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The Artist as Creator: The Theory of Art in Du Fu's Poems about Paintings

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THE ARTIST AS CREATOR

THE THEORY OF ART IN DU FU'S POEMS ABOUT PAINTINGS

A Thesis Presented

By

JAMES EDWARDS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the

University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

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Chinese

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ABSTRACT

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MAY 2012

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Du Fu is one of China's most celebrated and influential poets. His poems about paintings are a highly innovative subset of poems rich with imagery and emotion. Received ideas about these poems fail to account for any role played in them by Du's aesthetic ideas. This study analyses Du's poems about paintings in order to bring to light Du's theory of art. Du's theory of art combines ancient Chinese ideas about aesthetics, literature and the nature of humanity's relationship to the universe. These traditional ideas serve as the foundation for a unique theory. Du's theory of art posits the painter as a higher being whose paintings have magical qualities as a result of his mastery of the craft of painting and the richness of his inner world.

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INTRODUCTION

Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770 AD) lived during the height of the Tang dynasty (618-907) and is widely thought to be one of China's greatest poets. The *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* says that Du “was one of the great geniuses of world literature”¹. Despite these glowing words of praise many aspects of Du's work remain curiously understudied. One subset of Du's poetry which is of particular interest is his poems about paintings. Du's poems about paintings² are some of the most influential poems about painting. Analyses of these poems have been cursory and vague, and frequently explain away curiosities by way of reference to Du's patriotism.³ The following study uses Du's poems about paintings to construct a picture of Du's thoughts on the nature of painting and aesthetic experience. In the process a detailed picture of the mechanics of Du's poems about paintings will emerge, a picture that can be explained by way of Du's aesthetic thought.

Du's poems about paintings are innovative in that they directly address the experience of looking at a painting. Before Du's poems about paintings, texts about painting focused mainly on the creative process and the technical or aesthetic criteria of fine art. Du was not a connoisseur or an art critic. As a result, the language he uses to describe the aesthetic experience is devoid of specialized art-critical terminology. Instead, Du draws upon the language of the Chinese classics, descriptive language and a variety of poetic techniques to convey his aesthetic experience. This aids in our understanding of

¹ Nienhauser, William H. ed. *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 813

² 題畫詩

³ In this context “patriotism” refers to Du Fu's devotion to the Chinese territorial space.

Chinese aesthetics because this kind of language has a larger tradition of usage and is sometimes clearer than the words used by Chinese art critics.

Du's poems about painting contain a rich and multi-faceted body of thinking about aesthetics. Central to Du's view is an emphasis on the individual nature of artistic genius. Du locates the creative faculty in the individual creative genius who is figured as a god of creation. The artist as creator produces a work that, through its vivid realism, has the power to dissolve physical, mental, and spatial-temporal boundaries. Because of Du's high regard for craftsmanship he values meticulous and diligence in the execution of a painting. On the other hand, his view of master painters as higher beings with powers of creation also allows for spontaneous creation as a legitimate form of artistic production. Du's view that the painter is like a god of creation is a unique theory rooted in the tradition of Chinese thinking about creativity, it combines Buddhist and Taoist ideas and contains traces of traditional poetics.

CHAPTER I

THE ARTIST AS CREATOR

The core of Du's view is in his comparison of the artist with the god of creation 造化者.

The occurrences of this comparison establish Du's artist centered view and explain the other aspects of his aesthetic theory. By locating the powers of creation within the artist himself Du empowers the artist and personalizes the artwork. These comparisons occur in "Rhapsody on a Painting of a Falcon", which will be examined first, and "A Song about the Newly Painted Landscape Screen by District Defender Liu of Feng Xian". Here is "Rhapsody on a Painting of a Falcon" 畫鷗行:

In a high hall I see a living falcon,

swooping crisply it moves its autumn bones.

At first I am surprised because its feet are unbound,

4 how is it that it stands so proudly?

Then I realize the master painters' magic,

his skill could carve out the creators den.

To draw this divine heroic image,

8 it fulfills the thing that is in your eye.⁴

Crows and magpies fill the drooping branches,

⁴ This refers to the painters eye.

perking up for they fear the falcon will come out.

With head cocked it gazes at the blue sky,

12 It would rather make the crowd of birds disappear.

Its long feathers are like knives and swords,

It can surpass the domain of men.

Heaven and earth are empty high and vast,

16 ink markings are also desolate like rattling wind.

Your thoughts are like the border of clouds and sand,

and you naturally have the quality of mist and fog.

Now my thoughts, why do they hurt?

20 Looking back as I walk away, I am especially depressed.⁵

高堂見生鶻，颯爽動秋骨。初驚無拘攣，何得立突兀。

乃知畫師妙，巧刮造化窟。寫此神俊姿，充君眼中物。

烏鶻滿樛枝，軒然恐其出。側腦看青霄，寧為衆禽沒。

長翮如刀劍，人寰可超越。乾坤空崢嶸，粉墨且蕭瑟。

緬思雲沙際，自有烟霧質。吾今意何傷，顧步獨紆鬱。

⁵ Du Shi Xiang Zhu 杜詩詳注, Qiu Zhao'ao 仇兆鰲 (1638-1717), annotator, (Beijing: 4 vols, Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1979), hereafter DSXZ, 6.477. All translations of Du Fu's poems are by the author.

In the beginning of this poem Du believes he is looking at a real falcon, and even imagines its graceful movement. He quickly realizes he has been tricked, however, by an exceptionally realistic painting. Du reflects on this experience as he stands in awe of the painter's skill. In line six Du places the artist's skill on an equal plane with the creator of the world by suggesting that a painting is a space where the artist creates life. The rest of the poem can be read as an explanation of the claim made in line six via a series of comparisons and parallels.

The first such comparison that Du employs is between the painted falcon and the painter. Du's description of the majesty and power of the falcon simultaneously functions as praise of the painter. Lines eleven and twelve express Du's feeling that the painter is an exceptional talent compared to the crowds of "crows and magpies" which represent lesser painters. The painter is lofty and profound and would rather disappear into the sky than flaunt his skills in front of throngs of amateurs. In line thirteen, Du suggests that the painters' power surpasses the talents of ordinary men, while simultaneously describing the awesome powers of flight possessed by a bird of prey.

Lines fifteen and sixteen mark the exit of the falcon and serve as a basis for the painters' extraordinary skill. These lines indirectly suggest that the bird has soared out of the painting into the void of heaven. The mournful sound of rattling leaves could indicate that the only thing left in the painting is autumn trees. If these lines are viewed in parallel, however, they provide a basis for the equality of painting with the cosmological duality of heaven and earth. Heaven and earth are in the same position within the line as ink and

powder,⁶ and “high and vast” is likewise correlated with “desolate like rattling wind”.

This explains how the artist would transcend “the domain of men”: the artist creates his own world via the composition of “ink markings”. In the next couplet Du descends from the vastness of heaven into the mind of the painter, and we discover the source of the world in the painting

Du uses a depiction of landscape to describe the painters’ mind. The painter is a microcosm; he is able to use the magic of brush and ink to create such masterful artwork precisely because he contains a world within himself. Du views the artist as a higher being on account of his ability to manifest his own internal universe through the medium of brush and silk in an act of divine creation. In “A Song about the Newly Painted Landscape Screen by District Defender Liu of Feng Xian” 奉先刘少府新畫山水障歌 we find the same analogy is made between the painter and the creator. Here is the first half of that poem:

In a hall it's unusual to see a live maple tree

It's strange that from the mountains and rivers there is rising mist and fog

I have heard that you have swept out all the scenes of Chi County

4 And with spontaneous inspiration imbued paintings with green country charm⁷

Masters of painting may be countless

But a good hand cannot be found

⁶ Ink and powder are words for paint.

⁷ The phrase “green country charm” is used in the poem 之宣城出新林浦向板橋詩 by Xie Tiao 謝朓. Mather, Richard *The Age of Eternal Brilliance* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). In this poem, XieTiao contemplates reclusion as he travels through the countryside on the way to a new post.

Facing this [painting] my mind and spirit meld

8 And I know you venerate brush and silk

Could there only be Qi Yue and Zheng Qian⁸

your brush trace far surpasses Yang Qidan⁹

Could it be the primordial garden splitting

12 Is it not the xiao and xiang mixing

Sadly, suddenly I am beneath Tianmu mountain

In my ear already the clear cries of the gibbon

My thoughts turn to last night's fierce wind and rain

16 It was definitely the ghosts and spirits of Pu city entering [the painting]

The original breath¹⁰ splattered makes the screen look wet

The true lord up above commands and heaven responds with weeping

堂上不合生楓樹，怪底江山起烟霧。聞君掃却赤縣圖，乘興遺畫滄州趣。

畫師亦無數，好手不可遇。對此融心神，知君重毫素。

豈但祁岳與鄭虔，筆跡遠過楊契丹。得非玄圃裂，無乃瀟湘翻。

⁸ Qi Yue and Zheng Qian were both famous artists of the tang dynasty. Very little is known about Qi Yue other than what can be gained from a few scattered references to his artwork. Zheng Qian was an Erudite who worked in the Institute for the Extension of Literary arts, a painter, and a friend of Du.

⁹ Yang Qi-dan was a famous painter of the Sui dynasty.

¹⁰ Original breath 元氣 is the energy or raw substance out of which heaven and earth were formed.

悄然坐我天姥下，耳邊已似聞清猿。反思前夜風雨急，乃是蒲城鬼神入。

元氣淋漓障猶濕，真宰上訴天應泣。

In lines seventeen and eighteen Du uses a metaphor of cosmological creation to describe the appearance of the wet paint. Instead of “paint” Du uses the word “original breath” 元氣 which is the basic substance out of which the universe was constructed. This is a stronger parallel than in the previous poem and reinforces the idea that Du views painting as akin to divine creation. Du then depicts the creative process as an interaction between the commands of a creator god¹¹ and the response of heaven. The use of a divine drama that illustrates creation as a metaphor for painting is further evidence for Du’s vision of the artist’s creative power.

A short story in the *Liezi* contains a precedent for this idea. In the story an artisan named “master Yan” presents an artificial human to King Mu of Zhou (976-922) that sings and dances. After he finishes performing, the artificial man beckons to the king’s concubines, which throws the King into a rage. In order to absolve himself, and presumably his creation, of blame, master Yan demonstrates the inanimate nature of his robot by taking it apart and showing the king each piece. At this the king remarks “Can the skill of a man really match the achievements of the creator?”¹² In this story, as in Du’s poetry, the human creative faculty is seen as nearly equivalent to the powers of the creator god. As such it serves as an early example of the view that human creativity is a kind of powerful magic that borders on the divine.

¹¹ The word *zhenzai* 真宰, which I translate as “true lord”, is a synonym for *zaohuazhe* 造化者.

¹² Lau, D.C. ed. *Lie zi zhu zi suo yin* 列子遂字索引. (Hong Kong: shang wu yin shu guan, 1996), p. 31.

a. The Magical Aesthetic Experience

Du's poems about paintings give detailed accounts of the experience of looking at a painting. Du's description of the aesthetic experience often involves extraordinary and magical events. For Du, the painting has the power to function as a simulation of real life, a gateway to other times and other places, or as a subjective link to the mind of the painter. All these cases involve the removal of experiential barriers, whether it be the barrier between the real and imagined world, the past and the present, of the self and the other. In "Painting of a Hawk" 畫鷹 we find an example of a painting coming to life.

From white silk wind and frost rise,

the grey hawk is painted exceptionally.

Stretching its body to consider the cunning rabbit,

4 its sideways glance resembles an anxious barbarian¹³.

The cord and ring¹⁴, glimmering, could be undone,

on the pillar of the balcony, the hawk looks like you could call to it.

When will it strike the common bird,

8 and splatter its blood and feathers over the flat plains¹⁵?

¹³ The use anxious barbarian as a metaphor for the look of a hawk found is used in other poems including: Hawk Fu 鷹賦 by FuXuan 傅玄, Hawk Fu 鷹賦 by Sun Chu 孫楚, and Hawk Fu 鷹賦 by Wei Yanshen 魏彥深

¹⁴ Devices used in falconry to attach the hawk to its perch.

¹⁵ DSXZ, 1.19

素練風霜起，蒼鷹畫作殊。聳身思狡兔，側目似愁胡。

條鏃光堪摘，軒楹勢可呼。何當擊凡鳥，毛血灑平蕪。

The first line describes an elemental power emanating from the silk. This seems to foreshadow the magical quality of the painting. Next, Du describes the posture and appearance of the hawk itself. Line five begins Du's connection with the painting by commenting on its realism. Du feels that he could reach into the painting and untie the "cord and ring" that bind the hawk to its perch. He also feels that the bird is so realistic he could call out to it and it would respond. Finally, the distinction between reality and painting disappears as Du wonders when the bird will swoop down and "strike the common bird". Over the course of the poem the barrier between painting and reality dissolves, a gradual interpenetration between Du's mind and the painting is followed by total immersion in the world depicted by the painting. Another example of this imaginative entrance into the scene of a painting happens in "Wei Yan Paints Horses on My Wall" 題壁上韋偃畫馬歌:

Marquis Wei comes to say goodbye to me for he must depart.

He knows that I love his peerless painting.

Playfully pinching a blunt brush he sweeps out fine steeds.

4 Suddenly I see fantastic horses coming out of the east wall.

One horse eats grass, one horse neighs.

I sit down and see a thousand miles met by frosty hooves.

In times of peril how could I obtain true horses like these?

8 To live alongside men, and also with them die.

韋侯別我有所适，知我怜君畫無敵。戏拈秃笔扫骅骝，歛見騏驎出東壁。

一匹齧草一匹嘶，坐看千里當霜蹄。時危安得真致此，與人同生亦同死。

This poem records the occasion of Wei Yan saying goodbye to Du before his departure from Cheng Du. During this parting visit, Wei paints two horses on the wall of Du's hut. In line 4 the interesting use of the verb "coming out" suggests the beginning of Du's immersive response. This response deepens with the description of space in the sixth line. Du's experience of the painting goes beyond the painted image as he imagines the horses galloping across a vast expanse. The subject has a life of its own which Du realizes through an imaginative journey within the painting. In the final couplet Du recognizes the limitations of the painted horses: they may obtain life in his mind, but they are not real enough to charge into battle and defend the empire.

In "Rhapsody on a Painting of a Falcon" there is an example of the realism of a painting providing a window into the mind of the artist. In the first couplet, Du's immediate response to the painting has a hallucinatory character: "in a high hall I see a living falcon/ swooshing crisply it moves its autumn bones". As Du catches sight of a painting of a hawk he registers it as a real bird and imagines its graceful movement. By the third couplet, however, Du realizes that he is looking at a painting of a Falcon. The "crisp" movement that Du describes was a product of the connection between the painting and Du's imagination. In the ninth couplet Du uses landscape imagery to

compliment the painter: “your thoughts are like the border of clouds and sand, and you naturally have the quality of mist and fog”. Du realizes the vastness and richness of the painter's mind through his experience of the vivid, lifelike scene in the painting. The painting is not a static object but a window into the imagination of the painter.

In the poem “A Song about the Newly Painted Landscape Screen by District Defender Liu of Feng Xian” there are number of different magical events which are caused by the painting. Here is the second half of that poem:

The wilderness pavilion far away in the mixed flowers of approaching spring
20 An old fisherman when darkness treads stands alone on a boat
The Canglang¹⁶ waters are [drawn] deep clear and vast
Beside the slanted bank the crooked island in autumns fine hairs
The Xiang maidens with drum and harp are not seen
24 today the speckled bamboo grows beside by the river
Liu Marquis' heavenly endowment is an essence
he loves painting such that it enters his marrow
You have two sons
28 In splashing ink they are also without peer

¹⁶ The Canglang waters are referred to in a song that is quoted in the Mencius and the Chu-ci. The song appears in the Mencius as follows: “when the Canglang waters are clear you can wash your hat strings in it; when the canglang waters are muddy, you can wash your feet in it” 滄浪之水清兮，可以濯我纓；滄浪之水濁兮，可以濯我足。Lau, D.C. ed. *Meng zi zhu zi suo yin*. (Hong Kong: shang wu yin shu guan, 1995).

The eldest son is of the highest intelligence

He can add an old tree to the steep side of a summit

The younger son's mind and eyes are open

32 He can describe monks and children on a mountain

Ruo ye stream and Cloud gate temple

Why am I alone in this muddy swamp

It will be green shoes and cloth socks from now on¹⁷

野亭春還雜花遠，漁翁暝踏孤舟立。

滄浪水深青溟闊，欹岸側島秋毫末。不見湘妃鼓瑟時，至今斑竹臨江活。

劉侯天機精，愛畫入骨髓。自有兩兒郎，揮灑亦莫比。

大兒聰明道，能添老樹巔崖裏。小兒心孔開，貌得山僧及童子。

若耶溪，雲門寺。吾獨胡為在泥滓，青鞋布襪從此始。

As Du is looking at the painting he is transported through space and time. Lines thirteen and fourteen read: “sadly, suddenly I am beneath Tian-mu mountain/ in my ear already the clear cries of the gibbon” 悄然坐我天姥下，耳邊已似聞清猿. Tian-mu is a mountain in the east that Du visited in his youth. Du is viewing the painting in *Feng Xian*, a city in the North West. The painting acts as a portal that sends Du back into his

¹⁷ DSXZ, 4.275

past experiences. Lines fifteen and sixteen also suggest that the painting has magical powers: “my thoughts turn to last night’s fierce wind and rain/ it was definitely the ghosts and spirits of Pu city entering the painting” 反思前夜風雨急，乃是蒲城鬼神入。In this couplet Du realizes that the sound of wind and rain from the previous night was actually the rushing of spirits into the painting. The painting acts as a gateway, perhaps to the “primordial garden” that is mentioned in line eleven, that attracts the ghosts and sprits of the city. This suggests that the power of the painting to draw in the observer extends even to the realm of spirits. As in “Rhapsody on a Painting of a Falcon”, these magical events are immediately followed by a comparison between painting and divine creation. In this way Du seems to attribute the magic of a painting to the godlike powers of the master artist. There is another instance of the power of a painting to transport the viewer through time in the poem “Yang Jian Again Displays Twelve Paintings of Hawks” 楊監又出畫鷹十二扇：

Recently there was Feng Shaozheng,

He was able to paint the likeness of birds of prey

Duke Ming displays these paintings

4 How could they not transmit of their images?

Their extraordinary images, each one is unique

Clear to the extreme, the bird’s minds have direction

Their swiftness is like a ten thousand mile horse

- 8 Their spirit a match for a general of ten thousand troops
- I remember in the past, Li mountain palace
- In winter the imperial guard would move there from Han Yuan
- When the heavens were cold there were great feathered arrow hunts
- 12 These animals, their spirit had strength and vigor
- At the time, there were no common talents
- A hundred hits, all with vigor
- The ink's contour resembles that time
- 16 The one who knows this is immediately disconsolate
- Spears and halberds seldom have a day of rest
- While the true bones grow old on mountain peaks
- Because of you, they are rooting out the crafty rabbit
- 20 And now, fluttering on the falconer's glove.¹⁸

近時馮紹正，能畫鷲鳥樣。明公出此圖，無乃傳其狀。

殊姿各獨立，清絕心有向。疾禁千里馬，氣敵萬人將。

憶昔驪山宮，冬移含元仗。天寒大羽獵，此物神俱王。

¹⁸ DSXZ, 15.1340

當時無凡材，百中皆用壯。粉墨形似間，識者一惆悵。

干戈少暇日，真骨老崖嶂。為君除狡兔，曾是翻韉上。

In this poem Du describes his experience at an exhibition of twelve paintings by Feng Shao-zheng. Du describes the paintings as being so masterfully done that one could almost read the minds of the hawks. In line nine the topic changes suddenly to Du's memories of the golden age of Xuan Zong's reign. Du describes an imperial hunt in which there were numerous falconers. In line fifteen Du explains that the brush strokes in the paintings resemble that experience and call forth his memories. Du goes on to lament the instability brought on by the An Lu-shan rebellion. Since then war has been constant and imperial hunts no longer take place. Line fifteen explains that, because there are not more hunts, the hunting birds have been abandoned to live out their lives in the mountains. In the final couplet Du remarks that, because of the exhibition, the birds have returned to the falconers to the hunt. For Du, the exhibition is much more than a collection of images of birds: the paintings have the power to bring the glorious past of the empire into the present. Functioning in this way, the exhibition becomes a site for the folding of space-time, and the past comes to life as a vivid commentary on the present. There is also the suggestion that painting can transport the painter through space in "A Song about Duke Jiang of Chu's Painting of a Horned Hawk" 姜楚公畫角鷹歌:

Duke Chu painted a hawk and the hawk wears horns

Its killing look is cold as it reaches the dark north

The observer is envious and anxious that it will beat its wings and fly

4 Master painter you have not without mind studied your craft

This hawk was drawn true in Zuo-mian

But I sigh that true bone will be empty passed on

Between the roof beams a bramble finch stops and is startled with fear

8 Indeed, it has not yet spiraled into the sky rising through the nine heavens¹⁹

楚公畫鷹戴角，殺氣森森到幽朔。觀者貪愁掣臂飛，畫師不是無心學。

此鷹寫真在左綿，却嗟真骨遂虛傳。梁間燕雀休驚怕，亦未搏空上九天。

In this poem Du observes a painting of a horned hawk, a species of hawk that has tufts on its head resembling horns. This hawk is setting down in a northern landscape, possibly a desert. In line three we have a fusing of the painted hawk with the real hawk. The painting is so fearfully realistic that Du is nervous that the hawk will suddenly begin to move.

Certain elements of this poem suggest that it is modeled after "effortless travelling" in the Zhuangzi 莊子. This chapter contains a story recounted by Zhuangzi that may have originated in the oral tradition of ancient China. In this story a great fish that lives in the mythical north ocean transforms into a bird and is launched out of a whirlpool into the sky by a great wind. The bird, who is so high in the sky it cannot see the ground, journeys all the way to the mythical southern ocean. Along the way, various insects and smaller birds look up in amazement at the bird, wondering why it is so high,

¹⁹ DSXZ, 11.924

where it is going, and comparing its awesome journey to their own pathetic attempts to fly from tree to tree.

In Du Fu's poem there is a similar situation. The last couplet introduces a finch who, like Du, is terrified by the appearance of the hawk. The reference to the great ascent through the heavens is reminiscent of the journey of the magical bird in the *Zhangzi*, while the finch plays the part of the lesser bird that looks on in amazement. Du is also like one of the small birds from the *Zhuangzi* in the way that he stands in awe before Duke Jiang's realistic painting. This reading reinforces the idea expressed in "Rhapsody on a Painting of a Falcon" discussed above that the painter's representational powers put him on a plane above ordinary men.

Duke Jiang was originally from the northwestern city *Shang-gui* in modern day Gansu province. At the time that the poem was written, however, he was living in the south as the Duke of Chu. Duke Jiang has made a magical journey through his painting to the northern grasslands of his home. Seen in this way, Du is actually the terrestrial observer of the painters' magical journey as he travels back to the northern desert in the form of a hawk.

In "A Song Playfully Written about Wei Yan's Painting of a Pair of Pines" 戲韋偃雙松圖歌 there are cases of animation and transformation:

In the world there are a few people who paint old pines

Bi Hong was already old when Wei Yan was a boy

He stops his brush and a distant wind lifts the fine branch tips

4 Throughout the hall images are moved and I exclaim: marvelous!

Two bare roots crack through the skin of lichen and moss

Bent iron crisscrosses—the curves of high branches

White deadwood is like dragon bones and tigers corpses

8 Blackness enters the dark night sky as a thunderstorm descends

At the base of the tree a foreign monk rests in quiet solitude

With bushy brows and white hair, and no earthly attachments

He exposes his right shoulder and reveals his legs²⁰

12 From within the leaves the pine cones fall down before the monk

Marquis Wei, Marquis Wei, many have come to see you

I have a bolt of fine eastern silk,

I treasure it no less than a piece of elegant embroidery

16 I have had it brushed down to subdue its chaotic luster

Would you please take your brush and paint a few straight trunks?²¹

天下幾人畫古松，畢宏已老韋偃少。絕筆長風起纖末，滿堂動色嗟神妙。

兩株慘裂苔蘚皮，屈鐵交錯迴高枝。白摧朽骨龍虎死，黑入太陰雷雨垂。

²⁰ The language of this line exactly matches four characters from the first sentence of section two of the diamond sutra.

²¹ DSXZ, 9.757

松根胡僧憇寂寞，龍眉皓首無住著。偏袒右肩露雙腳，葉裏松子僧前落。

韋僂韋僂數相見，我有一匹好東絹。重之不減錦繡段，已令拂拭光凌亂，

請公放筆為直幹。

The third and fourth lines describe the magic of Wei Yan's skill. As Wei completes his painting of a tree, heaven responds by sending distant winds through its branches. Because Wei is a master painter, his paintings have an unbroken connection with nature. This power of animation spread out of the painting and transforms the entire visual environment of the hall.

Lines five and six provide vivid description of the roots and branches of the painted tree. Line seven provides fearsome metaphors for the appearance of dead wood in the trunk of the tree. In line eight, Du describes the dark branches of the tree rising up into a sky filled with thunderclouds. This image, white bones and "bent iron" rising up into a black sky from which rain and thunder descend, serves as a ferocious and frightening depiction of the power of nature.

In line nine Du describes a monk resting in peaceful tranquility below the tree. Line ten indicates that the monk is in a state of Buddhist transcendence, and line eleven quotes four characters from the section two of the Diamond sutra. These three lines paint a picture of a monk in meditation that strongly contrasts with the preceding lines. References to Buddhist texts in Du's poetry are scarce, but this allusion to the Diamond sutra is crucial to our understanding of Du's response to painting. The diamond sutra is a Buddhist text containing a dialogue about the central tenets of Buddhist thought. The

characters quoted by Du describe the posture of the monk Subhuti as he asks the Buddha about the secret of perfect wisdom. The Buddha explains that everything is illusion, and that enlightenment is achieved through the recognition of the unreality of appearances.

Line twelve presents an image of pinecones that fall from the branches of the tree and rain down in front of the monk. The violence of tigers, dragons, and thunderstorms has been transformed by the monk's transcendent mind into a peaceful scene. The effects of the painting are not limited to strict representation of the object, but freely transform into different phenomena. This transformation first occurs in the branches of the tree and radiates outward into the hall where Du observes the painting. Later, the painting itself is transformed by the monk's entrance into the poem. Beneath his tranquil gaze the wild images of nature become delicate and gentle. This transformation, far from being a simple change of perspective, is charged with religious significance. Buddhism proposes that the mind alone has the power to realize the illusory nature of appearances and thereby transcend reality. The role of Buddhism in this poem as an agent of transformation provides a strong analogy to the power of art and suggests that the magical aesthetic experience may also be a kind of religious experience.

In Du's poem "A Song about Honorable Master Li's Pine Tree Screen" 題李尊師松樹障子歌 the painting provides a scene through which Du's personal emotions come to life:

I awoke on a clear morning, combed my hair

The Taoist of Xuan Du²² came to visit me

Still holding my hair, I called to my son to let in the guest

4 He held up a newly painted screen with green pines

The screen's pine forest was quiet and dark

Leaning it on the veranda suddenly it's like there is no paint

The dark cliff below holds the frosty, snowy trunks

8 The drooping branches twist in the shape of small dragons

All my life I have favored the strange and the ancient

Facing this my inspiration meets with a true spirit

I already know this immortal's thoughts are close to mine

12 Moreover you feel that in good work, the mind especially suffers

Below the pines there are old men with scarf and sandals like mine

Sitting together we are like the Shang Mountain elders²³

With a melancholy air, we deeply sing the song of the purple mushroom²⁴

16 In times of turmoil despair brings forth a mournful wind²⁵

²² Xuan Du was a Taoist temple in Xi'an.

²³ The Shang Mountain elders, also called "the four hoary heads," are legendary recluses who lived in the forest to escape the tyranny of the Qin dynasty. Brown, Kendall *The Politics of Reclusion*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii press, 1997).

²⁴ A ballad attributed to the four hoary heads about living in the mountains (see Brown, 1997).

²⁵ DSXZ, 6.459

老夫清晨梳白頭，玄都道士來相訪。握髮呼兒延入戶，手提新畫青松障。

障子松林靜杳冥，憑軒忽若無丹青。陰崖却承霜雪幹，偃蓋反走虬龍形。

老夫生平好奇古，對此興與精靈聚。已知仙客意相親，更覺良工心獨苦。

松下丈人巾屨同，偶坐似是商山翁。悵望聊歌紫芝曲，時危慘澹來悲風。

In this poem one of Du's friends comes to visit bringing along a painting to show him. The painting is incredibly realistic, with no trace of brush stroke, and the image is of tranquil and ancient pine trees. In line six we find an example of the painting as a portal through which Du enters a living scene. When the screen is placed on the veranda there is a moment of transformation where it loses its painted quality and it is as if Du Fu is looking at a real forest. In line ten Du describes this event as a connection with the painter through his art. The spiritual qualities of the painter have been expressed in the image of the forest and Du is immersed in them as he contemplates the image. Line thirteen introduces the human element of the painting; an indefinite number of old men sit below the cluster of pine trees. Du writes in line fourteen that the old men resemble the famous recluses who escaped the tyranny of the Qin dynasty to live in the mountains. In line fifteen Du, as he is immersed in the scene of the painting, sings with the men a ballad attributed to those recluses. The ballad glorifies the virtue of wandering in the mountains as a withdrawal from a corrupt society and immoral government. The painting transports Du into the past where he sings with the famous recluses of Shang Mountain and experiences the tranquility of an ancient forest.

The painting is like a religious icon in its depiction of Taoist virtues in the scene of a tranquil forest. It also provides a scene which gives life and character to Du's frustration with politics. Because Du is upset about the political turbulence of the day, he sees himself singing with the men in the painting about retiring from the world. In this way the world in the painting becomes a site for a complex cathartic event and a merging of Du's spirit with the spirit of the painter.

b. Meticulousness and Diligence

The Chinese attitude toward painting has two identifiable extremes: meticulous diligence and spontaneous naturalness. Both extremes have been emphasized by different individuals in different time periods. One consequence of the divine status of painting in Du's view is his relative appreciation of diligence and reverence in the execution of painting. As a result of the centrality of the painter, however, Du's view of painting transcends this binary analysis and encompasses spontaneous naturalness under certain circumstances.

Du praises hard work in lines eleven and twelve of his poem "A Song about Honorable Master Li's Pine Tree Screen": "I already know this immortals thoughts are close to mine/ moreover he feels that in good work, the heart really suffers". The first line of this couplet refers to the fact that both Du and Honorable Master Li love of the aesthetic of "the strange and the ancient". The second line explains that Master Li is also similar to Du in that he has an appreciation of meticulous craftsmanship. In line six Du writes that on the painting "suddenly there appears to be no paint". The brushwork of the painter is so carefully executed that, when looking at the painting, one sees the image of a

real pine forest. This kind of painting requires immense diligence and concentration, and Du is moved by the realistic effect that such meticulous craftsmanship produces.

There is even evidence that Du applied the standard of meticulousness to his own craft: in Li Bai's poem *For Du Fu*, Li Bai asks Du Fu if his so thin because he has been "making himself sick with poetry". Here Li teases Du for constantly laboring over poetry. Du himself commented on Li possessing the opposite quality, saying he would "drink a bottle of wine and then write a hundred verses"²⁶. It stands to reason that Du would apply a standard of obsessive dedication to the perfection of one's craft if that was the approach he took to the composition of his own poetry.

The poem "A Playful Song about Wang Zai's Landscape Painting" 戲題王宰畫山水圖歌 begins by describing Wang's meticulous approach to painting:

It takes him ten days to paint a river

Five days to paint a rock

When his work is neither rushed nor forced

4 Only then Wang Zai leaves a true impression

Powerful! The images of Kun Lun and Fang Hu²⁷

They hang on the high white wall of his chamber

Stretching from Dong Ting in Ba Ling to Japan in the east,

²⁶ DSXZ, 2.83

²⁷ Kun Lun is a magical mountain range in the west. Fang Hu is a mythical island where immortals live.

- 8 Between red banks the river flows into the milky way
 And in the center, vaporous clouds follow flying dragons
 Boatmen and fishermen move onto the bank
 The mountain forest bends under great waves of wind
- 12 His skill in portraying distance is unmatched by even the ancients
 In a small space there are discourses on ten thousand miles
 Where can I get a sharp knife from Bing Zhou
 To cut off half of [the painting of] Wu Song river²⁸

十日畫一水，五日畫一石。能事不受相促迫，王宰始肯留真跡。

壯哉崑崙方壺圖，挂君高堂之素壁。巴陵洞庭日本東，赤岸水與銀河通。

中有雲氣隨飛龍，舟人漁子入浦溆，山木盡亞洪濤風。尤工遠勢古莫比，

咫尺應須論萬里。焉得并州快剪刀，剪取吳松半江水。

While the opening lines may seem to tease Wang for his laborious efforts, Du's praise of meticulous diligence elsewhere suggests that he greatly admired Wang's method. In addition, in line eleven Du praises the painting for containing movement, and in line thirteen praises Wang's depiction of vast space. It is likely that the qualities Du praises require the kind of patient, meticulous approach that he teases Wang about in the beginning lines of this poem.

²⁸ DSXZ, 9.754

Another reference to the painter's dedication is found in the "A song about Duke Jiang of Chu's painting of a Horned Hawk". The fourth line reads: "master painter, you have not without mind studied your craft". Here Du attributes the exceptional quality of the painting to the painter's application of his mind to the study of his craft. This issue is discussed in detail in chapter III below.

In "A Song about the Newly Painted Landscape Screen by District Defender Liu of Feng Xian" Du uses complicated language to praise the artist's work ethic. Line seven of the poem is ambiguous, and could be translated either as "facing this melding of mind and spirit" or "facing this, my mind and spirit meld" 對此融心神. In the former case the line serves as a comment on the apparent synthesis of "mind" and "spirit" in the execution of the painting. In the latter case this line describes the effect that the painting has as Du looks at it. The latter interpretation seems more likely because the poem continues on to describe the effect of the painting on the observer.

Line eight seems to reason directly from line seven: "[because of this] I know you venerate brush and silk". Here Du attributes the miraculous effect of the painting to an attitude of reverence about the process of creation. This idea has historical precedent in the writings of the scholar Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132-192). In his work "Discussion of the Brush" 筆論 Cai maintains that a calligrapher must have an attitude of collected dignity: "don't speak, don't be full of breath, gather your spirit together like you are facing a great leader, then everything will be good."²⁹

言不出口，氣不盈息，沉密神彩，如對至尊，則無不善矣。

²⁹ Li dai shu fa lun wen xuan 歷代書法論文選, Huang Jian 黃簡, editor, (Shang Hai: shang hai shu hua chu ban she, 1983, Hereafter LDSFLWX), p. 5.

Cai's admonition surely makes sense in a world where written works were often produced for the sake of a leader, for example, in the case of memorials which were presented to the emperor. Such a presentation of one's writing was certainly a serious matter. In Du Fu's poetry, however, the attitude of reverence has a different character. There is a more personal quality to the "melding of mind and spirit" that a painting effects, for instance, in its power to recreate past experiences in the present. To wield such a power, an artist must be serious about their work. Like a doctor who places his scalpel in the body of a patient, the artist's work "enters the marrow" of the one who looks upon it.

A notable exception to this idea is found in "Wei Yan Paints Horses on my Wall". The second couplet describes a quick, almost careless episode of artistic creation: "playfully pinching a blunt brush [Wei Yan] sweeps out fine steeds/ suddenly I see fantastic horses coming out of the east wall." The language of this couplet describes the relatively rapid execution of a painting. The verb "coming out" gives the painting a sense of dimension or movement. At first glance, the scene described in this poem seems to contradict Du's preference for meticulously executed paintings. On the other hand, meticulousness and patience may not be self-sufficient criteria for the evaluation of art. Du's theory of art centers on the master painter as the locus of excellence. A master painter who has mindfully studied their craft would be able to transcend the abilities of ordinary people, and as a result they would be capable of producing miraculous works of art under a variety of circumstances. In this poem Wei Yan demonstrates the extraordinary nature of his skill by producing a masterpiece in the blink of an eye.

CHAPTER II

DU'S THEORY OF ART IN CONTEXT

Du's concept of the artist as creator differs from the dominant trend of thinking both before and after the Tang dynasty. There is a noticeable tendency from the warring states (475-221 BC) through the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD) to view art as the expression of a natural phenomenon that is channeled through human skill. The artist's work is in a way greater than the artist's ability because artistic form has its source in heaven, nature, or the universe itself. The artist's work is a demonstration of his spiritual receptiveness, technical ability, and acute perception. This view contrasts with Du's view that the artist is a master creator who produces works of art by way of his unique genius.

In order to understand ancient Chinese aesthetic theory it is helpful to begin with the warring states period (475-221). Here, in the *Lu Shi Chun Qiu* 吕氏春秋, we find one of the earliest sources for the idea that a human being channels divine harmony: "The origin of life is heaven, the perfection of its cultivation is in humankind. He who nourishes that which is born of heaven and does not oppose it is called a genius."³⁰ The

³⁰ Literally: "child of heaven" 天子。

actions of the genius take the whole of heaven as their foundation. This is how the minister establishes himself.”³¹

始生之者，天；養成之者，人也。能養天之所生而勿撓之謂天子。天子之動也，以全天為故者也。

This passage sets forth the idea that heaven/nature itself is the wellspring of human ingenuity. The human genius is the individual who takes the whole of nature as the foundation of his actions. To take nature as his foundation the genius must realize those internal elements of his being which accord with universal as well as cosmic principles and values. This realization transforms the nature of his expression and exerts an ordering and harmonizing influence on his environment.³²

The earliest application of this idea to the arts is found in the writings of Cai Yong. Cai’s essay *The Nine Movements* begins with a kind of aesthetic genesis: “As for the origin of writing in nature, nature was already established, Yin and Yang were born out of it; when Yin and Yang were already established, form and movement were born.”³³

夫書肇於自然，自然既立陰陽生焉；陰陽既生形勢出矣

The implication is that form and movement, which are the fundamental components of calligraphy, are derived from the patterned characteristics of nature. This idea is also found in the writings of Cheng Gong Sui 成公綏 (231-273). His text “On Li

³¹Lau, D.C. ed. *Lu shi chun qiu zhu zi suo yin* 呂氏春秋遂字索引. (Hong Kong: shang wu yin shu guan, 1994), p. 2.

³² This idea continued on and can be seen in the writings of Dong Zhong-shu 董仲舒 (179-104 BC) whose political ideas were influential in the early Han dynasty.

³³ LDSFLWX, 6

Shu” 隸書體 begins: “When Cang Jie invented writing, from the things of the world he composed his thoughts, he looked at those bird tracks, and thereupon he completed written characters.”³⁴

皇頡作文，因物构思，觀彼鳥迹，遂成文字

Cang Jie is traditionally figured as having four eyes and a dragons head. And yet, despite his god-like status, in this text he does not invent written characters so much as adapt them from a system of forms already present in nature. All the texts cited above emphasize the origin of creativity in nature and its adaptation and utilization by people.

Similarly Liu Xie 劉勰 (5th century AD), in his text *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* 文星雕龍, sets forth the idea that literary art is the illumination of the beauty of heavenly creation:

The virtue of literature is great. How is it that it is born with heaven and earth? As for the mixing of the colors yellow and black, the division of square and circle, the cycling of the jade disks moon and sun: they are formed of the descended beauty of heavens images; the brilliant elegance of mountain and river: they are the spreading shape of earth patterns. These things clothe the pattern of the Dao. Looking up, it spews out heavenly bodies, looking down, it contains the earth’s divisions. High and low are set in their place, and the two images³⁵ are already born. As for humanity taking part in this, it is in the dwelling together of nature and spirit, and this is called the trinity. Humankind is the refinement of the five

³⁴ LDSFLWX, 9

³⁵ The “two images” are Yang and Yin or heaven and earth.

phases³⁶, truly the heart of heaven and earth. The heart is born and words are established, words are established and patterns are illuminated. This is the way of nature.³⁷

文之為德也大矣，與天地并生者何哉。夫玄黃色雜，方圓體分，日月疊璧，以垂麗天之象；山川煥綺，以鋪理地之形：此蓋道之文也。仰觀吐曜，俯察含章，高卑定位，故兩儀既生矣。惟人參之，性靈所鍾，是謂三才。為五行之秀，實天地之心，心生而言立，言立而文明，自然之道也。

In this passage, the mind is a conduit for the patterns of nature. This text could be ambiguous: it is not entirely clear whether humans innovate the patterns that they illuminate or if the patterns are already set forth in the “heavenly bodies” and “earth’s divisions” etc. In the first place, the emphasis on the origin of form and movement in nature suggests that the latter interpretation is correct. Furthermore, the idea that humankind is the “flowering of the five phases” places human existence squarely in the context of natural processes. The succeeding statement, that humanity is “the mind of heaven and earth,” completes this idea by defining human consciousness as the expressive component not of individuals but of the greater world of nature.

Before we move on to texts about painting in particular we can contrast this cosmic theory of calligraphy with Du Fu’s poetry. The poem “Palace Inspector Yang Displays Zhang Xu’s Cursive Calligraphy” 殿中楊監見示張旭草書圖 opens with the following lines:

³⁶ The five phases are wood, metal, earth, fire, water.

³⁷ *Xin yi wen xin diao long* 新譯文心雕龍. LuoLi'qian 羅立乾, annotator, (Tai Bei: san min shu ju yin hang, 1985), p. 4.

This gentleman is already gone

As for the sage of cursive his secret is hard to obtain

Now this mournful exhibition

4 It fills our eyes and we immediately grieve

A sorrowful wind forms in the fine silk threads

Ten thousand li of elegant beauty unravels

斯人已云亡，草聖秘難得。及茲煩見示，滿目一淒惻。悲風生微綃，萬里起古色。

The opening of this poem focuses on the calligrapher Zhang Xu who has recently died. In the first couplet, Zhang's skill is called a "secret" or in an alternate translation, a "mystery". It is clear in this line that the secret is Zhan's genius and not the secret of the cosmos in general. This is an example of the personalization of artistic beauty that is characteristic of Du's view. We also get a sense that the beauty of the calligraphy is equal to or perhaps even subservient to the beauty of the individual, the memory of which emanates mournfully from the silk. Finally, the beauty of the calligraphy itself is introduced as the unfolding of a vast magical space where the beauty of art is experienced. It is the uniqueness of Zhang's genius that accounts for the special beauty of his skill, and it is the recognition of that genius in his work that causes Du and Yang to grieve. The personal approach to the aesthetic experience serves as a complement to the technical approach, which together form the foundation of the magical effects of art.

If we turn to discussions of painting, the writings of Zhang Yan-yuan 張彥遠 (815-877) are most notable: “painting promotes culture and strengthens culture and strengthens the principle of right conduct; it penetrates completely all the aspects of the universal spirit... It fathoms the subtle and the abstruse serving thus the same purpose as the Six Classics, and it revolves with the four seasons. It originated from Nature and not from any decrees or works of men.”³⁸ Notice the highly general and impersonal nature of the terms “universal spirit”, “culture” and “nature”. In addition, the reference to the six classics signifies the importance of precedent and morality. These things are all greater than the individual, who is but an agent of greater forces. The artist is encouraged to have humility before the craft of painting in the same way that he has humility before heaven or the emperor.

Du Fu did not depart far from this tradition; the artist as microcosm is an important component of Du’s view. When Du writes of an artist that his “thoughts are like the border of clouds and sand/ and [he] naturally has the quality of mist and fog” this is a clear invocation of a microcosmic explanation of creativity. John Hay writes that “the transformations of energy³⁹ occurred a distinctive framework, that of the microcosm within the macrocosm”⁴⁰.

In his Du’s poems about paintings, however, there is an unprecedented focus on the individuality of artists. Du frequently attributes the quality of the painting to some aspect of the painter himself. In “Rhapsody on the Painting of a Falcon”, the surprising

³⁸ Siren, Oswald *The Chinese of the Art of Painting*. (Shanghai, North-China Daily News, 1936), p. 224.

³⁹ Hay uses “transformations of energy” both in the aesthetic and physiological sense.

⁴⁰ Hay, John. “The Human Body and Calligraphy,” in *Theories of the arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 90.

effects of the painting are due to the “painting master’s magic,” and the wonderful image of the falcon “fulfills the thing that is in [the painters] eye”. In “A Song about the Newly Painted Landscape Screen by District Defender Liu of Feng Xian” Du’s “mind and spirit meld” and as a result he knows that “[the painter] venerate[s] brush and silk”.

Furthermore, the painter’s divine inspiration becomes an essence because he “loves painting such that it enters his marrow”. Thus it is the painters love and veneration of painting that contributes most to his miraculous skill. Similarly, in “A Playful Song about Wang Zai’s Landscape Painting” Du suggests that Wang’s particular mastery is due to his incredible patience.

In “A song about Duke Jiang of Chu’s painting of a Horned Hawk”, Du fears that “true bone will be emptily passed on” because there are so few artists with Duke Jiang’s ability. This sentiment is expressed in “A Song about the Newly Painted Landscape Screen by District Defender Liu of Feng Xian”: “masters of painting may be countless, but a good hand cannot be found”. This line probably suggests that, while many people study painting and master its principles, painters who are able use their hand to channel their mind and spirit are rare. Unlike earlier texts that examine the nature and foundations of artistic practice and locate the beauty of expression in the forms of expression itself, Du Fu’s poems about art emphasize the unique skills and qualities that constitute the painter as creator. These individuals transmit lifelike forms with a skill that imbues them with magical life and an ineffable personal quality. This act is rooted in the natural world but is really a manifestation of the inner world of the painter through his own unique artistic skill. The artistic genius uses realism as a tool to magically construct his own inner world.

CHAPTER III

THE FOUNDATIONS OF DU FU'S AESTHETIC THOUGHT

Du's view of the artist as creator has Buddhist and Taoist elements, and is also influenced by literary theory. A brief account of Buddhist ideas will demonstrate the potential influence those ideas had on Du's aesthetic theory. An examination of Taoist texts will reveal the origins of Du's concept of the master craftsman. Finally, an examination of literary theory as set forth in Lu Ji's (261-303) Rhapsody on Literature will establish a likely precedent for Du's ideas about aesthetic experience.

a. Taoism

The Taoist element of Du's view is visible in his use of the word *xin* 心 which I translate as "mind", and *shen* 神 "spirit". There are three passages which suggest Taoist influence. The first is in *A Song about Duke Jiang of Chu's Painting of a Horned Hawk*: "master painter you did not without mind study your craft". This passage sets forth the use of "mind" as an essential component of study. The second is in *A Song about*

Honorable Master Li's Pine Tree Screen: “Moreover you feel that in good work the mind really suffers”. This line shows the importance of “mind” in the production of art. The third passage is in *A Song About the Newly Painted Landscape Screen by District Defender Liu of Feng Xian*: “facing this, my mind and spirit meld”. This passage shows that the aesthetic experience is constituted through the merging of mind and spirit. An examination of the *Zhuangzi* will demonstrate the complicated role of “mind” in craftsmanship and its relationship to “spirit”.

In *Zhuangzi*, which is arguably the most important Taoist text, the mind is the fundamental agent of human interaction and comprehension. The spirit, on the other hand, is a force that unites a person with the world during inspired action. In some ways, “mind” is synonymous with “spirit”. The use of spirit and mind in the following passages will demonstrate their meaning.

In section six of the chapter “Free Wandering” 逍遙遊, *Zhuangzi* belittles Huizi for his inability to comprehend the difference between big and small. This story makes it clear that “mind” is the human faculty of comprehension and thought. In the story, Huizi gains possession of a large gourd. He finds that he cannot use it as a jug or as a cup, and so destroys it, thinking it useless. *Zhuangzi* replies with a story about a man who makes a small profit selling a healing salve to a general who uses it to win a war. *Zhuangzi* points out that Huizi could have used the gourd as a boat, and finishes with the insult: “You sir, seem to have tumbleweed for a mind” 則夫子猶有蓬之心也夫.⁴¹ This passage implies

⁴¹ Lau, D.C. ed. *Zhuang zi zhu zi suo yin* 莊子逐字索引, (Hong Kong: shang wu yin shu guan, 2000), hereafter ZZZZSY, p. 3.

that the mind is the mental faculty used for strategy, the comprehension of functions, and imagination.

In section two of the chapter “Adjustment of Controversies” Zhuangzi gives a psychological analysis of the interpersonal struggles inherent in a society, wherein he states: “daily there is the contending of minds” 日以心鬪⁴². This passage suggests that the mind is the functional apparatus through which people interact and communicate. Mind also has more profound functions, as in the description of the sage Wang Tai in the chapter 德充符 of *Zhuangzi*: “he takes no knowledge of the things for which his ears and eyes are the appropriate organs, but his mind travels through the harmony of excellent qualities” 且不知耳目之所宜，而游心於德之和。⁴³ Here we see that the mind of the sage goes beyond the comprehension and manipulation of everyday things and wanders freely in the realm of philosophical abstraction and divine unity.

In the chapter “The Lord of Supporting Life” 養生主 in *Zhuangzi*, a prince asks a master butcher to explain his peerless skill. The master butcher explains: "When I started carving oxen, of what I saw nothing was not the ox. After three years, I had still never seen a whole ox. Now I use my spirit to meet the ox, and I do not use vision. My sense perception stops and my spirit yearns to move" 始臣之解牛之時，所見無非牛者。三年之後，未嘗見全牛也。方今之時，臣以神遇，而不以目視，官知止而神欲行。⁴⁴ This passage describes a process whereby a butcher learns his craft over time. Because ox carving is a simple, physical task, not much use of the mind is needed; the butcher uses his senses to

⁴² ZZZZSY, p. 3.

⁴³ ZZZZSY, p. 13

⁴⁴ ZZZZSY, p. 8

judge where to cut. Over time, the butcher learns the nature of the ox's body. The immense knowledge gained through years of physical experience enables the butcher to use his spirit instead of his senses. Using his spirit, the butcher effortlessly moves his knife through the empty spaces in the ox's body, leaving his knife untouched. The use of the spirit suggests a high level of technical achievement that manifests itself as superhuman ability.

This Taoist take on learning is also discussed in "Attaining Life" 達生 in the *Zhuangzi*. In that chapter there is a story of a hunchback who gathers cicadas with a stick. Here he describes his method: "for five or six months I practiced gathering pellets, and I could balance two without dropping them, so I only lost a small portion of the cicadas. Then I could balance three without dropping them, and I only lost one cicada out of every ten. When I could balance five on my stick, it was like I was gathering them with my hands" 五六月累丸，二而不墜，則失者鎔銖；累三而不墜，則失者十一；累五而不墜，猶掇之也。⁴⁵ The hunchback gathers cicadas effortlessly only because he painstakingly devoted himself to practicing the skills necessary to that end. Confucius comments on this saying: "when you are using your undivided will you are concentrated in your spirit." This suggests that single-minded determination and practice activates the spirit; the use of *shen* 神 "spirit" is attainable only through diligence and single minded determination.

The Taoist theory of craftsmanship could be summarized thusly: the concentrated application of the self to a craft over a long period of time will result in the fusing of one's spirit with the craft and a fantastic level of ability. Du's recognition of the magical abilities of painting masters and the interpenetration of artist and subject seems to be

⁴⁵ ZZZSY, p. 50.

influenced by this idea. The central role of mind in the study of painting, a role which is not mentioned explicitly in the *Zhuangzi*, is recognized by the Taoist painter Guo Xi (c. 1020-c. 1090).

An examination of *An Essay on Landscape Painting* by Guo Xi will clarify the role of mind in the Taoist conception of painting. According to his son, Guo Xi "followed the teachings of [Daoism] in his youth"⁴⁶. In the section entitled "the meaning of painting", he quotes the *Zhuangzi*, and immediately following states that an artist should be "...natural, sincere, gentle," and then he will be able to render all sorts of objects "spontaneously with his paint brush". Naturalness and spontaneity are typical Taoist ideas. While Guo Xi may not have been a Taoist in the strict sense, his text contains a perfect description of the Taoist theory of craft. Guo's text is full of proscriptions for technique including the kinds of brushes and inks to be used; the atmospheres and colors appropriate to a landscape according to season or weather; the modulation of technique based on distance, angle, and relative size; rules of composition; and guidelines for the placement of different kinds of plants, rocks, dwellings, and other features in a landscape. The essay as a whole depicts painting as a craft full of specific rules, techniques, and technology, and requiring almost endless study of these things as well as the time and concentration to utilize them in a well conceived and planned way. It becomes clear that spontaneity is achieved through extensive planning and experience, and necessitates an intimate familiarity between artist and subject. Any familiarity with painting would have made Du aware of the complexity of these rules and techniques. While Du values the meticulous approach when it comes to painting, it is not merely the careful and learned

⁴⁶ Guo, Xi 郭熙 . *An Essay on Landscape Painting*. (London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1936), p. 9.

application of technique which he values. The use of mind, as suggested by the *Zhuangzi*, also entails judgment, creativity, and the ability to see beyond the rules into the reality that they aim to depict. Moreover, the *Zhuangzi* identifies spirit as a transcendent force that emerges when the craftsman has reached a high level of ability. With respect to painting, the creative individual who has mastered technique creates a work of art that unites the mind and the spirit in a magical aesthetic experience.

b. Buddhism

Du's poems about paintings give us the impression that reality and painting are interchangeable. The magical qualities possessed by a masterpiece of painting blur the lines between past and present, here and there, painting and reality. The Buddhist idea that reality is an illusion may have influenced Du's thoughts on this matter. Consider the following description of the Consciousness-Only school of Buddhism: "The whole universe exists only in the mind of the perceiver. The fact of illusion...was adduced as evidence to show that all normal human experience was of the same type."⁴⁷ If one sees the world as an illusion there is little real difference between the world and a painting; the experience of reality and the aesthetic experience are simply the experience of images.

That Du is aware of this idea is suggested by his reference to Buddhism in 同诸公登慈恩寺塔. In that poem Du uses the word "image school" or "image teaching" (象教) to refer to Buddhism⁴⁸. This suggests that, in Du's mind, Buddhism may have been characterized by the idea that sense perception is an illusion.

⁴⁷ Wing-Tsit Chan. Author, "The School of Consciousness-Only," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p. 441.

⁴⁸ DSXZ, 2.103

Buddhism also plays a central role in the poem *A Song Playfully Written about Wei Yan's Painting of a Pair of Pines*. In that poem Du describes a monk resting beneath the pine trees. Du uses the phrase *wuzhuzhuo* 無住著, a Buddhist term, to describe the monk's state of transcendence. In the next line, Du uses a phrase from the Diamond sutra in his description of the monk's reclined posture. The diamond sutra addresses the illusory nature of reality in its conclusion: "as stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp, a mock show, dew drops, or a bubble, a dream, a lightning flash, or cloud, so should one view what is conditioned"⁴⁹. By "what is conditioned" is meant anything other than universal truth, in other words things in the world that produce sense perceptions. Buddhism plays a minor role in Du's poetry, and yet nonetheless shows up as a central element in a poem about a painting. Du probably felt there was some truth to Buddhist philosophy. It may have helped to explain the vivid experiences he had when immersed in the beauty of a painting. Perhaps the monk transcending beneath the pine tree is in fact Du himself, a reflection of his own transcendence as he immerses himself in Wei Yan's painting.

c. Literature

Another potential source of Du's view of painting is his own view of poetry. The *Indiana Companion* says: "Tu Fu, having violated accepted boundaries of poetic subgenres, now violates those of poetry itself"⁵⁰. This quote demonstrates Du's relative lack of regard for convention. Du seems to use book learning and conventional forms as a tool to achieve his own creative purposes. In a poem where Du follows one convention or

⁴⁹ *Jin Gang Jing Yi Ben Ji Cheng* 金剛經譯本集成, Lin Guang-ming 林光明, compiler, (Tai Bei: jia ling chu ban she, 1995), p. 563

⁵⁰ William H. Nienhauser ed. *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, 816)

form perfectly, he usually simultaneously breaks another. Thus Du's view of poetry contrasts with those poets who saw poetic convention as hallowed tradition. Those poets with the latter viewpoint consider conventional themes and forms to be matrices within which creativity takes shape. This viewpoint is influenced by the tendency, prevalent all over the world but particularly strong in Chinese culture, to value precedent over innovation. Du's innovative approach suggests that he valued the personal creative spark over the glory of tradition. This could explain the centrality of individual genius in his poems about painting. For example, in *A Playful Song About Wang Zai's Landscape Painting*, Du writes: "[Wang Zai's] skill in portraying distance is unmatched by even the ancients". In this line Du specifically praises the skill that sets Wang Zai apart from the tradition.

Another trait of Du's poetry is its penchant for blending realism with imaginative and cosmic elements. In *Rhapsody on a Painting of a Falcon*, the subject of the poem moves from a real (yet imagined) falcon, to a painted falcon, to the falcon in the painter's mind, to the birds outside who also mistake the painted falcon for a real bird, to the falcon/painter who together transcend the earthly realm, to the emptiness of heaven and earth, back into painting in the abstract as a reflection of heaven and earth, and finally describing a landscape inside the painter's mind before finishing with a vague comment on Du's malaise. On top of this, the use of the word "autumn" to describe the bones of the falcon, and the use of the adjective "desolate like the rattling wind" add a seasonal tone to the whole poem. Du manages to convey visual aspects of the painting while constantly moving between his own mind, the painter's mind, the real world, the painted world, ascending into space in a cosmic journey; and when Du descends from the

heavens to the world of mists and sand, we find we have settled not in the world of men but in the painters mind.

Du seems to use poetry as a means to creatively explore the universe. His poems contain vivid description, time travel, transcendence, illusion, and storytelling. This idea was set forth by Lu Ji (261-303) in his work *Literature: A Rhapsody*. In preparation for the act of writing “the writer contemplates the mystery of the universe... moving along with the four seasons, he sighs at the passing of time; gazing at the myriad objects, he thinks of the complexity of the world”. This passage demonstrates the cosmic scope of literature. In the act of writing “his spirit gallops to the eight ends of the universe; his mind wanders along vast distances”. In Lu’s writings the unlimited powers of the literary mind are already present. The writer comprehends the vastness and complexity of the universe and distills that knowledge into beautiful sentences. Du’s poems about painting are rich with cosmic travel, potentially more so than any of his other poems. This suggests that it was under the influence of painting that the highest ideal of poetry was unleashed.

In Du’s poems about paintings, the creative individual employs his creative faculty in an act which is engaged with the world but which ultimately transcends the boundaries between things and people and collapses space and time. The creative product contains in itself a multifaceted cosmos within which the observer or reader may travel through space and time while communicating directly with the mind of the artist.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The consensus view of Du's poems about paintings is nicely summarized by Ronald Egan: "as critics have pointed out, Tu Fu is fond of beginning with the representation and ending with the thing itself, whether the subject of the painting is horses, falcons, or landscape. Typical too is the fact that the transition is not an end in itself. It is rather a technique Tu Fu uses to introduce his characteristic concern for the fate of the realm and the welfare of its people."⁵¹ This view has two basic parts: Du's poems about paintings generally shift from painted thing to real thing; this shift from painting to not-painting has to do with Du's political thought.

The first part is often true but is lacking in detail. As we have seen, there is rarely as simple a progression as sketched in the above quote. Du's poems about paintings contain multiple transitions between painted objects, real objects, and imagined or

⁵¹ Egan, Ronald C. "Poems on Paintings: Su Shih and Huang T'ing-Chien" in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43.2 (1983): 418

remembered objects. Moreover, each of these transitions has particular logic and *raison d'être*, and cannot be explained away by reference to Du's concern for his country.

Du's ideas can be divided into three parts: the painter, the craft of painting, and the painted image. It has been shown above that ancient Chinese philosophy posits a direct connection between "heaven" and humanity. Certain talented or enlightened individuals are able to channel heaven and create order and harmony in the world. Du takes this idea one step further and figures the master painter as an independent creative being with almost limitless power. In this way Du emphasizes the individuality of creative genius. This conception of the artist as creator is also an expression of Du's own innovative spirit. With respect to the craft of painting Du values meticulousness and diligence. This view of craft has roots in Taoism, and also reflects Du's approach to literary composition. Du views the painted image as a portal to other times and places, and as a spiritual text that images fantastic lands and religious ideas. Buddhism may have inspired this creative conflation of memory, reality, and painted image. As a poetic phenomenon, the cosmic journey has roots that go back to literary theory as represented by the poetry of Lu Ji. Du believed that good art was innovative, expressive, and served as a vehicle for the exploration of the universe and the depths of the human spirit.

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