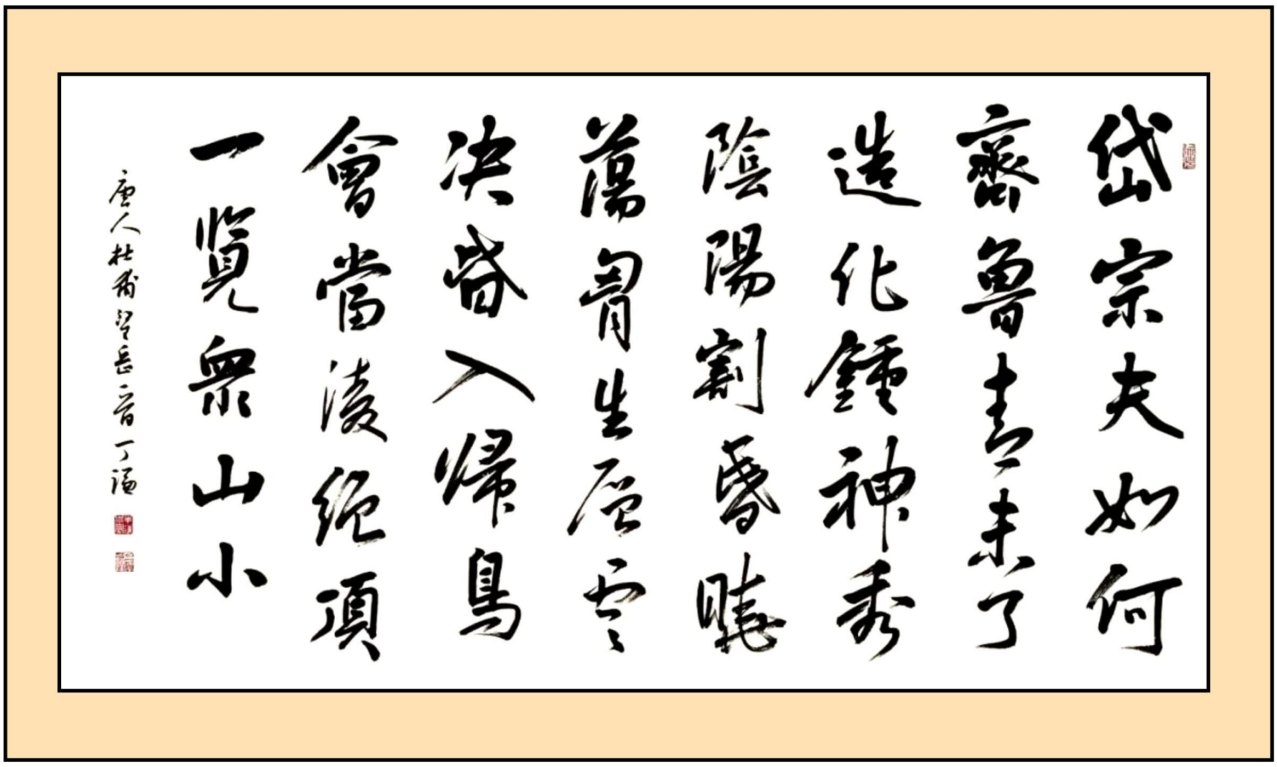
We can begin our examination of Du Fu’s poetry with one of the early poems written during his time in Yanzhou: *Gazing on the Peak* (737 CE). The peak is *Taishan* (exalted mountain), located in Northeastern China. Taishan is one of the Five Great Mountains (*Wuyue*) of ancient China. Today one can reach the summit by climbing up some 7000 steps (see illustration on the right), but in Du Fu’s time the climb would have been more difficult. The following is the poem in printed Chinese characters (*Hànzì*) and in Pinyin transliteration:

望嶽	wàng yuè
岱宗夫如何,	dài zōng fū rú hé
齊魯青未了。	qí lǔ qīng wèi liǎo
造化鍾神秀,	zào huà zhōng shén xiù
陰陽割昏曉。	yīn yáng gē hūn xiǎo
盪胸生曾雲,	dàng xiōng shēng céng yún
決眥入歸鳥。	jué zì rù guī niǎo
會當凌絕頂,	huì dāng líng jué dǐng
一覽眾山小。	yī lǎn zhòng shān xiǎo

The poem is in the *lǜshī* (regulated verse) form which requires eight lines (four couplets), with each line containing the same number of characters: 5- or 7-character *lǜshī* are the most common. Each line is separated into phrases, with a 5-character line composed of an initial 2-character phrase and a final 3-character phrase. The last words of each couplet rhyme. Rhyme in Chinese is based on the vowel sound. Within the lines there were complex rules for the tonality of the sounds (Zong Qi Cai, 2008, Chapter 8; Wai-lim Yip, 1997, pp 171-221). These rules do not always carry over to the way the characters are pronounced in modern Chinese. The following is a reading of the poem in Mandarin (from Librivox).

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/wang-yue-from-librivox.mp3

Chinese poetry is directed at both the ear and the eye, and fine calligraphy enhances the appreciations of a poem. Ding Qian has written out Du Fu's *Wàng yuè* in beautiful cursive script (going from top down and from left to right):



The following is a character-by-character translation (adapted from Hinton, 2019, p 2):

gaze/behold mountain

Daizong (ancient name for Taishan) then
like what
Qi *Lu* (regions near Taishan) green/blue
never end
create change concentrate divine beauty
Yin *Yang* (Taoist concepts of dark and light)
cleave dusk dawn
heave chest birth layer cloud
burst eye enter return bird
soon when reach extreme summit
one glance all mountain small.

And this is the English translation of Stephen Owen (2008, poem 1.2):

Gazing on the Peak

And what then is Daizong like? —
over Qi and Lu, green unending.
Creation compacted spirit splendors here,
Dark and Light, riving dusk and dawn.
Exhilarating the breast, it produces layers of cloud;
splitting eye-pupils, it has homing birds entering.
Someday may I climb up to its highest summit,
with one sweeping view see how small all other mountains are

The interpretation of the poem requires some knowledge of its allusions. In the fourth line, Du Fu is referring to the *taijitu* symbol of Taoism (illustrated on the right) that contrasts the principles of *yin* (dark, female, moon) and *yang* (light, male, sun). Du Fu proposes that Taishan divides the world into two ways of looking. Some have suggested that the *taijitu* symbol originally represented the dark (north) side and the light (south) side of a mountain, and this idea fits easily with the poem.

All translators have had difficulty with the third couplet (reviewed by Hsieh, 1994). My feeling is that Du Fu is noticing layers of clouds at the mountain's upper reaches — the chest if one considers the mountain like a human body — and birds swooping around the peaks — where the eye sockets of the body would be. However, it is also possible that Du Fu is breathing heavily from the climb and that his eyes are

surprised by the birds. Perhaps both meanings are valid, with Du Fu and the mountain becoming one. Du Fu may have been experiencing the meditative state of Chan Buddhism, with a mind was "wide-open and interfused with this mountain landscape, no distinction between subjective and objective" (Hinton, 2019, p 6). One might also consider Du Fu's mental state: at the time he wrote this poem he had just failed the *jenshi* exams. This might have caused some breast-beating and tears, as well as his final resolve to climb the mountain and see how small all his problems actually were.

The last couplet refers to Mencius' description of the visit of Confucius to Taishan (Mengzi VIIA:24):

> He ascended the Tai Mountain, and all beneath the heavens appeared to him small. So he who has contemplated the sea, finds it difficult to think anything of other waters, and he who has wandered in the gate of the sage, finds it difficult to think anything of the words of others.

Zhang's Hermitage

During his time in Yanzhou Du Fu visited a hermit named Zhang near the Stonegate Mountain, one of the lesser peaks near Taishan. Zhang was likely a follower of the new Chan Buddhism, which promoted meditation as a means to empty the mind of suffering and allow the universal life force to permeate one's being. Buddhism first came to China during the Han dynasty (206BCE – 220CE). Since many of the concepts of Buddhism were similar to those of Taoism, the new religion spread quickly (Hinton, 2020). A type of Buddhism that stressed the role of meditation began to develop in the 6th Century CE, and called itself *chan*, a Chinese transcription of the Sanskrit *dhyana* (meditation). In later years this would lead to the Zen Buddhism of Japan. There are many allusions to Buddhism and especially to Chan ideas in Du Fu's poetry (Rouzer, 2020; Zhang, 2018)

Du Fu reportedly wrote the following poem on one of the walls of Zhang's hermitage. The poem is a seven-character *lǜshī.* The following is the poem in Chinese characters (Owen, 2008, poem 1.4) and in pinyin:

題張氏隱居	tí zhāng shì yǐn jū
春山無伴獨相求	chūn shān wú bàn dú xiāng qiú
伐木丁丁山更幽。	fá mù dīng dīng shān gēng yōu
澗道餘寒歷冰雪，	jiàn dào yú hán lì bīng xuě
石門斜日到林丘。	shí mén xié rì dào lín qiū
不貪夜識金銀氣，	bù tān yè shí jīn yín qì
遠害朝看麋鹿遊。	yuǎn hài zhāo kàn mí lù yóu
乘興杳然迷出處，	chéng xīng yǎo rán mí chū chǔ
對君疑是泛虛舟。	duì jūn yí shì fàn xū zhōu

The following is a character-by-character translation (adapted from Hinton, 2019, p 22):

inscribe Zhang family recluse house

spring mountain absence friend alone you search
chop tree crack crack mountain again mystery
creek pathway remnant cold pass ice snow
stone gate slant sun reach forest place
no desire night know gold silver breath/spirit
far injure morning see deer deer wander

ride burgeon dark thus confuse leave place
facing you suspect this drift empty boat.

And this is a translation by Kenneth Rexroth (1956):

Written on the Wall at Chang's Hermitage

It is Spring in the mountains.
I come alone seeking you.
The sound of chopping wood echos
Between the silent peaks.
The streams are still icy.
There is snow on the trail.
At sunset I reach your grove
In the stony mountain pass.
You want nothing, although at night
You can see the aura of gold
And silver ore all around you.
You have learned to be gentle
As the mountain deer you have tamed.
The way back forgotten, hidden
Away, I become like you,
An empty boat, floating, adrift.

Notable in the poem is the idea of *wú* (third character) which can be translated as "absence, nothing, not" (Hinton, 2019, p 24) This is an essential concept of Chan Buddhism – the emptying of the mind so that it can become a receptacle for true awareness. The third and fourth characters of the first line might be simply translated as "alone (without a friend)," but one might also venture "with absence as a companion" or "with an empty mind." This fits with the image of the empty boat at the end of the poem.

Zheng Qian, a drinking companion of Li Bai and Du Fu, suggested the idea of combining poetry, painting and

calligraphy. The Emperor was impressed and called the combination *sānjué* (three perfections) (Sullivan, 1974). Li Bai and Du Fu likely tried their hand at painting and calligraphy but no versions of their *sānjué* efforts have survived. The Ming painter and calligrapher Wang Shimin (1592–1680 CE) illustrated the second couplet of Du Fu's poem from Zhang's hermitage in his album Du Fu's Poetic Thoughts now at the Palace Museum in Beijing.


澗道餘寒歷冰雪
石門斜日到林丘
乙巳臘月寫
少陵詩意十
二幀似
旭盛賢翁時年
七十有四 時敏

The An Lushan Rebellion

Toward the end 755 CE, An Lushan, a general on the northern frontier rebelled against the empire and captured the garrison town of Fanyang (or Jicheng) located in what is now part of Beijing. Within a month the rebels captured Luoyang. The emperor and much of his court fled Chang'an, travelling through the Qinling Mountains to find sanctuary in the province of Shu. The city of Chang'an fell to the rebels in the middle of 756 CE.

Below is shown a painting of *Emperor Ming-Huang's Flight to Shu.* Though attributed to the Tang painter Li Zhaodao (675-758 CE), this was actually painted in his style several hundred years later during the Song Dynasty. Shu is the ancient name for what is now known as Sichuan province. This masterpiece of early Chinese painting is now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. Two enlargements are included: the emperor with his red coat is shown at the lower right; at the lower left advance members of his entourage begin climbing the mountain paths.

The rebellion lasted for eight long years. The northern part of the country was devastated. Death from either war or famine was widespread. Censuses before and after the rebellion suggested a death toll of some 36 million people, making it one of the worst catastrophes in human history. However, most scholars now doubt these numbers and consider the death toll as closer to 13 million. Nevertheless, it was a murderous time.

Moonlit Night

At the beginning of the rebellion, Du Fu managed to get his family to safety in the northern town of Fuzhou, but he was himself held captive in Chang'an. Fortunately, he was not considered important enough to be executed, and he finally managed to escape in 757 CE. The following shows a poem from 756 CE in characters (Owen, 2008, poem 4.18), pinyin transcription, and character-by-character translation (Alexander, 2008):

月夜	yuè yè	moon night
今夜鄜州月，	jīn yè fū zhōu yuè	this night Fu Zhou moon
閨中只獨看。	guī zhōng zhǐ dú kān	woman's room only alone watch
遙憐小兒女，	yáo lián xiǎo ér nǚ	far pity little boy girl
未解憶長安。	wèi jiě yì cháng ān	not understand remember Chang'an
香霧雲鬟濕，	xiāng wù yún huán shī	fragrant mist cloud hair wet
清輝玉臂寒。	qīng huī yù bì hán	clear brightness jade arm cold
何時倚虛幌，	hé shí yǐ xū huǎng	what time lean empty curtain
雙照淚痕乾。	shuāng zhào lèi hén gān	pair shine tears trace dry

The following is a reading of the poem from Librivox:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/yue-ye-from-librivox.mp3

Vikam Seth (1997) translated the poem keeping the Chinese rhyme scheme: the last character rhymes for all four couplets:

> Moonlit Night
>
> In Fuzhou, far away, my wife is watching
> The moon alone tonight, and my thoughts fill
> With sadness for my children, who can't think
> Of me here in Changan; they're too young still.

> Her cloud-soft hair is moist with fragrant mist.
> In the clear light her white arms sense the chill.
> When will we feel the moonlight dry our tears,
> Leaning together on our window-sill?

Alec Roth wrote a suite of songs based on Vikam Seth's translations of Du Fu. The following is his setting for Moonlit Night with tenor Mark Padmore:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/06-Songs-In-Time-of-War_-Moonlit-Nig.mp3

David Young (2008) provides a free-verse translation:

> Tonight
> in this same moonlight
> my wife is alone at her window
> in Fuzhou
> I can hardly bear
> to think of my children
> too young to understand
> why I can't come to them
> her hair
> must be damp from the mist
> her arms
> cold jade in the moonlight
> when will we stand together
> by those slack curtains
> while the moonlight dries
> the tear-streaks on our faces?

The poem may have been written or at least conceived during the celebration of the full moon in the autumn. Families customarily viewed the moon together and Du Fu imagines his wife viewing the moon alone. The mention of the wife's chamber in the second line may refer to either her actual bedroom or metonymically to herself as the inmost room in Du Fu's heart (Hawkes, 1967). David Young (2008) remarks that this may be

“the first Chinese poem to address romantic sentiments to a wife,” instead of a colleague or a courtesan.

David Hawkes (1967) notes the parallelism of the third couplet:

> ‘fragrant mist’ parallels ‘clear light,’ ‘cloud hair’ parallels ‘jade arms,’ and ‘wet’ parallels ‘cold’

Spring View

Spring View (or *Spring Landscape*), the most famous poem written by Du Fu in Chang’an during the rebellion, tells how nature persists despite the ravages of effects of war and time. Subjective emotions and objective reality become one. The character *wàng* (view, landscape) can mean both the act of perceiving or what is actually perceived. In addition, it can sometimes mean the present scene or what is to be expected in the future (much like the English word “prospect”). The illustration below shows the text in Chinese characters (Owen, 2008, poem 4.25), in pinyin and in a character-by-character translation (adapted from Hawkes, 1967, Alexander, 2008, and Zong-Qi Cai, 2008):

春望	chūn wàng	spring view
國破山河在，	guó pò shān hé zài	country broken mountain river remain
城春草木深。	chéng chūn cǎo mù shēn	city spring grass trees deep
感時花濺淚，	gǎn shí huā jiàn lèi	feel moment flower splash tear
恨別鳥驚心。	hèn bié niǎo jīng xīn	regret/hate parting bird startle heart
烽火連三月，	fēng huǒ lián sān yuè	beacon fires join three months
家書抵萬金。	jiā shū dǐ wàn jīn	family letters worth ten-thousand gold
白頭搔更短，	bái tóu sāo gèng duǎn	white head scratch become thin
渾欲不勝簪	hún yù bù shēng zān	simply about not bear hairpin

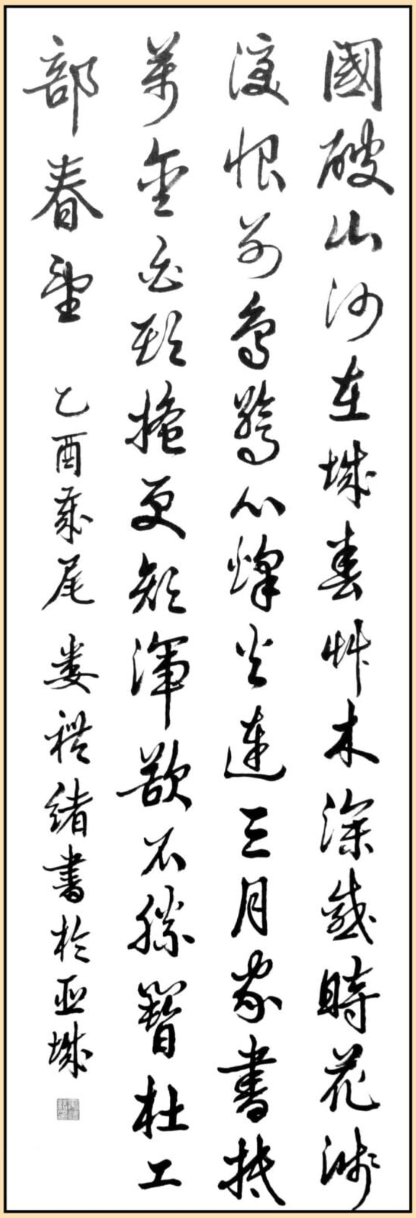
The following is a reading of the poem from the website

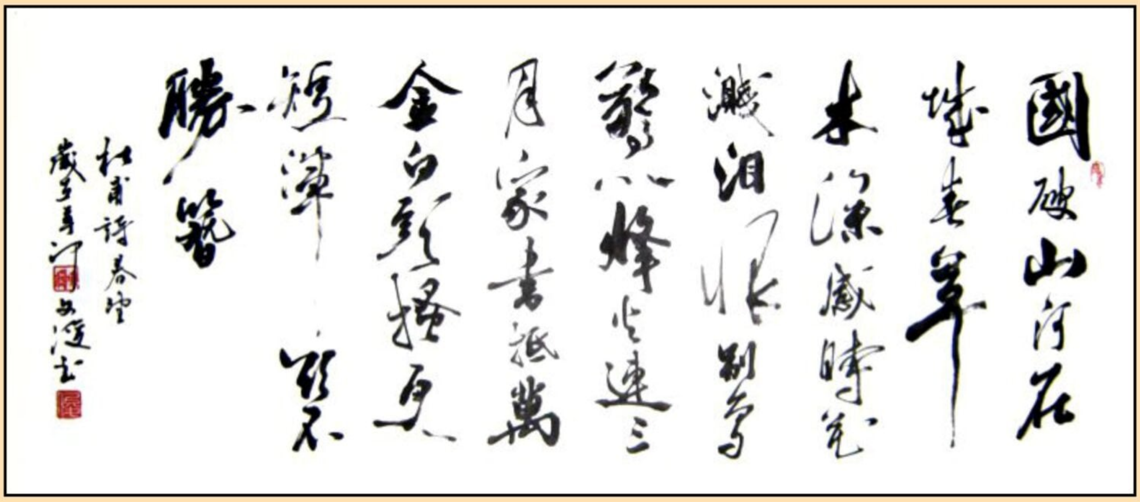
associated with *How to Read Chinese Poetry* (ZongQi-Cai, 2008, poem 8.1):

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/c8.1-spring-scene.mp3

The next illustration shows the poem as written by three calligraphers. All versions read from top down and from right to left. On the left is standard script by Anita Wang; on the right the calligraphy by Lii Shiuh Lou is gently cursive. At the bottom the calligraphy by an anonymous calligrapher is unrestrained: it accentuates the root of the growing grass (8th character) and the radicals that compose the character for regret/hate (16th character) fly apart.


國破山河在城春草木深感時花濺淚
恨別鳥驚心烽火連三月家書抵萬金
白頭搔更短渾欲不勝簪
杜甫春望 辛丑臘月


國破山河在城春草木深感時花濺
淚恨別鳥驚心烽火連三月家書抵
萬金白頭搔更短渾欲不勝簪杜工
部春望


國破山河在城春草木深感時花濺淚恨別鳥驚心烽火連三月家書抵萬金白頭搔更短渾欲不勝簪
杜甫詩春望

The following are two translations, the first by David Hinton, which uses an English line of a constant length to approximate the Chinese 5-character line (2020a):

> 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.

A second translation, with preservation of the rhyme scheme and phrasal structure, is by Keith Holyoak (2015)

> The state is in ruin;
> yet mountains and rivers endure.
> In city gardens
> weeds run riot this spring.

These dark times
move flowers to sprinkle tears;
the separations
send startled birds on the wing.

For three months now
the beacon fires have burned;
a letter from home
would mean more than anything.

I’ve pulled out
so many of my white hairs
too few are left
to hold my hatpin in!

The second couplet has been interpreted in different ways.

Most translations (including the two just quoted) consider it as representing nature's lament for the evil times. For example, Hawkes (1967) suggests that "nature is grieving in sympathy with the beholder at the ills which beset him." However, Michael Yang (2016) proposes that "In times of adversity, nature may simply be downright uncaring and unfriendly, thereby adding to the woes of mankind." He translates the couplet

> Mourning the times, I weep at the sight of flowers;
> Hating separation, I find the sound of birds startling.

The last two lines of the poem refer the hair-style of the Tang Dynasty: men wore their hair in a topknot, and their hats were "anchored to their heads with a large hatpin which passed through the topknot of hair" (Hawkes, 1967). Most interpreters have been struck by the difference between the solemn anguish of the poem's first six lines, and the self-mockery of the final couplet (Hawkes, 1967, p 46; Chou, 1995, p 115). This juxtaposition of the tragic and the pitiable accentuates the poet's bewilderment.

The Thatched Cottage

Disillusioned by the war and by the politics of vengeance that followed, Du Fu and his family retired to a thatched cottage in Chengdu, where he lived from 759-765. A replica of this cottage has been built there in a park celebrating both Du Fu and Chinese Poetry:

Many of the poems that Du Fu wrote in Chengdu celebrated the simple joys of nature. He often used isolated quatrains to find parallels between his emotions and the world around him. This brief form called *juéjù* (curtailed lines) was widely used by his colleagues Li Bai (701–762) and Wang Wei (699–759). The form consists of two couplets juxtaposed in meaning and rhyming across their last character (Wong, 1970; Zong-Qi Cai, 2008, Chapter 10). The following poem (Owen, 2008, poem 9.63) describing willow-catkins (illustrated on the right) and sleeping ducks gives a deep feeling of peace. These are the Chinese characters and pinyin transcription followed by the character-by-character translation (Alexander, 2008):

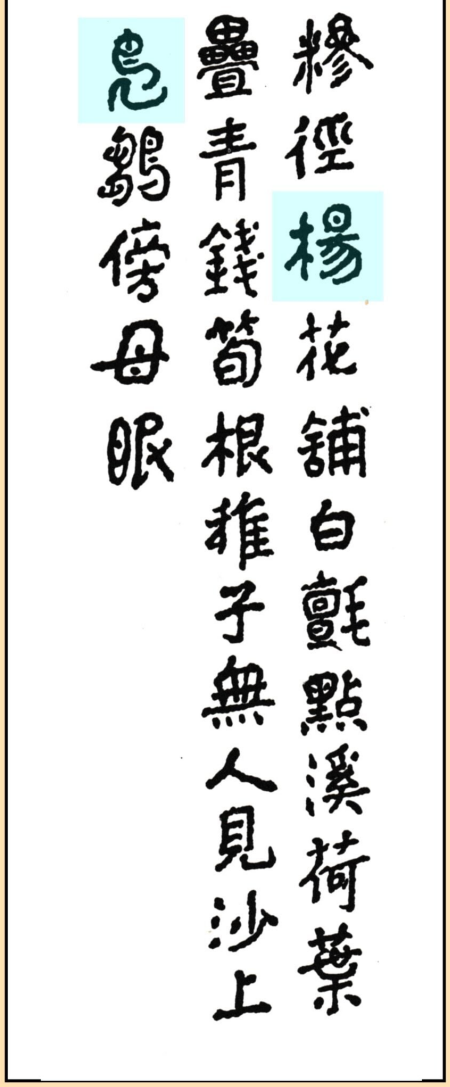
糝徑楊花鋪白氈，　　sǎn jìng yáng huā pū bái zhān
點溪荷葉疊青錢。　　diǎn xī hé yè dié qīng qián
筍根雉子無人見，　　sǔn gēn zhì zǐ wú rén jiàn
沙上鳧雛傍母眠。　　shā shàng fú chú bàng mǔ mián

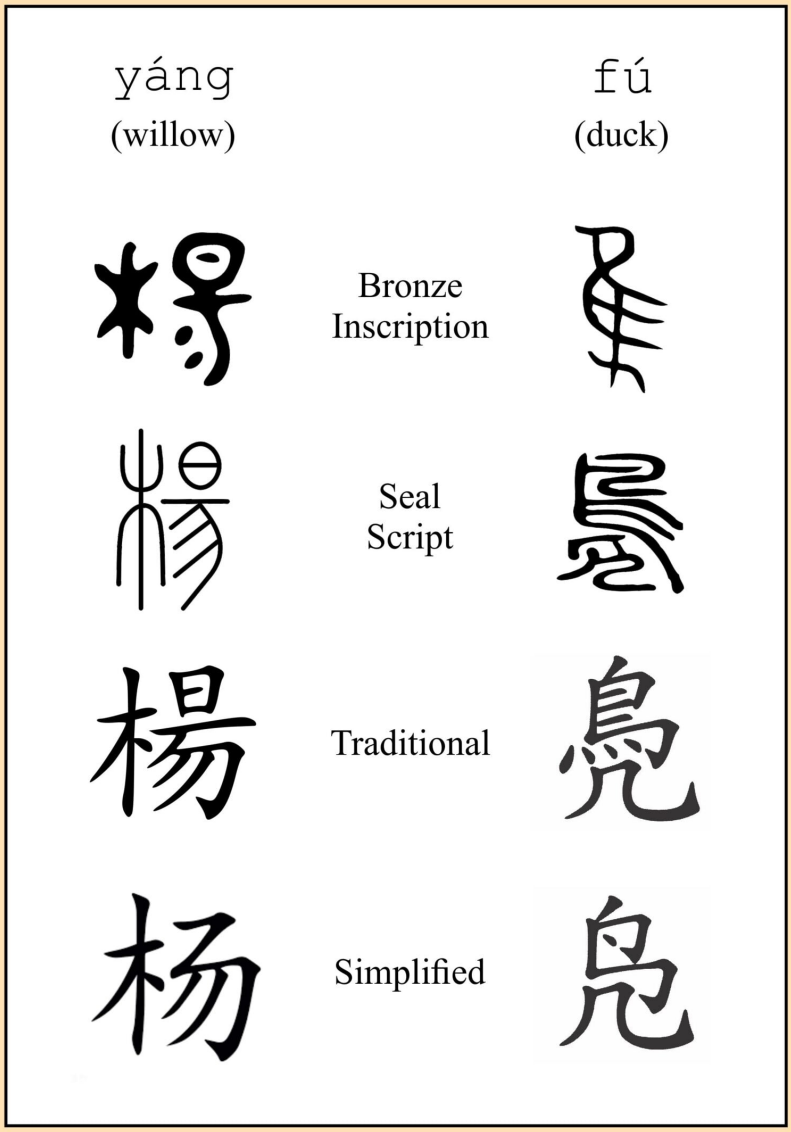
grain path poplar/willow blossom pave white carpet
little stream lotus leaves pile green money
bamboo shoot root sprout no person see
sand on duckling beside mother sleep

The following translation is by Burton Watson (2002):

> Willow fluff along the path spreads a white carpet;
> lotus leaves dot the stream, plating it with green coins.
> By bamboo roots, tender shoots where no one sees them;
> on the sand, baby ducks asleep beside their mother.

Shui Chien-Tung provided the following calligraphy for the poem (Cooper, 1973). He used aspects of the ancient scripts (circles, curves and dots) in some of the characters to give a sense of simplicity and timelessness. The illustration shows the calligraphy of the poem on the left and the evolution of the characters *yáng* (willow, poplar) and *fú* (duck) on the right.





Another quatrain from Chengdu describes a night scene on the river. The following shows the poem in Chinese characters (Owen, 2008, poem 13.61), in pinyin, and in a character-by-character translation (mine):

江動月移石，	jiāng dòng yuè yí shí	river move moon change rock
溪虛雲傍花。	xī xū yún bàng huā	stream empty cloud beside flower
鳥棲知故道，	niǎo qī zhī gù dào	bird perch understand old Dao
帆過宿誰家。	fān guò sù shuí jiā	sail pass stay(lodge) who home

This is the translation by J. P. Seaton (Seaton & Cryer,

1987):

> The River moves, moon travels rock,
> Streams unreal, clouds there among the flowers.
> The bird perches, knows the ancient Tao
> Sails go: They can’t know where.

As the river flows by, the moon’s reflection slowly travels across the rocks near the shore. The water reflects the clouds between the lilies. A bird on a branch understands the nature of the universe. A boat passes, going home we know not where.

The poem conveys a sense of the complexity of the world where reflections and reality intermingle, a desire to understand the meaning of our life, and a fear that time is passing and we do not know where it will take us. All this in twenty characters. Such concision is extremely difficult in English. An attempt:

> River and rocks reflect the moon
> and clouds amid the lilies
> resting birds understand the way
> sails pass seeking home somewhere.

The following shows a painting by Huang Yon-hou to illustrate the poem. This was used as the frontispiece (and cover) of the book *Bright Moon, Perching Bird* (Seaton & Cryer, 1987). On the right is calligraphy of the poem by Mo Ji-yu.

Above the Gorges

In 765 CE Du Fu and his family left Chengdu and travelled eastward on the Yangtze River. The region of Luoyang had been recently recovered by imperial forces and Du Fu was perhaps trying to return home (Hung, 1952). He stayed for a while in Kuizhou (present day Baidicheng) at the beginning of the Three Gorges (*Qutang, Wu* and *Xiing*).

While there Du Fu wrote a series of meditations called *Autumn Thoughts* (or more literally *Stirred by Autumn*). This is the second of these poems in Chinese characters and in pinyin:

夔府孤城落日斜，	kuí fǔ gū chéng luò rì xié
每依北斗望京華。	měi *yī běi* dǒu wàng jīng huá
聽猿實下三聲淚，	tīng yuán shí xià sān shēng lèi
奉使虛隨八月槎。	fèng shǐ xū suí bā yuè chá
畫省香爐違伏枕，	huà shěng xiāng lú wéi fú zhěn
山樓粉堞隱悲笳。	shān lóu fěn dié yǐn bēi jiā
請看石上藤蘿月，	qǐng kàn shí shàng téng luó yuè
已映洲前蘆荻花。	yǐ yìng zhōu qián lú dí huā

A character-by-character translation (Alexander, 2008) is:

> Kui prefecture lonely wall set sun slant
> Every rely north dipper gaze capital city
> Hear ape real fall three sound tear
> Sent mission vain follow eight month raft
> Picture ministry incense stove apart hidden pillow
> Mountain tower white battlements hide sad reed-whistle
> Ask look stone on [Chinese wisteria] moon
> Already reflect islet before rushes reeds flowers

The following is Stephen Owen’s translation (Owen, 2008 poem 17.27):

> On Kuizhou’s lonely walls setting sunlight slants,
> then always I trust the North Dipper to lead my gaze to the capital.
> Listening to gibbons I really shed tears at their third cry,
> accepting my mission I pointlessly follow the eighth-month raft.
> The censer in the ministry with portraits eludes the pillow where I lie,
> ill towers’ white-plastered battlements hide the sad reed pipes.

> Just look there at the moon, in wisteria on the rock,
> it has already cast its light by sandbars on flowers of the reeds.

The poem is striking in the difference between the first three couplets and the last. At the beginning of the poem Du Fu is feeling regret that he is not in Chang’an which is located due north of Kuizhou (in the direction of the Big Dipper which points to the North Star). Owen notes that “There was an old rhyme that a traveler in the gorges would shed tears when the gibbons cried out three times.” The eighth month raft may refer to another old story about a vessel that came every eight months and took a man up to the Milky Way. Owen commented on the third couplet that “The “muralled ministry” is where were located the commemorative portraits of officers, civil and military, who had done exceptional service to the dynasty.” Incense was burned when petitions were presented. The final couplet disregards all the preceding nostalgia and simply appreciates the beauty of the moment.

The Ming painter Wang Shimin illustrated this final couplet in one of the leaves from his album Du Fu’s Poetic Thoughts.


請看石上藤蘿月
已映洲前蘆荻花

Later in Kuizhou, Du Fu entertained a librarian named Li who was returning north to take up an appointment in Chang'an. The following is the beginning of a poem (Owen, 2008, poem 19.34) describing Li's departure in Chinese characters and in pinyin:

青簾白舫益州來，	qīng lián bái fǎng yì zhōu lái
巫峽秋濤天地回。	wū xiá qiū tāo tiān dì huí
石出倒聽楓葉下，	shí chū dǎo tīng fēng yè xià
櫓搖背指菊花開。	lǔ yáo bèi zhǐ jú huā kāi

A character-by-character translation is:

> blue/green curtain white boat/raft Yizhou arrive
> Wu gorge autumn waves heaven/sky earth/ground turn (around)
> stone/rock leave/exit fall listen maple leaf down
> scull/oar swing carry point chrysanthemum flower open/blume

The following is Stephen Owen's translation:

> When the white barge with green curtains came from Yizhou,
> with autumn billows in the Wu Gorges, heaven and earth were turning.
> Where rocks came out, from below you listened to the leaves of maples falling,
> as the sweep moved back and forth you pointed behind to chrysanthemums in bloom.

The Ming painter Wang Shimin illustrated the second couplet in one of the leaves from his album Du Fu's Poetic Thoughts. The painting shows the bright red leaves of the maples. In front of the riverside house one can see the multicolored chrysanthemums that Li is pointing to. Harmony exists between

the wild and the cultivated.


石出倒聽楓葉下
櫓搖背指菊花開

On the River

After his sojourn in Kuizhou, Du Fu and his family continued their journey down the Yangtze River. However, the poet was ill and was unable to make it beyond Tanzhou (now Changsha) where he died in 770 CE. No one knows where he is buried. In the 1960's radical students dug up a grave purported to be his to "eliminate the remaining poison of feudalism," but found the grave empty.

One of Du Fu's last poems was *Night Thoughts While Travelling*. The following is the poem in Chinese characters (Owen, 2008, poem 14.63) and in pinyin (Alexander, 2008):

旅夜書懷	lǚ yè shū huái	journey night write think
細草微風岸,	xì cǎo wēi fēng àn	gently grass soft wind shore
危檣獨夜舟。	wēi qiáng dú yè zhōu	tall mast alone night boat
星垂平野闊,	xīng chuí píng yě kuò	star fall flat fields broad
月湧大江流。	yuè yǒng dà jiāng liú	moon rises great river flows
名豈文章著,	míng qǐ wén zhāng zhù	name not literary works mark
官應老病休。	guān yìng lǎo bìng xiū	official should old sick stop
飄零何所似,	piāo piāo hé suǒ sì	flutter flutter what place seem
天地一沙鷗。	tiān dì yī shā ōu	heaven earth one sand gull

The following is a reading of the poem from Librivox:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/night-thoughts-from-librivox.mp3

Holyoak (2015) provides a rhymed translation:

The fine grass
by the riverbank stirs in the breeze;
the tall mast
in the night is a lonely sliver.

Stars hang
all across the vast plain;
the moon bobs
in the flow of the great river.

My poetry
has not made a name for me;
now age and sickness
have cost me the post I was given.

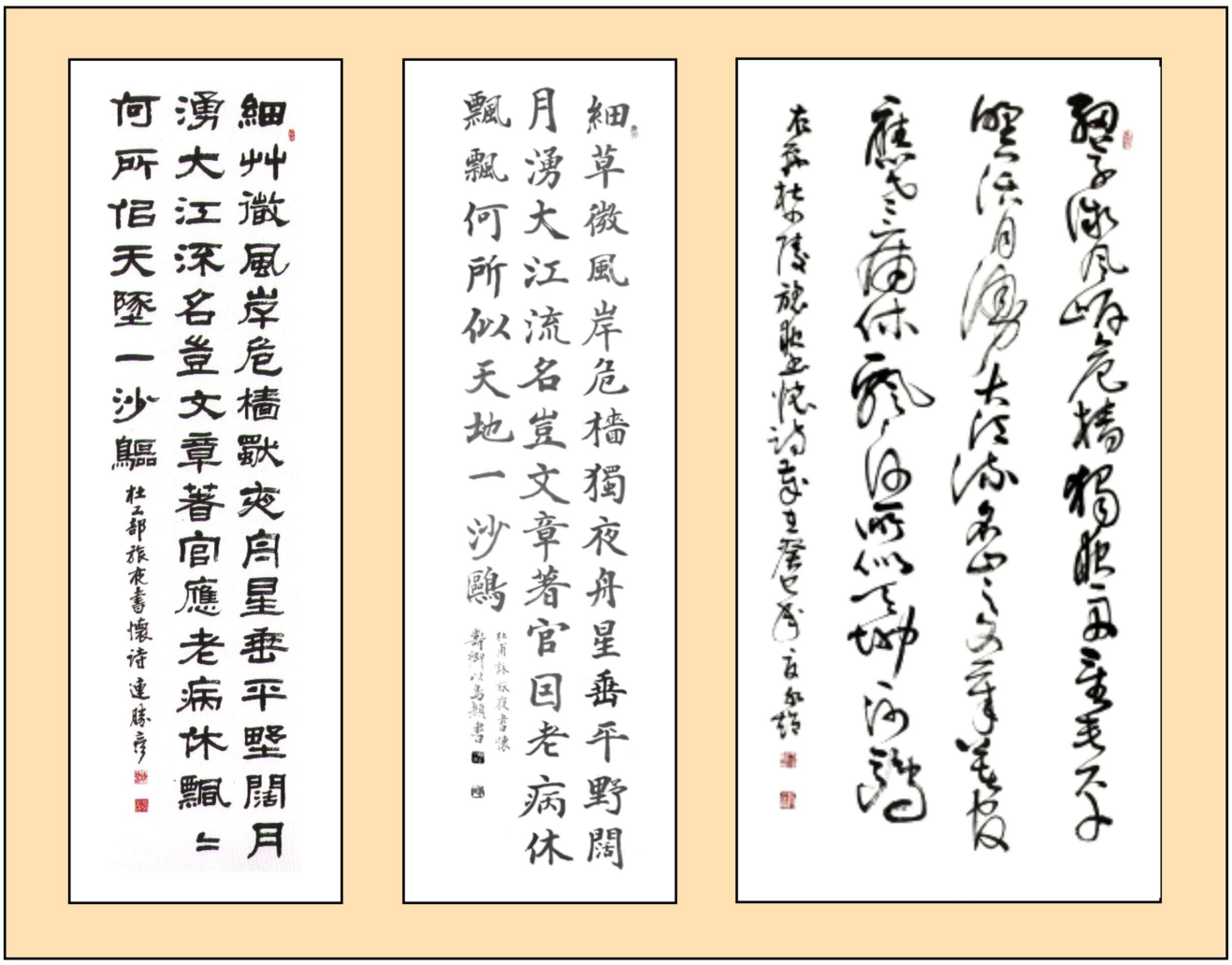
Drifting, drifting,
what do I resemble?
A lone gull
lost between earth and heaven.

Kenneth Rexroth (1956) translates the poem in free verse:

Night Thoughts While Travelling

A light breeze rustles the reeds
Along the river banks. The
Mast of my lonely boat soars
Into the night. Stars blossom
Over the vast desert of
Waters. Moonlight flows on the
Surging river. My poems have
Made me famous but I grow
Old, ill and tired, blown hither
And yon; I am like a gull
Lost between heaven and earth.

The following shows the poem in calligraphy with three styles. On the left the poem is written in clerical script, in the center in regular script and on the right is unrestrained cursive script. All examples were taken from Chinese sites selling calligraphy.



Changing Times

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) the role of literature, and poetry in particular, in society changed dramatically (Owen, 2011):

> In the 650s, literature was centered almost entirely in the imperial court; by the end of the era literature had become the possession of an educated elite, who might serve in government, but whose cultural life was primarily outside the court.

During Du Fu's lifetime, poetry became no longer a part of the ancient traditions; rather it began to be concerned with the present and with the personal. Lucas Bender (2021) describes the traditional role of poetry in a society following the

precepts of Confucianism:

> Most people … would be incapable on their own of adequately conceptualizing the world or perfectly responding to its contingency, and therefore needed to rely on the models left by sages and worthies. Many of these models were embodied in texts, including literary texts, which could thus offer an arena for ethical activity. Poetry, for example, was understood to offer models of cognition, feeling, and commitment that would ineluctably shape readers' understanding of and responses to their own circumstances. One way of being a good person, therefore, involved reading good poetry and writing more of it, thereby propagating the normative models of the tradition in one's own time and transmitting them to the future. (p 317)

Du Fu found himself bewildered by the state of the world. He sought to convey this confusion rather than explain it:

> Du Fu doubts the possibility of indefinitely applicable moral categories. The conceptual tools by which we make moral judgments, he suggests, are always inherited from a past that can – and, in a world as various and changeable as ours has proven to be, often will – diverge from the exigencies of the present. As a result, not only are our values unlikely to be either universal or timeless; more important, if we pay careful attention to the details of our experience, they are unlikely to work unproblematically even here and now. (Bender, 2021, p 319)

The complexity of Du Fu's poetry – the difficulty in understanding some of his juxtapositions – becomes a challenge. The past provides no help in the interpretation. We must figure out for themselves what relates the mountain, the clouds and the poet's breathing in the first poem we considered. And in the last poem we must try to locate for ourselves the place of the gull between heaven and earth.

References

Alexander, M. (2008). *A little book of Du Fu*. Mark Alexander. (Much of the material in the book is available on Chinese Poems website).

Bender, L. R. (2021). *Du Fu transforms: tradition and ethics amid societal collapse*. Harvard University Asia Center.

Chan, J. W. (2018). Du Fu: the poet as historian. In Zong-Qi Cai. (Ed.) *How to read Chinese poetry in context: poetic culture from antiquity through the Tang*. (pp 236-247). Columbia University Press.

Chou, E. S. (1995). *Reconsidering Tu Fu: literary greatness and cultural context*. Cambridge University Press.

Collet, H., & Cheng, W. (2014). *Tu Fu*: *Dieux et diables pleurant, poèmes*. Moundarren.

Cooper, A. R. V. (1973). *Li Po and Tu Fu*. Penguin Books.

Egan, R. (2020). Ming-Qing paintings inscribed with Du Fu's poetic lines. In Xiaofei Tian (Ed.). *Reading Du Fu: nine views*. (pp 129-142). Hong Kong University Press

Hawkes, D. (1967 revised and reprinted, 2016). *A little primer of Tu Fu.* New York Review of Books.

Hinton, D. (1989, expanded and revised 2020a). *The selected poems of Tu Fu*. New Directions.

Hinton, D. (2019). *Awakened cosmos: the mind of classical Chinese poetry*. Shambhala.

Hinton, D. (2020b). *China root: Taoism, Ch'an, and original Zen*. Shambhala

Holyoak, K. (2015). *Facing the moon: poems of Li Bai and Du*

Fu. Oyster River Press.

Hsieh, D. (1994). Du Fu's "Gazing at the Mountain." *Chinese Literature, Essays, Articles, Reviews*, *16*, 1–18.

Hung, W. (1952, reprinted 2014). *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet*. Harvard University Press

Owen, S. (1981). Tu Fu. In S. Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang*. (pp 183-224). Yale University.

Owen, S. (2010). The cultural Tang (650–1020). In Chang, K. S., & Owen, S. (Eds). *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (Vol. 1, pp. 286–380). Cambridge University Press.

Owen, S., (edited by P. W. Kroll & D. X. Warner, 2016). *The poetry of Du Fu*. (6 volumes). De Gruyter. (Available to download in pdf format.)

Rexroth, K. (1956). *One hundred poems from the Chinese.* New Directions.

Rouzer, P. (2020). Refuges and refugees: how Du Fu writes Buddhism. In Xiaofei Tian (Ed.). *Reading Du Fu: nine views*. (pp. 75-92). Hong Kong University Press.

Seaton, J. P., & Cryer, J. (with calligraphy by Mo Ji-yu, and painting by Huang Yon-hou, 1987). *Bright moon, perching bird: poems of Li Po and Tu Fu*. Wesleyan University Press.

Seth, V. (1997). *Three Chinese poets: translations of poems by Wang Wei, Li Bai and Du Fu*. Phoenis.

Sullivan, M. (1974). *The three perfections: Chinese painting, poetry, and calligraphy*. Thames and Hudson.

Xiaofei Tian (Ed.). (2020). *Reading Du Fu: nine views*. Hong Kong University Press.

Zhang, Y. (2018). On 10 Chan-Buddhism images in the poetry of Du Fu. *Studies in Chinese Religions*, *4*(3), 318–340.

Wai-lim Yip. (1997). *Chinese Poetry,* Duke University Press.

Watson, B. (2002). *The selected poems of Du Fu*. Columbia University Press.

Wong, S. S. (1970) The quatrains (*Chüeh-Chü* □□) of Tu Fu. *Monumenta Serica*, 29, 142-162

Yang, M. V. (2016). Man and nature: a study of Du Fu's poetry. *Monumenta Serica*, 50, 315-336.

Young, D. (2008). *Du Fu: a life in poetry*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Zong-Qi Cai (2008). *How to read Chinese poetry: a guided anthology*. Columbia University Press. (audio files are available at website).