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**Paula M. Varsano/Tracking the Banished Immortal**

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# Introduction



## Looking toward Heaven's Gate

*From the middle of Heaven's Gate  
breaks forth the River of Chu,  
Emerald waters' eastward flow touches  
north and then returns.  
On either shore a mountain green,  
emerging face to face,  
Beside the sun a lonely sail: one single  
sheet approaching.*

天門中斷楚江開  
碧水東流至北迴  
兩岸青山相對出  
孤帆一片日邊來

—Li Bo, “Looking toward Heaven's Gate Mountain” (望天門山)

THE PAIR OF mountains called “Heaven's Gate” marks the threshold between heaven and earth: the place that many readers will recognize as the dwelling place of the Tang poet Li Bo (701–762). Here, the edge of perceptible space becomes the center, and the massive solidity of the mountains serves, above all, to frame emptiness. As China's famed Banished Immortal, the poet fittingly portrays himself looking toward, but never passing through, the gate to heaven. His vision singles out the objects whose existence shapes the breadth and depth of the otherwise immeasurable void.

If this poem presents a vision of the world through the eyes of Li Bo, it also offers—not incidentally—a view of Li Bo through the eyes of generations of Chinese readers and critics. Just as he provided visual markers that enable us to “see” the invisible, critics have long been trying to establish the verbal means that would enable us to apprehend the “unattainable,” inherently indescribable poetics that is said to be uniquely his. And just as readers of

this poem understand that to cross the threshold into emptiness is to destroy that emptiness, critics have never tired of cautioning readers against venturing too close to the details that make up one of Li Bo's poems.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, however, not all readers who complied with this warning did so out of respect for Li's poetry; not everyone was pleased by his penchant for the unreal or unfounded, the all-too-obvious pleasure he took in hyperbolic renderings of already dramatic landscapes, and his casual brushes with immortals. Depending on the critical focus of a given era and, of course, on the preoccupations of individual critics, Li Bo's stylistic and imagistic liberties provoked attacks on his moral fiber, his self-discipline, his grasp of literature and literary history, his perceptiveness regarding the so-called substantive world, or the overall nefarious effect that writings such as his might have on the continued development of poetry. The Northern (and, to a lesser extent, the Southern) Song dynasty (960–1279) is frequently cited as a particularly difficult one for Li's admirers. The charge of being all surface and no content—"all flowers and no fruit"—became a refrain among readers ranging from Li Gang (1083–1140) to Lu You (1125–1210) that was regularly revived throughout the traditional period by critics who feared seduction by virtuosity.

The charge was a serious one, implying that Li's poems were not the "articulations of intent" prescribed by tradition, but collections of words and images gratuitously arrayed with the sole and express intent of creating effect. His supposedly free-wheeling expressiveness was perceived by some as posing a threat to what has elsewhere been termed the ideal of expressive immediacy.<sup>2</sup> This ideal, which upholds poetic expression as the unmediated, untransformed verbal manifestation of emotion, is rooted in the "Great Preface" to the *Shijing*, a text widely read and studied by literati from the end of the Han dynasty through the Song (approximately the third through the thirteenth centuries), and whose influence upon the reading and writing of poetry extended through the end of the imperial era.<sup>3</sup> The ideal of immediacy conveyed in this text upholds the essential unity of the perceived world

and the poem articulating that world, a unity that expresses itself as a work brought forth without forethought or artifice of any kind.

A poem perceived as having been thus produced, then, speaks to the poet's "authenticity," a shorthand term I use to connote the poet's capacity to give himself over to feelings produced by unimpeded contact with the real world, and naturally and spontaneously to convey the resulting feelings in words.<sup>4</sup> Li's exaggerated and invented vistas, however, did not correspond easily to the real world that readers recognized either from their own experiences or from the poems of the ancients. Partly for this reason, his work could and did strike some as the disruption of the ideal oneness of world and poem. In the evident mediation of his individual imagination, some perceived and decried the inauthentic or superficial poses of the pure performer.

Given the seriousness of these criticisms, Li Bo should logically have faded into the oblivion reserved for those poets deemed merely tantalizingly idiosyncratic. Quite to the contrary, however, Li Bo attained the status of a truly great poet during his lifetime, and his status has endured. In a critical tradition largely shaped by periodic discussions of its poets' rank and lineage, the "frivolous" Li Bo consistently emerges at the top of most lists, either on a par with his younger contemporary, Du Fu (712–770) as China's greatest poet, or in the slot just below him. Over the years, the intensity of critical partisanship rose and fell, but the gravity (and occasional vituperative tone) of the charges—and the passion and persistence of the debates they incited—stand as a measure of Li's perceived importance in the ongoing discussion of what poetry should be and, as he receded into the distant past, of how best to depict the overall landscape of Chinese poetry. The centuries of contention triggered by his disruption of the word-world continuum, by his propensity to explore the elusive, indescribable, or imaginary dimensions of human experience, ultimately revealed that his poetry possessed the power to transform the very standards against which he was being judged.

Li Bo was not just one of China's two greatest poets; he was the Chinese poet whose greatness was worth fighting for. This

distinction, I believe, merits closer examination, not only for what it promises to reveal about Li Bo, but also for what it can tell us about the evolving values of the aesthetic tradition he ultimately helped shape. In this book I examine critical (and, on occasion poetic) writings from the period immediately following his death through the beginnings of the Republic (the early 1900s), and ask what exactly Li Bo provided that traditional readers of poetry felt compelled to protect and transmit, and what theoretical and rhetorical arguments were invoked by critics as they rose to the challenge.<sup>5</sup> In particular, I explore how and why this anointed guardian of all that is unlearnable and unattainable was gradually transformed, somewhat paradoxically, into a literary model, and offer some observations as to how this metamorphosis in turn effected the reception of Li Bo's poetry during the late imperial and early modern periods.

## NEGATIVE RHETORIC AND THE EXPRESSION OF PLENITUDE

In “Looking toward Heaven’s Gate Mountain,” Li Bo marked the presence of the void, Heaven, by depicting it at the threshold: where a pair of mountains mark an otherwise invisible boundary line between heaven and earth, and where a single sailboat’s progress marks a fluid passageway. The vision of the whole—of continuity in division—depends upon the steadfastness of the viewer’s stance, and the critical language that has shaped and preserved the poetic territory occupied by Li Bo’s works functions in a similar manner. Like the stolid, towering peaks, a host of critical terms name—and frame—all that Li Bo is not. Even during his lifetime and immediately afterward, readers both critical and admiring named his poetry as “not attainable” by mortal men, “not learnable” through the usual means of study and imitation, and “unrestrained” by the conventions and expectations of society and accepted literary practice. And, like the sailboat faring freely across that threshold, we meet with the intrepid, elusive names of the numinous: a series of otherworldly epithets and descriptive phrases

associating Li Bo with the realm of deities and immortals, a realm where commonplace limitations of time and space hold no sway.

Delineation by negation, evocation by metaphor: the combination not only protects Li Bo's precious unlearnability against reduction by mechanical representation, but also preserves the existence of unlearnability as a legitimate category of poetic practice, carrying both the poet and his work safely through the critical skirmishes and transformations that would arise over the centuries. These two rhetorical approaches—the negative and the numinous—have been neatly encapsulated in the oft-repeated epithet, “Banished Immortal,” which has been used to refer to Li Bo's supremely vivid and compelling persona during his lifetime and ever since.<sup>6</sup>

The question arises as to how negative rhetoric signifies within the traditional Chinese critical context. Today's readers, both Chinese and Western, when confronting a critical vocabulary largely composed of negative locutions, might be tempted to think in terms of Adorno's work on negative aesthetics or de Man's deconstructive readings. These theories of negativity, however, were fashioned in large part to account for the emergence of a fragmented, depersonalized modern poetics (informed by Kantian dialectical reasoning), and so conceive of a negative aesthetic primarily as an expression of resistance against dominant modes of discourse or artistic expression. Jonathan Culler summarizes this line of thinking as “a powerful strategy for interpreting even the most refractory poems: the most bizarre and disconnected images can be read as signs of alienation and anomie or of a breakdown of mental processes brought on by the experience in question.”<sup>7</sup>

Although it is possible to demonstrate some superficial points of overlap between contemporary conceptions of negative aesthetics and the distant image of a rebellious, iconoclastic Li Bo, close scrutiny of the critical tradition that grew up around his poetry reveals that readers did not tend to focus on Li Bo as actively rejecting tradition. Nor did they think of him as having been affected by trauma (let alone as being in a state of alienation). A more accurate and historically more convincing context in which to

situate the negative discourse associated with Li Bo is the rhetorical and epistemological construct that Andrew Plaks has termed “complementary bipolarity.”

Plaks’ model, derived from his structuralist reading of Cao Xueqin’s (ca. 1715–ca. 1763) masterpiece, the novel *Hongloumeng* (Dream of the red chamber), elaborates the familiar yin-yang dualism expressed in such pairs of existential phenomena as hot/cold, light/dark, true/false, and, especially pertinent to my discussion, substantial/illusory. According to this model, these pairs do not exist as absolute states standing in dialectical opposition, but reflect “the apprehension of experience . . . in terms of the relative presence or absence of opposites.” Plaks further specifies that these pairs are characterized by “ceaseless alternation towards and away from the hypothetical poles of each duality,” so that “the ascendance of one term immediately implies its own subsequent diminution,” and finally that “the endless overlapping of the axes of change . . . eventually adds up to a convincing illusion of plenitude, and hence the perception of reality.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, the unplanned unfurling of a line of critical discourse cannot be analyzed as though it were a deliberately constructed novel. But, as Plaks convincingly demonstrates, complementary bipolarity is not some random pattern imposed on one particular novel, but a defining paradigm forming the very basis of early philosophical thought and rhetoric. Whether the subject is society or literature, whether the form is lyrical or discursive, the drive to depict phenomenological plenitude—and the ubiquity of dynamic structures of complementary bipolarity—are familiar to all readers of traditional Chinese literature.

Both the numinous and the negative rhetoric of Li Bo criticism were conceived within the larger epistemological context of complementary bipolarity, as expressed in the overarching and enduring practice of Li Bo–Du Fu comparative criticism, a practice that forms the matrix for much of Li Bo criticism.<sup>9</sup> The “Li-Du” bipolar discourse, oft disputed but rarely analyzed, is almost as venerable as the poetry itself. Only a couple of generations after their deaths, the critic and author Yuan Zhen (779–831), in his funerary inscription for Du Fu, explicitly refers to the fact that Li

and Du's contemporaries already referred to them as "Li-and-Du";<sup>10</sup> and the appearance of a shorthand reference to "Li-Du Excellence-Inferiority" (*Li-Du youlie*) in Du Fu's biography in the *Jiu Tang shu* (Old Tang history) indicates that, by the time of Five Dynasties (907–960), this practice had become a subject of discussion in itself.<sup>11</sup>

Many factors contributed to the initial formation of the Li-Du pair, not the least of which was their supposed friendship, characterized by some as rather one-sided, with Du Fu emerging as the more loyal, admiring, and, not surprisingly, sincere friend. But another force propelling this tradition was the urge toward the representation of aesthetic plenitude. This plenitude suggests more mutuality between the two poets than most readers might be willing to concede, given the nearly unquestioned and unabated dominance of Du Fu ever since the Song and the early characterization of Du Fu's self-sufficient wholeness. We often rely on positive or concrete experiences in order to comprehend or convey their necessarily elusive opposites, so it is not altogether surprising that Du Fu's reputed "learnability" and "earthboundness" contribute in an obvious way to our ability to conceptualize Li's negative qualities of unlearnability and unfettered "immortality." But plenitude also dictates that readers' appreciation of Du Fu requires the presence of Li Bo—a requirement more difficult to grasp. What, after all, does Li Bo have to offer the poet who single-handedly integrated the disparate threads of the "ancient and modern" literary tradition, and whose sturdy footing in the world earned him the epithet "poet-historian"?<sup>12</sup> In effect, it is precisely Du Fu's self-contained perfection that necessitates Li Bo's promise of uncontainable infinity; it is this negatively rendered Li Bo who is deemed capable of lending true plenitude to the otherwise partial picture of Du Fu's perfection.

In order to make this argument, however, it is necessary to look again at the meaning of "plenitude" in this context. Plaks understood the depiction of plenitude in *Dream of the Red Chamber* as instrumental to producing an "illusion of reality," elsewhere described as "the sheer infinitude of existence—its all-ness."<sup>13</sup> Clearly, this explanation does not quite apply when the reality

being rendered is the critically conceived topography of Chinese poetry. In this context, the all-ness being depicted is not that of human existence, but of a mode of its representation: plenitude as an aesthetic ideal. Just such a notion has been recently elaborated in the work of Elaine Scarry. In her book *On Beauty and Being Just*, she argues that beauty is experienced as a desire to go beyond the specific beautiful object we behold, perhaps through the urge to beget or reproduce it, or perhaps in “the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation.”<sup>14</sup> These impulses, she suggests, lead naturally to the frequent associations of beauty with immortality. Scarry concludes that, inevitably, “beautiful things . . . always carry greetings from other worlds within them. . . . What happens when there is no immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing is just what happens when there *is* an immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing: the perceiver is led to a more capacious regard for the world. The requirement for *plenitude* is built-in.”<sup>15</sup>

Although Chinese poetic discourse would never express this sentiment in terms of the platonic category of Beauty (present in Scarry’s conception despite her removal of the capital letter) and although her insistence on immortality is a fortuitous coincidence, I find her description of the urge toward plenitude both compelling and helpful in concisely formulating the particular role that Li Bo played in the evolving conception of the lyric.

The desire for plenitude, thus explained, harbors a form of negativity that corresponds closely to the negative conceptualization of Li Bo’s poetics, for it is a plenitude understood in terms not of completion, but of the impossibility of completion—or, to put it less negatively, in terms of the eternally fugitive, tantalizing dream of completion. Scarry’s identification of the human need not for wholeness but for an elusive something more, although developed out of a tradition of Western philosophy, provides a concept that carries both the fundamental element of change and the motivating impulse of the reader’s desire for certain types of aesthetic experience. It is in this sense, too, that Du Fu needs Li Bo, as it is in this

sense that Li Bo's presence cannot be apprehended in the absence of Du Fu.

The bipolar plenitude mapped out by Li-and-Du is as multifaceted as the works of the poets concerned, and as much in flux as the plenitude toward which readers yearn. The pair's characterizations as heaven-and-earth, immortal-and-sage, Daoist-and-Confucian, sage-and-historian, genius-and-erudite all suggest a stable binary unit. But that sense of stasis is not only theoretically in conflict with the rhetorical and philosophical tradition of bipolarity: its empirical existence proves to be illusory, shifting constantly as the search for a stable equilibrium between any two terms of a bipolar pair results in constant reformulation and constant redrawing of boundaries.

To be more specific, one of the most comprehensive and fundamental bipolar concepts applied to Li and Du is *xu* and *shi*, the literal (but misleading) translations of which are "empty" and "full." The earliest definition of *shi*, as found in the Han dynasty dictionary, the *Shuowen jiezi*, is "wealth," or material plenty, and the connotation of the material and the concrete carry through the word's varied usage over the centuries, ranging from sufficiency to inclusion in compounds denoting substance, reality, solidity, truthfulness, and the less directly related botanical connotations of seeds and fruit. Stephen Owen offers a helpful gloss for this term as it is used in literary criticism: "'solid,' 'actual.' Sometimes used in opposition to *xu*, *shi* refers to the fixity of definite form (as opposed to the 'plasticity' of *xu*) and to the external solidity of a . . . 'scene' (as opposed to the 'empty' emotional coloring of the scene). A line is *shi* if it describes external things and has no 'empty' words that subordinate the description to the way the subject feels about it or interprets it."<sup>16</sup>

Owen's gloss indicates that *shi* carries strong connotations of the substantive, objective world, while *xu* embraces all that is elusive and modal, relating to the poetic subject's inner world. As he remarks elsewhere, this complex of meaning corresponds to the traditional linguistic distinction between lexically definable words and the grammatical function words, or particles, that join them in

sentences, and “for the quality of subjective relation they imparted to an utterance.”<sup>17</sup> This gloss also highlights the important fact that *xu* is not to be understood as a *lack* of anything, but as a recognizable quality of a significance equal to that of *shi*.

François Cheng, writing somewhat earlier, is insistent on this point. In warning his European readers away from the strong potential for misinterpretation across cultures, he inadvertently provides us with an excellent description of the elemental nature of the Li-Du pair in Chinese literary criticism, which is a motivating force in the maintenance of Li Bo’s supremacy in the poetic pantheon: “For, in the Chinese view, Emptiness is not, as one might suppose, something vague or unreal, but a remarkably dynamic and active element. Linked to the notion of vital breath and the principle of alternation between Yin and Yang, it constitutes the site most propitious to the operation of the transformations whereby Fullness attains to true plenitude. It is [Emptiness], in effect, that, by introducing discontinuity and reversibility into a given system, allows the constituent components of that system to circumvent rigid contraposition of opposites and unidirectional development, and at the same time, that renders possible a unifying vision for man of the universe.”<sup>18</sup>

Aside from the happy coincidence that led Cheng to think of *xu* as a “site,”<sup>19</sup> his description is also useful in confirming the traditional basis for an adaptation of Scarry’s notion of plenitude, namely, the ideal condition in which the stable wholeness of the finite is activated by evocations of the infinite. This adulation of the category of Emptiness is fairly common in literary criticism from about the late Ming period through the founding years of the Republic. The following statement by the Qing critic Wu Qiao (1611–1695?) suggests that Cheng is not overstating the case, at least as things stood during the late imperial period: “Overall, writings that are *shi* are finite, while writings that are *xu* have no limits. The “Elegantiae” and the “Hymns” [of the *Shijing*] are comprised mostly of poetic expositions, and thus are *shi* works. The “Airs” [of the *Shijing*] and the *Sao* [e.g., Qu Yuan’s “Encountering Sorrow”] contain many comparisons (*bi*) and stimuli (*xing*), and thus are *xu* works. Tang poems most often model themselves on

the “Airs” and the *Sao*, and therefore are wondrous and subtle (*lingmiao*).<sup>20</sup>

Still, *xu*, and the nearly synonymous *kong*, did not always signify desirable qualities in literary writing, but also harbored nuances of falsehood, futility, and superficiality. In this derogatory sense *xu* made its first appearance in Li Bo criticism, when, in the thirteenth century, debates concerning the quality and depth of Li’s knowledge of the classics were in full swing. By this time, a period when Song Neo-Confucian literati were broadening the philosophical and spiritual base of the Confucian classics in order to reestablish them as the basis for all learning, critics of Li Bo had already been divided into two camps: those who found his acquaintance with the classics superficial and flimsy, and those who discerned beneath the surface of “flowers and moonlight” a firm foundation in the *Shijing* or, at the very least, the *Sao*.

So, when the term “*xu*” first entered the vocabulary of Li Bo criticism, it was not as a means of praising the wondrously elusive worlds he evoked in his poems, but as a strong condemnation of his lack of learning. Readers pinpointed this lack not only in the relative dearth of direct references to the classics (a point that was hotly debated), but also in the disjuncture between the “*xu* tales about spirits and immortals”<sup>21</sup> presented in his poetry and the “real” world shared by all through the common medium of perception—the split between one person’s hyperbolic imaginings and people’s quotidian dealings with the social and political realities of the day. This disjuncture, evidence of what Owen has called Li Bo’s “fictional imagination,”<sup>22</sup> challenged the ideal of immediacy (at least the way it was understood by the more traditionalist among Li Bo’s readers), and cast doubt upon the substance and depth of the feelings Li articulated.

*Xu*, a central concept in the evolving criticism of Li Bo’s poetry, presents certain difficulties to the translator. It has proven supple enough to embrace connotations from the damning to the laudatory. Its implicit pairing with *shi* ensures that, whatever the tenor of its connotations, it occupies the negative space of plenitude, while its strong suggestion of a foundation in worlds other than the tangible here and now lends it the air of the numinous. In an effort

to evoke at least the possibility of this range of nuance and meaning, I gloss this term as “unfounded” or “unfoundedness.” Morphologically, this translation captures the negative dimension of Li Bo rhetoric, and, in its opposition to things “founded” in perceived reality, it evokes the numinous dimension as well. As a derogatory term, it also bears witness to *xu*’s pejorative beginnings in the Li-Du critical debate. Like *xu*, the use of “unfounded” in clearly commendatory contexts should imbue it with the same slightly paradoxical air it carries when used to defend Li’s particularities. As for *shi*, I have simply selected the word “substantive” for its evocations of solidity and empirical verifiability.

### ATTAINING ANCIENTNESS: TWO NARRATIVES

Modern literary historians have observed that the Song emphasis on learning was the primary cause for Li’s unpopularity relative to Du Fu during that dynasty, and that he recovered his high critical esteem when the Wang Yangming school of Neo-Confucian thought redirected the search for sagehood from the external sources of the classics and the material world to the internal resource of the essentially good “childlike heart.”<sup>23</sup> According to this argument, this shift in thinking allowed for the recognition of the reality of the imagination and so facilitated legitimate appreciation of Li Bo’s hyperbolic style and celestial imagery. Such an explanation bespeaks an admirable attempt to situate the critical discourse about Li Bo within larger historical and philosophical developments, and it is valid as far as it goes. But by oversimplifying the relationship between philosophical movements and literature (both theory and praxis), and by relying on the conventional dynastic periodization of monolithic politico-philosophical “movements,” this view shortchanges both the complexity of ongoing debate and the importance of Li Bo to the evolving practice and reception of poetry.

Under what terms, then, was Li Bo’s poetry first admitted into the ranks of poetic “greatness”—and how did his particular expression of greatness come to enter the poetic canon?<sup>24</sup> Tracing the evolution of critical discourse in two distinct but closely inter-