Stephen Owen observed twenty years ago that much of what distinguished the Mid-Tang period from the “Chinese Middle Ages” that it brought to an “end” could be traced back to Du Fu. In particular, Du Fu was the first poet to bring to prominence what Owen calls the “private sphere,” a realm of domestic space that was discontinuous with the empire and offered a form of escape from its universalizing claims. In the Mid-Tang, poets often followed Du Fu in offering playfully inflated interpretations of domestic spaces and leisure activities as a discourse of private valuation, articulated against commonsense values. Such values and meanings, offered in play, belong to the poet alone, and they create an effective private sphere distinct from the totalizing aspect of Chinese moral and social philosophy, in which even solitary and domestic behavior are part of a hierarchy of public values. To offer an example, when a fifth-century official left the court to live as a recluse in the mountains, the ostensibly private decision could be, and often was understood as, a political statement; when the Mid-Tang poet wittily claimed complete devotion to his bamboo grove or his pet crane on his day off, his playful excess broke free of public and political meaning.

This process was part, Owen suggests, of a larger trend that comes to define much of later Chinese literary culture, whereby “in ways large and small, writers begin to assert their particular claim over a range of objects and activities: my land, my style, my interpretation, my garden, my particular beloved.” Equally importantly, moreover, it was part of a trend whereby the relationship between “private” subjectivity and public values became problematic, resulting in new divisions between literary writing and moral/philosophical thought concerned with the fortunes of the empire. In short, then, Owen’s point that we can trace back to Du Fu many of the characteristic themes of the Mid-Tang period tends to imply that one of Du Fu’s major legacies to later Chinese literary culture has been much the opposite of his common depiction as the “Poet Sage,” thoroughly embodying public values and constantly concerned for the empire. Instead, Du Fu seems perhaps to be the originator of discourses that would fundamentally challenge the universality of empire and the depth of its claims upon the individual.

Owen demonstrated this point through an interpretation of Du Fu’s 764 poem, “Deck by the Water” 水檻. The poem was written in Chengdu, upon Du Fu’s return to his thatched cottage there.

2. Ibid., 4.
after a period spent away from home, avoiding a violent mutiny by the Chengdu garrison. By the
time Du Fu came back to Chengdu, much of the home-improvement work that he had put into his
hermitage in the period preceding his patron Yan Wu’s 嚴武 recall to the capital had been undone,
and the poet was faced with the choice of whether or not he wanted to do much of it all over again.

水檻 Deck by the Water

蒼江多風飄，Winds often gust hard on the grey river,
雲雨晝夜飛。rain and clouds fly day and night.
茅軒駕巨浪，This thatched porch mounted on mighty waves—
焉得不低垂。how could it help sagging down low?
遊子久在外，Long did the owner roam abroad—
門戶無人持。there was no one to maintain the place.
高岸尚為谷，If even high cliffs are made into valleys;
何傷浮柱欹。why care that its posts are leaning?
扶顛有勸誡，A precept tells us “Support what has failed”—
恐貽識者嗤。I suspect I’ll be laughed at by those who know it.
既殊大廈傾，And since this differs from a mighty hall’s collapse,
可以一木支。it can be propped up by even a single beam.5
臨川視萬里，You can see thousands of miles from the riverside,
何必欄柵為。so what need is there to make a porch?
人生成故物，But people are moved by familiar things,
慷慨有餘悲。and in my sighing, I have grief to spare.

Owen begins his reading of this poem with the observation that, although poets had no doubt re-
paired decks before this time, “whether to repair a sagging deck had never been a question that was
felt to merit serious poetic treatment,” and so when Du Fu takes it up, “the poem becomes self-
reflexive, turning back to his own interest in the topic.” The basic drama of the poem, then, lies in
Du Fu’s attempt “to answer why this matters to him and why the serious genre of poetry should
concern itself with something so trivial and commonplace.”6 This attempt to justify his interest in
the question of the deck through recourse to the system of values that generally underlay medieval
poetry ends up, however, less substantiating the relevance of poetry’s normative concerns to the

3. In this paper, the Chinese texts of Du Fu’s poems represent as closely as is possible in Unicode the readings of
Wang Zhu 王洙, ed., Songben Du Gongbu ji 宋本杜工部集, Xu guyi congshu facsimile edition (Shanghai: Shangwu
yinshu guan, 1957). The translations are (mostly slight) modifications of Stephen Owen’s in The Poetry of Du Fu, trans.
Stephen Owen (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016). For the purposes of this conference paper, I will not be noting variants.
Significant variants from early texts can generally be found in Xiao Difei 蕭滌非, ed., Du Fu quanji jiaozhu 杜甫全集
校注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2014), although even this massive work is inconsistent in referencing certain
important early editions.

4. This “precept” derives from the Analects, book XVI: “Confucius said: ‘The Responsibilities of the Zhou Government has
words to the following effect: “Exert your strength while you are in the ranks, but when you are incapable, you should
stop.” If he does not uphold what is teetering and support what is failing, then what is the use of a minister?” 孔子曰：
求！周任有言曰: 陳力就列，不能者止。危而不持，顛而不扶，則將焉用彼相矣？

5. Wang Tong (in the “Serving One’s Lord” 事君 chapter of the Zhongshuo 中說) is supposed to have said that “When
a mighty hall is about to collapse, it cannot be propped up by a single beam” 大廈將顛，非一木所支也.

Discovering that his deck is on the point of collapse, Du Fu begins to argue with himself: “if even high slopes turn to valleys,” if dynasties fall and the very earth changes, why should I care about so unimportant a thing as my deck? Du Fu answers his question by poetically inflating the significance of the deck with an outrageous application of a passage in the Analects (XVI. 6), in which Confucius enjoins us to “support what totters,” fudian 扶顛. Confucius’ precept admits a wide latitude of interpretation, but it was clearly not intended to apply to porches. Du Fu’s attempt to universalize the phrase in this way, making the minor thing yet another case of the larger principle, instead calls attention to the difference between the serious principle and the triviality of the present circumstance. It becomes comic, in the same way that Bai Juyi’s evocation of Confucius’ response to the Shao music was comic when applied to eating bamboo shoots....

The commonplace ideological core of the poem is that the small thing is the microcosm of the large: if you want to rectify the empire, you begin with yourself or your family. The poem, however, breaks apart cosmology; it calls attention to the disparity between the large and the small. The “close at hand” application of the Analects becomes a mockery of that principle, which even the naturalizing interpretation at the end cannot entirely heal. Du Fu has circumscribed a small world of concern that cannot effectively be explained and justified as a microcosm of the large world. In effect, this is private space; it cannot be persuasively integrated with the totality of state and universe. The small thing as the microcosm of the large was the medieval assumption, and a change on one scale had echoes in the other. This mirroring of the large in the small survives in Du Fu and the Mid-Tang writers as a poetic trope, but often as the ironic ground on which one calls attention to the difference between the large and the small. This means, in effect, that the small can no longer be subsumed by the large, that it is not “serious” and thus can be a private domain to be possessed.7

The blatant incongruity in Du Fu’s use of the Analects to justify porch-repair, then, tends to produce an ironic fracturing of the world, whereby the values that pertained to affairs of state proved inapplicable to the domain of the private life. As Owen reads the poem, “no matter how much Du Fu strains to allegorize his domestic structure, it remains stubbornly no more than a deck, ironizing his attempts at interpretation and foregrounding their excess,” and leading the poet himself in the end to recognize that his attachment to the porch is not an instance of the hifalutin cultural values to which he aspires, but merely a case of humble familiarity. The porch is simply his, and he cares for it, quite apart from any public justification; and herein, Owen suggests, lie the rudiments of the private sphere and of subjective forms of valuation that cannot and need not be publicly shared.

It is important to mention, however, that Owen reads this poem in the context of a discussion of “Wit and the Private Life” in the poetry of Bai Juyi and his contemporaries, and even if he does want to make the general point that many Mid-Tang tropes can be traced back to Du Fu, he also admits that Du Fu is not yet a Mid-Tang writer. Du Fu, Owen writes, is “not comfortable with [the] obviously ‘unnatural’ interpretation” of his concern for the deck that his Analects allusion represents, and though the interpretation becomes “comic,” it is not quite the intentional, urbane wittiness that

Bai Juyi and his Song heirs would cultivate. But consistent with his focus on the Mid-Tang, Owen does not explore why Du Fu remains uncomfortable with his private valuation, or the value of this sort of comedy in his verse. In this respect, Owen’s brief discussion of “Deck by the Water” offers an invitation to consider in more detail the question of how exactly Du Fu’s prefigurations of the Mid-Tang fit into a collection completed (if not necessarily fixed) before the directions of Mid-Tang and late imperial literary culture were set. In this paper, therefore, I will be taking Du Fu’s poetry of the private life out of the larger public narrative into which Owen placed it, bracketing (temporarily at least) the continuities that link Du Fu to “the end of the Chinese middle ages” in order to understand better how his own repeated fracturing of the medieval worldview fits into his collection.

I am not the first person to accept Owen’s invitation to think more deeply about Du Fu’s poems on the private sphere, which has recently been taken up admirably by a scholar present at this conference. In his 2013 dissertation, Gregory Patterson discusses a number of Du Fu’s poems on housework in the context of an argument that Du Fu’s late poetry represents an attempt to recreate systems of value and meaning in the aftermath of the An Lushan rebellion. Patterson suggests that poems like “Deck by the Water” serve to express [Du Fu’s] appreciation of the various ‘life supports’ he has come to rely on in the post-rebellion world, however lowly or unpoetic, amplifying the significance of household affairs by ... making them instantiations of canonical norms and thus producing value in uncharted literary territory at a moment when established standards of worth had been destabilized.” Patterson is not explicitly concerned in this work with the question of how Du Fu’s poetry fits into the larger literary historical narrative that Owen lays out in The End of the Chinese Middle Ages. Yet extending past his explicit claims, Patterson’s hints in this direction could perhaps be understood as suggesting that Du Fu’s poetry on the private life rather directly prefigures Mid-Tang and Song attempts to stake out new domains of value and lay new foundations for Chinese literary culture. Faced with the destruction of the medieval worldview, that is, this view would have Du Fu repurposing the shards of the old system of values to originate discourses to undergird a later world.

This unauthorized speculative extension of Patterson’s much more precise and well-evidenced arguments represents one possible answer to the question that Owen’s discussion of “Deck by the Water” leaves open, by which we would see Du Fu’s verse on humble, domestic topics as essentially continuous with Mid-Tang experiments in the poetry of private subjectivity. What I want to do in the paper that follows is to note a few (hopefully) enriching complications to this thesis that seem to me to arise when we look closer at the poems themselves, and at the sequence in which they seem to have been composed. In particular, I will suggest that while Du Fu does write a number of poems that seek to dignify the various ‘life supports’ he has come to rely on in the post-rebellion world, these poems—which are found relatively early in Du Fu’s collection—are mostly not the same as the poems that fracture the world through the comic application of public values to incongruously humble topics. These later poems, I will argue, are instead distinguished from Mid-Tang poetry on the private sphere by the way that their comedy is tinged with a bitterness and a pathos that is generally absent from Bai Juyi’s playful encomia to pet cranes and private gardens. If Du Fu thus inaugurates

9. Ibid., 251.
the kind of wittily disjunctive poetry of subjectivity that would play a role in bringing about “the
end of the Chinese middle ages,” then, he does so in a tragic mode, less imbuing “surplus value”
into humble things than deflating the ideals he had at hand to make moral sense of his life. Du Fu,
on this reading, is less the bricoleur shoring fragments from the general ruin of his civilization than
a destroyer himself, and instead of seeing Du Fu as repurposing the broken tradition to create new
values, I want to suggest that Mid-Tang and Song writers repurposed him.

Early Poems on Humble Topics

Du Fu has a number of poems on humble and domestic topics that are generally understood to
predate “Deck by the Water.” In these poems as well, Du Fu is often concerned with the relationship
between the macrocosmic and the microcosmic, but before “Deck by the Water,” this relationship
is rarely ironic. Stephen Owen himself noted this point in a footnote to his reading of “Deck,” sug-
suggesting that in Du Fu’s Qinzhou-era poem “Taking Down a Trellis” 除架 “there is a tension between
large and small, grand and trivial, but no irony has taken shape in that tension: Du Fu does not yet
imagine anyone laughing” at his grandiose comparison of the death of gourd-vines and the decline
of the Tang dynasty.\textsuperscript{10} And much the same thing can be said for other poems on humble topics up
until Du Fu’s return to his damaged thatched cottage in 764—although we can perhaps discern, in
Du Fu’s concern to explicitly ward off the possibility that large and small might not be capable of
reconciliation, the encroach of later ironies upon these earlier poems.

The brief citation of two relatively early poems on domestic topics should, I hope, be enough to
make the point. The first of these is usually dated to Qinzhou, and may be part of the same loose
collection of regulated \textit{yongwu} titles that encompassed “Taking Down a Trellis”:

\begin{flushleft}
病馬 Sick Horse

乘爾亦已久, I have ridden you already a long time now,
天寒關塞深。in cold weather deep in the barrier passes.
塵中老盡力, In the dust, aging, you used all your strength;
4 歲晚病傷心。the year late now, your sickness pains the heart.
毛骨豈殊眾, Pelt and bone no different from the ordinary;
馴良猶至今, well-trained and docile even now.
物微意不淺, The creature insignificant, its meaning not shallow:
8 感動一沈吟。moved, I broodingly hum this poem.
\end{flushleft}

Here, the final point of the poem—the point that Du Fu claims inspires the poem—is the juxtaposi-
tion between the insignificance of the creature and the depth of its “meaning” or “intention.” Despite
its humble status—an aging nag out in the frontierlands—this horse is a paradigm of loyalty and hard
work, virtues that transcend its ignoble station and apply even to the most important tasks of govern-
ment. Here, it seems clear, Du Fu could very rightly be described as imbuing with canonical value
the “‘life supports’ he has come to rely on in the post-rebellion world, however lowly or unpoeitic”—
though it might be noted that horses, through a long tradition of comparison with ministers, were

\textsuperscript{10} Owen, \textit{The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages'}, 93.
not necessarily unpoetic subjects in the Tang. The following Sichuan-era poem, however, is on a consciously unpoetic topic, and nonetheless follows much the same pattern.

棕拂子  Palm Whisk

棕拂且薄陋，The palm whisk is a humble thing;
豈知身效能。 who knew it could exercise such abilities?¹¹
不堪代白羽, It cannot replace white feathers,
有足除蒼蠅。 but it does well enough to get rid of blueflies.¹²
熒熒金錯刀，Sparking, a golden knife coin;
擢擢朱絲繩。 brightly colored, a cord of crimson silk.¹³
非獨顏色好，Not only does it look good,
亦用顧眄稱。 it is also praised for its use when looking around.
吾老抱疾病，In my old age I have serious illnesses;
家貧臥炎蒸。 my household is poor, I lie in steaming heat.
咂膚倦撲滅, When insects bite me, I weary of swatting and killing them,
賴爾甘服膺。 I rely on your willingness to serve me loyally.¹⁴
物微世競棄, When something is humble, all the world rejects it,
義在誰肯徵。 but when right remains, who would chastise it?¹⁵
三歳清秋至, For three years, when clear autumn comes,
未敢缺緘縢。 I never dare fail to wrap it up carefully and put it away.

Although there are yongwu precedents for this kind of poem, Du Fu wants to point out here the oddity of writing so admiringly about such a humble instrument of personal convenience, informing us repeatedly that other people do not recognize its virtues. He, however, not only appreciates the fan’s “service” to him—in particular, its ability to keep away the “blueflies” that throughout Chinese poetry stand for the flatterers and slanderers that pervert imperial judgment—but recognizes that its virtues are microcosmic parallels of the public, imperial virtues to which he dedicated his youth. There is, Du Fu is at pains to suggest here, nothing fundamentally different between the large and conspicuous and the small and unnoticed: the same values apply, and the same sorts of perspicacity are necessary to appreciate them. The world, in short, is not yet fractured—or at least, Du Fu wants to argue that it is not.

As in many of Du Fu’s earlier poems, there may be an implicit argument in the poet’s showcasing of his ability to recognize the services of such a humble figure—a horse or a flywhisk—that he

¹¹ “Exercise such abilities” is a feeble attempt to suggest the personification of the whisk present in Du Fu’s phrase, xiao neng 效能, which would normally refer to talented men putting their abilities to use in government.
¹² “White feathers” probably refer to the white feather fans that were a stylish accoutrement of heroes like Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (184-234). Blueflies were a canonical figure for slanderers.
¹³ Commentators disagree about the meaning of this couplet. Some take coin and cord to be the ornaments of the fly-whisk; others suggest that they are other objects worn at the poet’s waist, both of which are more superficially attractive than the whisk.
¹⁴ The interpretation of this line is uncertain. Either Du Fu is relying upon and gladly remembering his flywhisk, or he is relying upon its willingness to serve him. I have followed the latter reading (Owen’s), but it could well be the former.
¹⁵ This reading also follows Owen, though the line could also be interpreted to mean, “who could question it?” or “who can make it clear?”
himself would make, or would have made, a good member of the ruling stratum of Tang society, part of whose responsibility it was to recognize and recommend talent among those yet unknown to the central government. Having sometime before abandoned his post in Huazhou and thereby severely damaged his prospects for reappointment, however, Du Fu probably could not have expected such an argument would produce any significant material reward, if it is perhaps possible that it could have pulled a little more patronage from men like Yan Wu. The poem, in other words, seems determined to recognize the value of the small less as a demonstration of Du Fu’s perspicacity, and more as a way of assuaging (and perhaps subtly communicating) the poet’s concern that in having himself become as humble and insignificant as a horse or a flywhisk, he might also be alienated from the sources of value that had directed his youthful aspirations. The poem’s effective argument, in other words, seems to be that the virtues of a person or a thing do not depend upon their status, their proximity to the imperial center, or public recognition. The horse and flywhisk thus become topics worthy of poetic treatment not because Du Fu wants to create the kind of discontinuity that would characterize Mid-Tang poems on the private life, but precisely because he wants, somewhat desperately, to convince himself and us that there is no discontinuity, that what he does and what he is on the margins of the imperial world still may be valuable. And in his anxiety to convince us, we can already catch a glimpse of the tragic edge that will remain characteristic of Du Fu’s poems on domestic affairs throughout the rest of his life.

In these and other relatively early poems on humble topics, then, Du Fu is indeed attempting to imbue value into things that are conventionally considered worthless, but he is not doing so wittily, ironically, or in defiance of imperial claims of universal prerogative. And although these poems do repurpose canonical values to dignify the life supports of his constrained existence in the southlands, Du Fu is not attempting to produce new forms of value. Quite the opposite, in fact: these poems attempt to salvage precisely the public values of the empire, despite the poet’s own alienation from the institutional structures that promised the only real possibility of making them effective. Du Fu’s interest in ultimately destabilizing discontinuities between the private life and the ideology of the imperial center, therefore, originates initially in his desire to deny that such discontinuities might exist.

Vegetable Allegories

Eventually, Du Fu’s anxiety about the applicability to his current life of the values that had oriented his youth would become self-conscious, a transformation characteristic of his artistic obsessions over the course of his life. Instead of merely protesting the smooth applicability of public values to private life, that is, Du Fu comes at a certain point to emphasize and to exploit in his poetry precisely the problematic relationship between his daily affairs and imperial values. Stephen Owen implicitly identifies this point as sometime around 764, when Du Fu returned to his thatched cottage and found his deck in disrepair—although that poem seems to me capable of alternate interpretations as well. Whatever the case may be, however, relatively unambiguous examples of Du Fu’s increasing tendency to offer ludicrously grandiose interpretations of mundane affairs can be found not too long after the supposed date of “Deck by the Water.” These poems were written in Kuizhou, whence, as Gregory Patterson has aptly pointed out, “the most conspicuous examples of Du Fu’s interpretive
excess” derive.\(^{16}\)

A few of these poems are explicit about this “interpretive excess,” justifying even the practice itself through reference to the canonical texts of the verse tradition. Two poems in particular, both concerning vegetables, trace the allegorizing treatment of humble affairs back to the great sources of Chinese poetry, the Shijing 詩經 and the Chuci 楚辭, each of which was understood to offer models for turning apparently non-political topics and imagery into media of governmental significance. In both of these poems, however, Du Fu’s attempt to follow canonical precedents in his allegorizing treatment of the humble topics of his immediate experience seems in one way or another to deconstruct itself, leaving the poet questioning whether his Kuizhou vegetables might be more important to him than allegory, or public values, would allow.

### 種萵苣并序 Planting Lettuce

既雨已秋, 堂下理小畦, 隔種一兩席許萎苣, 向二旬矣, 而萵不甲坼, 伊人莧青青。傷時君子或晚得微祿, 轇軻不進, 因作此詩.

It is autumn now that the rains have come, and I have made a small plot by the main hall. There I planted a few beds of lettuce\(^{17}\) in separate plots. It has been almost twenty days, yet the lettuce has not germinated, and other people’s amaranth\(^{18}\) is growing green. I lament the times, that a gentleman may late in life get a small salary, but the going is rough and he does not advance. Therefore I made this poem.

陰陽一錯亂, Yin and Yang were topsy-turvy,
驕蹇不復理。domineering, recalcitrant, no longer in good order.
枯旱於其中, Dryness and drought were in their midst,
植物半蹉跎, Half of all plants had missed their time,
嘉生將已矣。and the possibility of a good harvest was almost gone.
雲雷欻奔命, Clouds and thunder suddenly sped to command
師伯集所使。as Rainmaster and Windbaron gathered their minions.
指麾赤白日, They directed the reddish-white sun,
淵洞青光起。and in swirling masses blue light appeared.\(^{20}\)
雨聲先已風, The rain sounds were preceded by wind,
散足盡西靡。and the scattering drops all streamed westward.
山泉落滄江, Mountain streams fell into the gray river,
霹靂猶在耳。and peals of thunder were still in my ears.

17. The Songben text reads “withered lettuce,” which makes no sense. This translation follows Zhao Cigong’s 趙次公 emendation of 萵/萎. See Xiao, Du Fu quanji jiaozhu 杜甫全集校注, 3693.
18. Owen, like the Shandong University editors of the new Du Fu quanji jiaozhu 杜甫全集校注, follows the various early texts that report a variant獨野萵青青, “only the wild amaranthus is growing green.” I have followed the Songben reading because it is not impossible that Du Fu’s neighbors might have planted amaranth, which is recorded in precedent Chinese texts as a poor man’s food. It is, of course, still eaten today, both in China and in India.
19. The language of this line recalls the Shijing 詩經, “The Banks of the Ru” 出殽: “The royal House is like a blazing fire” 王室如燬. The “hot regions,” or “fiery regions,” yanfang 炎方, refers to the south.
20. This passage is reminiscent of several poems in the Chuci.
終朝紆颯沓，All day long it whirled swirling,
信宿罷瀟洒，then after two nights it ceased its briskness.
堂下可以畦，Beside the hall was a possible garden plot,
呼童對經始，I called to my boy to start it out with me. 21
苣兮蔬之常，O lettuce! Common among vegetables,
隨事蓺其子，we went through the process to plant its seeds.
破塊數席間，We broke up clods in several beds;
荷鋤功易止，carrying hoes, the achievement was easy to complete.
缻旬不甲坼，But after twenty days, you did not germinate,
空惜埋泥滓，and I, helpless, pitied how you were buried in mire.
宗生實於此，its teeming growth is truly right here.
此輩豈無秋，Though this type of plant must also know autumn,
亦蒙寒露委，bearing as well the accumulation of cold dew,
翻然出地速，In a flash it comes forth from the ground;
滋蔓戶庭毀，and lushly spreading, my whole yard is ruined.
掩抑至沒齒，suppressing it until it perishes.
賢良雖得祿，Even if the worthy and good get a salary,
守道不封己，they keep to the Way, and do not enrich themselves.
擁塞敗芝蘭，Crowding and blocking ruins holy mushroom and orchid;
眾多盛荊杞，thorns and medlars flourish in multitudes.
中園陷蕭艾，When a garden falls to mugwort and artemesia,
老圃永為恥，an old gardener will always feel ashamed. 23
登于白玉盤，Offered on plates of white jade,
藉以如霞綺，spread on figured silks like clouds:
莧也無所施，Yes, amaranth has no place there;
胡顏入筐篚，how does it dare enter the baskets?

This poem plays upon a long tradition, stretching back to the Chuci at least, of texts that draw parallels between the virtues and vices of various plants and the virtues and vices of men. Like the speaker of the Lisao, Du Fu is a gardener, cultivating his fine vegetables in a world overrun by stinking weeds. Yet much as this poem seeks to affiliate itself to that tradition—going so far as to use the Lisao’s characteristic empty syllable, xi 兮, in a crucial line—it can ultimately only represent a deflation of that noble trope. Du Fu is not here planting fragrant, god-pleasing plants like basil and orchid, but rather lettuce, “common among vegetables.” The poem’s grandiose apostrophe to the plant, “O lettuce!” 茛兮, is thus immediately undercut by the patent inability of such hardy, peasant

21. The language of this line recalls the Shijing, “Spirit Terrace” 灵台: “We started out the Spirit Terrace” 經始靈台.
22. Stephen Owen translates this line differently: “You, wild amaranthus, I don’t know where you came from.” Although Owen’s reading is favored by a number of modern commentators, in the present context Du Fu is probably thinking of the harm of having virtue “confused” with vice. As Confucius was supposed to have said, “I hate that which seems to be something, but is not” 孔子曰:惡似而非者.
23. The phrase “old gardener” recalls the Lunyu 論語, wherein Confucius responds to being asked by a student about gardening, “I am not as good as an old gardener” 請學為圃，曰：‘吾不如老圃。’
fare to stand in for the rare and fragile virtues it is being tasked with representing: it is merely “common among vegetables” (shu zhi chang 蔬之常). There is something vaguely ridiculous, we sense, in applying the Lisao tradition to this sort of garden.

Du Fu’s own role in the poem, moreover, mirrors and is undermined by this incongruity in the comparison he has drawn. In the preface, that is, Du Fu clearly places himself in the role of the “gentleman” who, like a noble plant overgrown by wild amaranth, fails to flourish in a disordered age. By the end of the poem, however, he has become merely an “old gardener” (laopu 老圃), the sort of common human vegetable that Confucius scorned in a famous passage reflecting upon his place within a moral elite that should be in charge of the empire. This instability in the poet’s self-presentation, moreover, propagates itself in the breakdown of the poem’s allegorical structure, which begins with the suggestion that fault for the gentleman’s failure lies elsewhere—in the emperor, perhaps, who, like the cosmic emperor whose supernal functionaries show up too late to prevent “half of all plants” from missing their appointed harvest time, seems to be a poor gardener of his realm—and ends with a statement of shame that Du Fu has himself failed to properly govern his garden. Faced with his lettuce’s failure to germinate, the poet too will be forced to take amaranth into his baskets, to eat the “petty” food of his poorer neighbors in Kuizhou instead of the imperial fare served on plates of white jade and figured silks. Far from being the fragrant basil that the Lisao’s speaker cultivated in his seclusion, and that Du Fu promised to be in this poem’s preface, at the end he is down in the very muck of a corrupt world, unable to escape it even through allegory.

It is, of course, also possible to read the poet’s admission that he fails as an “old gardener” as a point of pride, suggesting that like Confucius, he always set his sights on higher things, and therefore does not know how to manage a garden. But if that is the import of the allusion, then the poem’s explicit attempt to elide the boundary between the world of gardening and the world of governing tends itself to break down. Despite the canonical sanction that the Chuci provides the process of using gardening as an allegory for public values, that is, Du Fu would be finding an equally canonical statement of the disjuncture between these two realms, and using it to explain why he failed at the Lisao’s task. The poem’s final suggestion would then be that Du Fu is, in fact, irremediably separated from his high ideals of imperial order, which can be forced only unsatisfactorily onto the activities of his present life. And there would now be a definite pathos in the poem’s earlier attempt to deny this rupture.

A similar structure of self-undermining allegory can be found as well in another of Du Fu’s poems on vegetables from around the same period. In the following poem, Du Fu is even more explicit about his attempt to find empire-level significance in private affairs he claims are themselves “beneath mentioning.” And here, the self-conscious turn at the end of the poem is more obviously pathetic, as Du Fu again recognizes that his attempt to allegorize his private life runs against the very ideals he is trying to import into it.

園官送菜 The Garden Officer Sends Vegetables

園官送菜把，本數日閭。矧苦苣、馬齒，掩乎嘉蔬。傷時小人妬害君子，菜不足道也，比而作詩。

The garden officer sends me bundles of vegetables, but he has actually been remiss for several days. Worse, the bitter lettuce and horse-tooth amaranth overwhelm the finer vegetables. I am pained that in this age petty people do harm to gentlemen out of spite: the vegetables themselves
are not worth bringing up, but I drew a comparison and wrote this poem.

清晨蒙菜把, In the clear morning, when I receive my bunch of vegetables
常荷地主恩。 I am always grateful for local master’s grace. 24
守者悉實數, But the one in charge of this cheats on the count
略有其名存。 so pretty much only the name remains.
苦苣刺如針, The bitter lettuce has thorns like needles,
馬齒葉亦繁, the leaves of horse-tooth amaranth are also lush.
青青嘉蔬菜, Green, green, the colors of the better vegetables
埋沒在中園。 are buried away in the garden.
園吏未足怪, This garden officer is not worth being upset about,
世事因堪論。 but the situation of the times can be discussed through this.
嗚呼戰伐久, Alas! warfare has gone on so long
荊棘暗長原。 that thorns and brambles darken the long plain: 25
乃知苦苣輩, For this reason we know that things like bitter lettuce
傾奪蕙草根。 will overwhelm the roots of sweet basil.
小人塞道路, And petty men stuff the roads of power,
為態何喧喧。 how noisy and clamorous their manner!
又如馬齒盛, This too is like the horse-tooth amaranth, flourishing so
氣擁葵荏昏。 that its aura crowds and shades out mallow and perilla.
點染不易虞, It’s not easy protect against contamination,
絲麻雜羅紈。 strands of hemp mixing in with gossamer and damask:
一經器物內, So, once these pass through the cookware
永掛麤刺痕。 they always leave marks of their coarseness and thorns.
志士採紫芝, The man of high aims plucks the purple mushroom,
放歌避戎軒。 singing out while avoiding army carts; 26
畦丁負籠至, But I, when fieldworkers come shouldering baskets,
感動百慮端。 am stirred by a hundred sources of care.

If the animating canonical tradition behind “Planting Lettuce” was probably the extended allegory between plants and people in the *Lisao*, this poem affiliates itself more explicitly with the *Shijing*. As Du Fu tells us in the preface, he is drawing a “comparison,” *bi*, one of the Odes’ “six principles” discussed in the “Great Preface” to the Mao-Zheng edition that was preeminent in Du Fu’s time. According to contemporary interpretation, such “comparisons” took affairs from one domain primarily to suggest affairs in another, and it was not uncommon for the poets of the Odes, in the words of the

24. Presumably, Bo Maolin 柏茂林, Du Fu’s patron in Kuizhou.
25. This passage alludes to a saying from the *Laizi* 老子: “Where an army camps, there will thorns and brambles grow. After a great war, there will always be years of poor harvest” 師之所處 荊棘生焉 大軍之後 必有凶年.
26. This couplet refers to the “Four Greybeards” 四皓, who famously retired to Mt. Lantian during the misgovernance of the Qin dynasty. Huangfu Mi’s 皇甫謐 Gaoshizhuan 高士傳 records a song attributed to these paradigmatic recluses: “Vast is the high mountain, with its long, winding, deep valleys. Brightly shining is the purple mushroom, which can cure our hunger. The time of Yu is long past: where could we find a home in the state? A team of four horses and a high awning: the worries that accompany this are great. Rather than terrify by rank and riches, it is better to be poor, lowly, and able to do what one wants” 莫莫高山深谷逶迤曖曖紫芝可以療飢唐虞世遠吾將何歸駟馬高盖其憂甚大富貴之畏人不如貧賤之肆志.
“Ironic Empires”

Maoshi zhengyi 毛詩義, to “see the mistakes of current government but not dare to criticize them directly, and so choose a categorical comparison in order to speak of them.” Du Fu thus implicitly claims to be following precedents of the most exalted sort in writing about the shoddy vegetables he has received from the lowly Kuizhou clerk. But in protesting too much that his focus is entirely on the target domain of the comparison, and not the local realities of the source, Du Fu hints that his “hundred sources of care” may not really be for the state alone.

From the beginning of the poem, there is a certain recalcitrance to Du Fu’s discussion of the vegetables that refuses to be passed over into a more noble discussion of the times. For example, although traditional poetic theory did demand a local stimulus—like the “stirring” (gandong 感動) Du Fu mentions in the final line—in order to justify more general observations, these particular stimuli are supposed to give way over the course of the poem to the more pressing states of affairs they crystallize: think, for example, of the line “Green, green are the plants on the riverbank” 青青河畔草, which serves as the opening image of two famous early poems dealing with the more exigent topic of springtime lust in separation, and which disappears into the background as the poems reach their proper topic. In the fourth couplet of this poem, by contrast, Du Fu seems to echo this paradigmatically poetic line, but rather than taking the greenness of the plants as a figure for something else, he is instead mouth-wateringly interested in precisely the literal freshness it represents—a freshness that says nothing particularly interesting about the political world. And this same inability to get “past” the rotten vegetables to say something of interest about the public sphere can be seen as well in the relative unity of the poem’s depiction of the former and the scattered character of its comments about the latter. In lines 11 through 22, that is, Du Fu seems to try several different ways of making the vegetables speak to the larger world, a progress that suggests that he might be less writing out of his “vision of the mistakes of current government” than seeking, somewhat desperately, for ways in which his experience might contain some larger significance. Rather than a well-structured allegory, the poem reaches for several different ways of making the vegetables capable of bearing the weight of what is ultimately a rather unenlightening disquisition about the times, and although a certain stripe of Chinese critic has never tired of this sort of topical-allegorical message, this poem seems almost to thematize its formulaic monotony. The unavoidable result, I think, is that the poem comes across less as a vehicle of serious political commentary than a grumpy complaint about poor-quality vegetables.

This is not to say, of course, that Du Fu does not care about the larger imperial world that he is aiming at in these comparisons: no doubt he does. But the poem’s final couplets represent yet another self-conscious turn that tends to undermine the poem’s claim that its humble “stimulus” can unproblematically instantiate larger concerns. After reaching the crescendo of his complaint in the figure of the low quality roughage leaving permanent damage on his cookware, Du Fu seems to remember here the example of other worthy men who have lived in times of disorder, and who, instead of continuously complaining about the effects of misgovernance, high-mindedly avoided it

28. In one of these poems, there is a variant of 邊/畔. See Lu Qinli 逯欽立, ed., *XianQin Han Wei Jin NanBeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 192 and 329.
by going into reclusion in the mountains beyond imperial reach. Such men, Du Fu reflects, also sing songs about food, but their songs depict lightly picking numinous mushrooms in the dust-free highlands of a larger world, and thus contrast distinctly with his own poem, which concerns the petty vegetables bearing down heavily on the backs of the muck-working peasant who comes to deliver it to him. These “men of lofty aspiration” seem to rebuke Du Fu’s downward gaze, as he apparently recognizes that the medieval ideals he claimed to be defending in this poem generally would have discouraged a worthy man from remaining within, dependent upon, or concerned with the state during a period of disorder like the one he depicts. In the final couplet, therefore, Du Fu seems to be reflecting rather bitterly on his own inveterate worldliness, recognizing perhaps that powerful among his “hundred sources of care” may be the simple, mundane concern for being decently fed.

The final lines of the poem thus turn back on Du Fu’s earlier protestations that the shoddy vegetable shipment and the clerk responsible for it were not really the subject of his lament. Du Fu recognizes, it seems to me, that he cannot simply turn his private concerns into examples of his ideals: that they remain at least partly unassimilable to the value structures that he calls upon in his attempt to ennoble them. In these poems, therefore, Du Fu is not simply repurposing canonical language and canonical ideals to raise the status of his private affairs, but rather dramatizing both an attempt and a failure to find those canonical ideals still relevant to the straightened circumstances of his life in Kuizhou. The vegetable gardens of Du Fu’s southern livelihood become not microcosmoids, but only ironic empires, failing to faithfully instantiate the macrocosmic world from whose center Du Fu finds himself alienated. Although the beginnings of the valorization of a “private sphere” may be visible in the poems, then—as Du Fu here recognizes the value of humble lettuce, the importance of basic sustenance, and his own dependence upon the sort of minor functionaries that the classical gentleman was supposed to be above—this discontinuous realm of private significance comes into being not triumphantly, but rather tinged with regret.

Poetry for Slaves

This regret differentiates these poems on domestic topics from the more playful verse of Mid-Tang writers like Bai Juyi. According to Stephen Owen, the incongruity in Bai Juyi’s comparison of the joys of eating bamboo shoots to Confucius’ rapture at hearing the Shao music of the ancient sage kings is so absurd as to escape public meaning, becoming an ostensibly harmless joke that would, as such jokes proliferated, ultimately demarcate realms of human experience that imperial values could not touch. Du Fu, by contrast, is not trying in these poems to escape public meaning, but somewhat desperately to retain it in a situation in which his connection to imperial values is threatened. In the poems we read above and in those we will read in this section, that is, domestic topics are not the tokens of private ownership that they would become for Mid-Tang and late imperial poets, signaling their exclusion of others and of the imperial center from the “surplus values” they managed to imbue

29. This point cannot be fully substantiated here. Suffice it to say, however, that the opposition between reclusion and engagement that becomes a feature of later Chinese moral thought has very little purchase upon the medieval world. As Owen noted in the first quotation of this paper, reclusion in the medieval world was often (although not always) understood as a political act. And there was no significant moral discourse, as far as I am aware, on remaining in government despite its corruption, or remaining in society despite its decay.
into their conventionally insignificant possessions. Instead, Du Fu’s attention to these humble affairs demarcate the poet’s own exclusion from the center of the public world.

This difference between Du Fu’s Kuizhou-era poetry and the work of Mid-Tang writers like Bai Juyi is crystallized in a set of poems on domestic topics that Du Fu wrote to his slaves. Implicitly, the comic poetry of the private life that Owen describes is always written to an audience defined in part by its devotion to public values, its charismatic humor deriving in large part from a witty disregard for the standards of significance that we, its readers, are supposed to share. Du Fu, in stark contrast, addresses much of his work on private and domestic topics to his children and his slaves, audiences beyond the margins of the public world, and audiences that Tang poetry generally ignored. Where Bai Juyi creates walled-off private spaces from which to exclude peers and superiors, that is, Du Fu’s poetry on domestic topics often seeks (ostensibly, at least) to expand the community of imperial values, perhaps because pushing its outer boundaries to include individuals even more marginal than he was out in Kuizhou offered a means of shoring up his own position within the public community. Du Fu’s poems to slaves, therefore, depict the poet not as existing beyond the reach of the public sphere, but rather very much in its center, as an imperial surrogate bringing Chinese culture to the wilds. The sometimes bitter, sometimes sad humor of this poetry, however, depends upon his and our recognition that the groups he seeks to coopt into Classicist culture may not, in fact, be capable or desirous of joining it.

Characteristic of this impulse to extend imperial and high-tradition Chinese values to subaltern individuals only questionably propitious for assimilation to it are two of Du Fu’s strangest and least legible poems. The tone of these poems is difficult to understand with any great confidence because there is nothing like them in the tradition of Chinese poetry, up to Du Fu’s time or for some time thereafter. Slaves were occasionally mentioned in Tang verse, primarily in a small number of clichéd ways that treat them merely as props for commentary about the literati themselves. But they were never, as far as I have been able to find, addressed in Tang verse, possibly for the simple reason that, as captives and the descendants of captives from non-Chinese populations on the borders of the empire, they were unlikely to possess the relatively high level of literacy required to appreciate the allusive art of poetry. And this fact puts us in an uncertain hermeneutical position with regard to Du Fu’s elaborately punning poems to his slaves.

信行遠修水筒 Xinxing Afar Repairs the Water-Tube

汝性不茹葷, By your nature you don’t ingest onions or garlic,\(^{30}\)
清靜僕夫內。among my slaves, the cleanest and purest.
秉心識本源, Controlling your mind, you know the source,\(^{31}\)
於事少滯礙。and so in your tasks you are rarely hindered.
雲端水筒坼, At the edge of clouds the water-tube broke,
林表山石碎。shattered by a mountain rock beyond the woods.

\(^{30}\) “Not ingesting onions and garlic” was a regulation in Daoist and Buddhist monasticism, but it had earlier roots in the Chinese tradition as well, being mentioned as purifying in both the Xunzi and the Zhuangzi.

\(^{31}\) The phrase “maintaining concentration” echoes the Shijing, “When Ding Culminated” 定之方中: “Maintaining his heart, full and deep” 秉心塞淵. The phrase is very common in imperial edicts commending service and in memorial inscriptions on former officials.
we rely on you to brave the heat and fix it,

8 to connect the current back to our kitchen.

往來四十里, Back and forth it’s forty leagues,

荒險崖谷大。wild and steep, the cliffs and valleys huge.

日曛驚未飱, As the sun darkened, I was shocked you had not eaten;

兇赤愧相對。I was ashamed to face your red, sunburned face.

浮瓜供老病, A soaked melon provided for my age and sickness,

裂餅常所愛。and a type of pancake I have always loved:

於斯答恭謹, with these I requite your diligence and respect,

足以殊殿最。enough to distinguish lesser and greater service.

詎要方士符, Who needs the insignia of an upright official,

何假將軍蓋。and what use a general’s canopy?

行諸直如筆, Xinxing, you are straight as a writing brush,

用意崎嶇外。your sights are set beyond all devious perils.

If it were really possible—and perhaps it is, for all I know—that Xinxing was literate enough to read this poem, it could be understood relatively unambiguously in the way Gregory Patterson suggests when he argues that “Making tallies out of melons, the poem thus becomes a kind of tally [recognizing Xinxing’s merit]; it posits the equivalencies between trivial and serious realms that are the basis for producing private significance.”

32. There are several different ways of interpreting this couplet and the next. It is possible, as Owen translates, that Xinxing is red in the face and ashamed to face Du Fu (because he has taken so long in fixing the water tube); in that case, it could be Xinxing who is shocked that Du Fu has not eaten. Under this interpretation, Xinxing would then serve Du Fu a melon and a biscuit, and Du Fu would requite him merely with the poem.

33. “Lesser and greater service,” dian-zui殿最, are terms drawn from the vocabulary of imperial commendation. The lowest grade of governmental or military merit is classed as dian, and the highest, zui.

34. Several interpretations have been offered for these lines, but none seem particularly satisfactory; see the survey of these suggestions, and various proposed emendations of the language, in Xiao, Du Fu quanji jiaozhu, 3666-8. I suspect that the text may be corrupt or that we may be missing an allusion, but the above translation is an attempt to make the text make sense without such a discovery. Fangshi fu 方士符 would normally be translated as Owen does: “the talisman of a magician.” There are, however, anomalous Tang uses of the phrase 方士 to mean “upright men,” e.g. Lu Zhaolin’s 區照鄰 “Preface to the Literary Collection of the Lord of Nanyang” 南陽公集序, wherein we find the sentence: “The conduct of sages and upright men is different in each age but nonetheless always appropriate” 聖人方士之行亦各異時而並宜 (Deng Hao 董浩 et al., eds., Quan Tang wen 全唐文 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982], 1692-1). Whatever explanation may ultimately be found for this couplet, the basic point seems to be that Xinxing can complete his tasks even without the external insignia of power.

35. The translation “devious perils” tries to capture something of the way that the phrase qiqu 崎嶇 appears in Du Fu’s poetry. Here, the compound basically refers to the arduous path that Xinxing had to take to reach the breakage in the water-tube. Elsewhere, however, the phrase is used negatively to refer to the deviousness of unworthy officials, as in “Bidding Farewell to Zhang Jianfeng (30)” 別張十三建封: “All the myriad youths I’ve seen all use their minds deviously” 眼中萬少年, 用意盡崎嶇, and “Reaching Zhaoling on my Travels” 行次昭陵: “He never shamed or killed those who criticized him directly, and the road for the virtuous was not hard or twisty” 直詞寧戮辱, 贊路不崎嶇. Given Du Fu’s emphasis on Xinxing’s “straightness,” this latter meaning seems also to be in play.

connecting Xinxing’s humble household merit with more lofty realms of achievement, connections that are not, it seems to me, unambiguously comic, even if certain of them seem close to the sorts of absurd juxtapositions that Owen noted in “Deck by the Water.” The linkages forged through the second couplet’s puns, for example—wherein Xinxing is depicted as both “recognizing the source” (shi benyuan 識本源) of the water-tube and recognizing as well the more metaphysical sources of this world, a wisdom that allows him to have “no hindrance” in completing his tasks and also to remove the more concrete “hindrance” (zhi’ai 滯礙) in this particular water-tube—can easily be read as suggesting that Xinxing’s apparently humble accomplishments are bound up with, and may represent mere instantiations of, his lofty spiritual achievements. More generally, the poem’s suggestion seems to be that Xinxing is not some mere slave, even if in his outward appearance and public role he seems to be one. Unlike generals who were permitted to use lofty canopies to shade themselves from the sun while on campaign, Xinxing’s lowly status is attested by his reddened, sunburned face after the long day’s work. Du Fu, however, looks past this outward façade to the interior man, and it is the interior man he honors when, instead of providing Xinxing with external insignia to mark his merit, he offers him instead a reward for his “insides”: food for his belly (which already in the first lines demarcated Xinxing’s distinction from the common run of slaves) and the poem for his mind. Like Xinxing in the final line, that is, Du Fu may—if he intends this poem to truly be understood by his slave—be “setting his sights” beyond the mere physical reality that is before him.37

If, on the other hand, Xinxing could not read or could not appreciate having this difficult verse declaimed to him, then the poem’s puns work equally well as ironic deflations of the poet’s inflated cultural pretensions. Xinxing’s “knowledge of the source,” for instance, could be valuable for little more than knowing where to repair a water-tube; his setting his sights “beyond the perils of the way” could suggest merely his focus on the physical location of the goal; and Du Fu’s use of food to reward his service may suggest an animality incapable of appreciating the more symbolic sorts of honors characteristic of the imperial center. Calling Xinxing “straight as a writing brush,” moreover, would call particular attention to his inability to use or to appreciate the products of a writing brush, suggesting that Xinxing’s straightness was less the high virtue of maintaining integrity than the artlessness of ignorance. The very rhetorical means by which Du Fu sought to claim that Xinxing was not merely a slave, in other words, would turn back on the poet himself, highlighting the effort he had expended in trying to convince himself he had a worthy interlocutor. On this reading, that is, Du Fu’s decision to address his poem to the capacities of a Chinese literatus rather than to those of a “barbarian” slave would dramatize an increasingly unhinged mind desperate for high-cultural companionship. The poem would thus become less a token of Xinxing’s conventionally overlooked qualities than a perverse instantiation of one of the few Tang poetic clichés through which slaves could normally figure in contemporary verse: that, as Wang Wei 王維 puts it, “In a distant land, friends and companions cut off, / the lonely traveler grows close with his slaves” 他鄉絕儔侶,孤客親僮僕.38 This, it should be clear, was not a cliché meant to be generous to the underclass.

37. I am not certain how far we can take the interpretation of the “devious perils,” qiqu 崎嶇, of the final line, but if Du Fu is thinking here of his other uses of the same term, which sometimes denote the metaphorical paths of office, he can perhaps be interpreted as suggesting as well that Xinxing’s mind is something like the recluse’s. His humble position, in other words, may be means of maintaining a purity rare in the hypocritical world of the imperial court.
38. From Wang’s “Staying the Night in Zhengzhou” 宿鄭州, Chen Tiemin 陳振民, ed., Wang Wei ji jiaozhu 王維集
It seems to me that the pathos of this cliché may underlie several of Du Fu’s poems to his slaves. These are among Du Fu’s strangest, funniest, and most baffling poems, particularly the following verse, with its nearly incomprehensible archaizing preface. There is no mistaking, amidst the overall strangeness of this poem, Du Fu’s complaint that he has no one better to write to.

課伐木 Assessing the Cutting of Trees

課隸人伯夷、幸秀、信行等, 入谷斬陰木, 人日四根止, 維條伊枚, 正直侹然。晨征暮返, 委積庭内。我有藩籬, 是缺是補, 載伐篠簜, 伊仗支持, 則旅次于小安。

山有虎, 知禁, 若恃爪牙之利, 必昏黑撐突。夔人屋壁, 列樹白菊, 鐠為牆, 實以竹, 亦式遏。為與虎近, 混淪乎無良, 賓客憂害馬之徒, 苟活為幸, 可嘿息已。作詩付宗武誦。

I exhorted my servants Boyi, Xingxiu, Xinxing, and others to go into the valley and chop trees on the northern slope, with each of them to cut just four each day, only those with branches and trunks that were straight and standing upright. They went off in the morning and returned at twilight, leaving a pile in the courtyard. I have a fence, and where there are openings there they shall mend. I had them cut bamboo, large and small, using them for supports, and my lodging became a bit more secure. There are tigers in the mountains, but how to stop them is known. If they are to depend on the sharpness of their claws and teeth, they must always attack in the murky dark. By the walls of their houses the people of Kuizhou plant rows of white chrysanthemums; they make their walls of plaster, and reinforce them with bamboo: by this they demonstrate “fending off.” Because of being close to tigers, and mixed up with evil sorts, this sojourner worries about the kind that harms horses, and to merely manage to survive is lucky: one can quietly sigh about this. I wrote this poem and gave it to Zongwu to read out.
Ironic Empires

lodging here, I set a task for my bondservants.

In the cool morning I fed their bellies;
then they took axes into White Valley.

After passing layered ridges into the dark blue sky,
for ten leagues they chopped north-slope trees.

Each person shouldered four and then stopped,
and at noon they started down to the mountain’s foot.

In the sounds of chopping,
but assessed their achievement to have fulfilled one day each.
The dark gray bark became a pile,
in blemishless integrity they shone on each other.
I rely on you to go beyond my little fence;
as for support, I will use bitter, hollow bamboo.
Bears roar in the deserted wilderness,
and nursing beasts wait for human flesh.
In the city the worthy governor
dwells in his high rank as if in a commoner’s house.
He is strict, pure in the essentials of government,
so that wasps and scorpions dare not sting.
But tiger lairs stretch right up to the villages,
and defending against them is an old custom here.
And in mooring my boat by the gray river’s bank,
I am cautious about what I might encounter.
West of my cottage the slope is high and steep,
thunder and rain have made dense cover there.

The phrase translated here as “chopping” comes from the Shijing, “Felling Trees” 取木: “We cut trees ding, ding; the birds cry out ying, ying” 伐木丁丁，鳥鳴嚶嚶.

I confess that I am not confident in the interpretation of this couplet. Some commentators have suggested that it means Du Fu’s slaves did their work especially quickly, but it is hard to imagine them arriving back home before the echoes of their chopping reached Du Fu’s ears. Perhaps there are other woodcutters still up in the mountains, and Du Fu is letting his slaves knock off early. Or perhaps they are still working at preparing the wood, but Du Fu lets them know they have done enough.

This whole section is rather obscure. Many commentators take the compound sujie 素節 to refer to the bamboo Du Fu tells us in the preface that his slaves cut down; this fresh, brightly colored bamboo would then contrast with the dark grey bark of the “north slope trees.” The problem is, sujie does not appear in Tang texts with the meaning “bamboo”: instead, it refers to autumn (the “white season”) or to the virtuous character of individuals. Du Fu may thus be talking about his slaves, describing how this wood will shine come autumn, or purposefully talking at once both about the slaves and the woodpile.

This couplet too is obscure, resulting in a number of variant readings. “You,” ru 汝, could conceivably apply either to the woodpile or to Du Fu’s slaves. If it is the woodpile, then it will “stretch over” his fence; if his slaves, then they “traverse beyond” his fence to do his bidding. The second line is also unclear, and I tentatively follow here the many commentators who have understood kuxu 苦虛 as a compound adjective for bamboo. This construction is anomalous, however, and it might be preferable to read ku 苦 as a verb, i.e., “I’m pained to have merely hollow bamboo.”
Although much of this poem remains too obscure for me to offer a confident interpretation of its dynamics, we can, I think, recognize the pathos of its ending. Du Fu begins the verse talking about his slaves as slaves, merely “feeding their bellies” as one might perhaps feed an animal. At the end of the poem, however, he comes back to these bellies again, this time with the promise not merely to provide them sustenance, but (as was the case in "Xinxing Afar Repairs the Water-Tube") to provide them with symbolically enriched comestibles. In particular, Du Fu will bestow his slaves with chrysanthemum-infused ale for the Double-Ninth Festival, thus welcoming them into the Chinese community that celebrates this holiday, and perhaps also implicitly inviting them to serve as replacements for the circle of friends and family with whom literati were customarily supposed to congregate on that day. The poem’s transformation of the slaves into members of the high-cultural community, therefore, again serves to guarantee that Du Fu himself remains within it, both insofar as he becomes a new civilizing center out here in the wilds—an imperial representative, ordering, assessing, and disseminating Chinese culture—and insofar as their assimilation allows him to continue to enact the communal rituals constitutive of civilization. At the same time, however, the poet’s admission that “in his waning years he fears living in isolation” in a damp, tiger-infested southern backwater tends again to highlight the motivatedness of his expansion of the Chinese circle, reminding us of the very strong possibility that his slaves might not appreciate the symbolic value of chrysanthemum ale promised several months in the future, and that their unpropitiousness for inclusion in the community of imperial values might thus threaten Du Fu’s own uncertain place within it. Indeed, the very energy the poet expends trying to include his slaves within his high-cultural sphere tends to push forward this more pathetic interpretation of the poem, as the more “Chinese” it becomes—with its preface imitating the rhetoric of the ancient Book of Documents and the poet’s injunction that the verse be read out by one of his subordinates, as an official might read out the words of the emperor—the more impossible it seems that Boyi, Xingxiu, and Xinxing will understand and appreciate its offer.

The poem, in other words, becomes pathetic in direct proportion to its grandiosity, tinged Du Fu’s attempted expansion of imperial values with what must strike us as purposeful and perhaps

49. “Persistent heat,” zhire 敛熱, is a phrase from the Shijing, "Young Mulberry," but Du Fu frequently uses it in a sense different from its canonical interpretation in the Mao-Zheng edition of the Odes.

50. That is, on the “Double Ninth” festival 重陽節, the ninth day of the ninth month, when families and friends would climb a high place, wear ailanthus, and float chrysanthemum petals in their ale. The “Double Ninth” festival was understood as representing the yin principle, responsible for the heat the slaves just suffered, in a time of growing darkness, or yin.

51. This couplet could also be translated, less grandiosely, as “I will repay you, when the light coolness arrives, by providing you all a gallon of ale.”
even bitter irony. Throughout the poem, Du Fu is concerned with the question of whether and to what degree the symbolic force of Chinese culture might work any real influence on this savage landscape. The local army commander and Du Fu’s patron, for example, is discussed as being so virtuous that, within the area under his jurisdiction, “wasps and scorpions dare not sting”—a statement that can be understood either literally or metaphorically, with “wasps and scorpions” on the latter interpretation standing in, through a conventional analogy, for evil men. Yet whatever specific malefactors Bo Maolin’s virtue was supposed to suppress, it seems not to be enough, for Du Fu still “sighs secretly” about his fear that he lives among “evil sorts” and feels compelled to reinforce his walls to protect against tigers. In this context, the excuse the poet offers for improving his defensive fortifications is telling: that even though he lives within the aura of a virtuous Chinese protector, preparing for tigers is an “old custom” in these parts, and he is therefore just doing what the locals do. Viewed in the light of this excuse, that is, Du Fu’s Chinese-ifying rhetoric is painfully at odds with the main activity described by the poem, which consists less in expanding Chinese culture to his barbarian slaves than in his own assimilation of mores foreign to the Chinese heartland. He may call his project “the demonstration of ‘Fending Off’” in grand classical language, but in fact it has no such canonical precedent, and we may legitimately doubt whether the tigers are repelled by such a high-minded symbolic “demonstration,” or by the brute materiality of the walls themselves. Indeed, Du Fu seems to invite our skepticism by describing Bo Maolin’s virtue as “living in high position as if it were a commoner’s house,” a description that seems to point out the gross uselessness of such symbolic power in a land wherein people’s literal houses need to be reinforced so strongly that tigers cannot break through their walls. The poem’s archaizing rhetoric, in other words, may be revealed as another form of purely symbolical power, a failing attempt to “fend off” Du Fu’s growing realization that Chinese culture simply has no great purchase on or application in the savage environment of Kuizhou.

As was the case in “Xinxing Afar Repairs the Water-Tube,” therefore, Du Fu’s attempt to expand the boundaries of Chinese culture can be read as rebounding upon him, signaling in his appropriation of the role of imperial surrogate his own exclusion from the true imperium of high cultural values. The poem’s logic thus exemplifies the old wisdom that “when things reach an extreme they begin to contract,” the overextension of high-cultural values returning to undermine those values themselves. In this respect, this poem prefigures Han Yu’s famous “Text for the Crocodiles” 鱷魚文, which is discussed by Stephen Owen in the phase of his argument about the end of the Chinese middle ages that deals with the Mid-Tang’s “discovery of subjectivity as such.” According to Owen, before the Mid-Tang “Subjectivity had ... been more or less successfully integrated with ideology; there was no essential disjunction between inner life and the understanding of ‘how things are.’”\footnote{Owen, The End of the Chinese ‘Middle Ages’, 82.} When Mid-Tang writers like Han Yu begin to offer “singular interpretations... often tinged with either irony or madness,” therefore, they begin to break this medieval bond, recasting understanding no longer as a process of recognizing what is objectively true and confirmed by public ideology, but rather “as a subjective act, determined less by the phenomenon interpreted than by the motives and circumstances of the interpreter.”\footnote{Ibid., 4.} In the case of “Text for the Crocodiles,” for example, Han Yu’s
apparently unprecedented decision to extend the form of imperial proclamation to the local fauna of Chaozhou pushes the boundaries of high-cultural rhetoric too far, redirecting our attention away from the illocutionary force such proclamations were normally supposed to bear and back towards questions about the writer himself, who must, we are likely to think, be either kidding, or insane, or somehow ironizing the very values he is mouthing. Much the same thing, I think, can be said about “Assessing the Cutting of Trees” as well, as Du Fu’s promise to reward his slaves with chrysanthemum ale on the Double Ninth becomes less a generous gesture than a marker of his own desperation at being excluded from the high-cultural community of the Chinese heartland. The poem as a whole, therefore, does not accomplish the civilization of the Kuizhou wilds that it purports to be attempting, but rather turns in on itself to display the twists and turns of the poet’s own increasingly unhinged, strange, and craggy psyche. But whereas subjectivity for later writers would become a realm of humor, interest, and play, a realm wherein they could escape from the demands of public morality and imperial meaning, for Du Fu here it is another form of exile.

Of Chickens and Children

Where important Mid-Tang writers like Han Yu and Bai Juyi show themselves wittily and willfully creating and exploring the new realm of private subjectivity, then, Du Fu in his Kuizhou-era poems on humble topics depicts himself as thrust into it unwillingly. Outside of his poetry, of course, Du Fu the poet did have a choice: he could have continued writing the verse of the High Tang capital circles well into the 760s, as many of his contemporaries did. What ultimately differentiates Du Fu’s verse on private topics from the Mid-Tang poetry that Owen examines, therefore, is the way that Du Fu depicts himself as not being free to choose, as if there were something in the world itself and in the process of his life that had made it impossible for him to produce the confident verse that poets in the capital continued to put out, something that forced him to desperate attempts to redeem imperial values in the face of their collapse. Patterson’s reading of Du Fu as rebuilding a shattered world, it seems to me, picks up very perceptively on this aspect of the poet’s self-representation. But the poems have another side to them as well, as Du Fu seems equally compelled to notice the problems with his attempts to salvage imperial values in his marginal life.54 Whereas Mid-Tang and Song poets often (though not always) treated private subjectivity as a place of unserious play, discontinuous with but ostensibly unthreatening to public values—where the unseemliness of caring too much for a private garden, for instance, is disarmed by the poet’s humorous admission that his joy in such a walled off space is exaggerated, unreasonable, and idiosyncratic—Du Fu depicts the fracturing of the world not as a joke, but rather as something that he is forced against his will to acknowledge. There is thus a strange doubleness to the poet’s character in these poems and a bitter edge to their humor, which is directed not only at the senile poet, but also at the imperial values that are failing him in Kuizhou.

This bitter edge, I want suggest here in the final section of this paper, is precisely what has been most frequently ignored in Du Fu’s poetry over the course of its reception history, even taking into

account the often diametrically opposed visions of the poet that have dominated different realms of later thought about his legacy. The witty poets of private subjectivity and the fractured world, for example, repurpose Du Fu’s absurd juxtapositions not to suggest that public values are wrong, but that they should merely relax a little bit, at least when it comes to the poets’ idiosyncratic pleasures and domestic affairs—the whole point of this pose is that its poets are not bitter. Likewise, however, there is also no possibility of bitter comedy in the counter-tradition to this poetry of the fractured world, namely Du Fu’s centrality to late-imperial commentary, which (as we all know only too well) has almost always held up his poetry—heavily annotated to show its historical accuracy and resonance—as the great antidote to the encroachment of the fractured world, proving that poets can (in the oft-repeated words of Su Shi 蘇軾) “even for the length of a single meal not forget their lords,” and that they can see, feel, and represent the world correctly, full stop. For this tradition, Du Fu’s embodiment of public values has become nothing short of tautological, as these imperial ideals become the crucial tools used in connecting his often-obscure poetry with the events of his time. Neither those poets who inherited his fractured world nor those commentators who inherited his attempts to restore its integrity, therefore, draw attention to Du Fu’s bitter humor: despite the diametrical opposition of these twin legacies of Du Fu’s work, they share an ultimate unwillingness to countenance the possibility that Du Fu might be criticizing public values as such, the one side claiming him as the empire’s constant champion; the other carving out a space that claims not to challenge it. In neither case can he really be disappointed by, criticize, complain about, or mock public values—though that is, I think, precisely what these poems on humble topics ultimately do.

Some indication of the subterranean similarities that obtain between the poetics of private subjectivity and its opposite in Du Fu commentary can be found in criticism of Du Fu’s bitterest Kuizhou-era verse. Take, for instance, the following famous poem, which has been both praised and scorned by Du Fu’s commentators. This difference of reaction, crucially, does not indicate a different criterion of judgment; rather, critics in both camps have generally applied to the poem one and the same standard, but come away from that application with radically different results.

絆雞行 Ballad of Binding a Chicken

小奴縛雞向市賣, My young slave bound up a chicken and headed to sell it at market;
雞被縛急相喧爭。the chicken was bound tightly and struggled and squawked at him.
家中厭雞食蟲蟻, Some in my house were tired of the chicken eating up bugs and ants,
不知雞賣還遭烹。but did not reflect that the chicken, once sold, would then get boiled.

56. This point is discussed extensively in my dissertation, which, however, only takes Du Fu up to Qinzhou.
57. “Public values” is, of course, a placeholder term: the values that filled this role in the Tang were very different from those that filled it in the Song, or the Ming, or the Qing, or in modern China. It is worth pointing out, however, that until the modern era, mainstream Chinese intellectual culture was committed to the idea that “true” public values had remained unchanged since the time of Confucius, even if particular dynasties were prone to err from that standard. In other words, no critic from the Song through the Qing ever suggested that Du Fu was living in a fundamentally different moral culture than they were; they just argued that he better represented moral ideals than did his contemporaries. In this respect, the placeholder term “public values” was not understood to be merely a placeholder by Du Fu’s premodern critics and readers: for them, Du Fu was always writing about, exemplifying, escaping, or failing to live up to their public values, not those of his own time.
What are bugs or chickens to us that we should treat one better or worse?

I upbraided the slave, and had him untie its bonds.

Wins and losses between chickens and bugs never will end,

I fix my eyes on the cold river, leaning against my tower in the hills.

For a significant proportion of later interpreters, this poem is essentially public-minded, and thus worthy of praise. The Song-dynasty writer Xie Jingchu 謝景初 (1020-1084), for example, argues that it is an allegory for how the empire should be run, with the bugs standing in for the populace and the chicken the state at large; Du Fu’s decision to save the chicken, for him, represents a recognition of the importance of the empire, even if its people may sometimes suffer in its maintenance. Similarly, for the early-Qing commentator Lu Yuanchang 盧元昌 (1616-1693), the poem becomes a criticism of precisely the human tendency to forget larger things in favor of smaller, demonstrating through the movement of the poet’s mind—from the specific example of these chickens and bugs to the larger world that they can symbolize—the ethically correct counterexample to this pervasive defect.

For other commentators, however, the poem is worthy of condemnation precisely because it fails to be public-minded. Li Yindu 李因篤 (1631-1692), for example, writes that “Its style is low (ge wei gao 格未高): this kind of verse is the precursor of the poetry of Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen.” For Wang Sishi 王嗣奭 (1566-1648), more elaborately, the poem is an example of the deterioration of Du Fu’s public commitment in his Kuizhou-era verse; although it “wondrously” depicts the feelings of a single moment in the poet’s life, those feelings concern Du Fu’s “inability to find a way out” (j iwatsuo chu 計無所出) from this dilemma into some larger public moral. Where for Xie Jingchu and Lu Yuanchang, that is, the poem had been an allegory of allegory, demonstrating the necessity of seeing large principles in small things, for Wang Sishi it displays Du Fu’s increasing inability in his later years to connect the limited realms of his immediate experience with the governing principles of the larger empire. But though they disagree as to whether the poem is a good one, all agree that in order to be a good poem, it would have to affirm public values and assist in the maintenance of the empire. And though no premodern commentator I have found praises Du Fu here for writing of private affairs—such praise, as I have indicated, would run against some of the most basic impulses of the commentary tradition—these two general approaches nonetheless approximate at least roughly the paradoxical legacy Du Fu’s poetry has had in late-imperial literary culture, with some commentators seeing a seamless world and other commentators a broken one.

The commentarial debate about this poem, therefore, hinges largely upon the indeterminacy of its final image, which Lu Yuanchang takes as exemplifying Du Fu’s seamless allegorization of the domestic scene, and which Wang Sishi interprets as his failing to see any public-minded “way out” of the domestic problem he has discovered. The indeterminacy of the poem’s horizon, however, may represent a bitter joke, understanding which depends upon a text it seems to me Du Fu likely had in mind when he wrote this verse, a famous parable of birds preying on bugs, men upon birds, and men of governmental status upon men of low degree:

58. This quote is preserved in Cai Zhengsun’s 蔡正孫 late thirteenth century Shilin guangji 詩林廣記, Yinying Wenyuyange Siku quanshu edition (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1985), 2.31a.
60. See Xiao, Du Fu quanji jiaozhu, 4353.
When Zhuangzi was wandering in Diaoling park, he saw a strange bird fly up from the south. Its wings were seven feet in breadth, and its eyes a full inch in diameter. It brushed against Zhuangzi’s forehead and perched within a chestnut grove. Zhuangzi said, “What kind of bird is this? Its wings are huge but it does not fly far, and its eyes are big, but it did not see me.” Lifting the hem of his skirts, he strode off after the bird, and taking his bow in hand, he waited for a shot. Then he saw a cicada that had just found a nice bit of shade and had forgotten itself. A praying mantis was taking advantage of cover to attack it, seeing gain and forgetting itself as well. And the strange bird was following it to profit from both, itself seeing profit and forgetting its true nature. Zhuangzi was shocked and said, “Alas! Things always encumber one another, with different kinds bringing calamity on each other.” He threw away his bow and ran away, but the forester was following on his heels cursing him.

When Zhuangzi returned home, he did not go out of his courtyard for three months. When Lin Qie asked him, “Why have you recently not come out of your courtyard?” Zhuangzi replied, “I was paying attention to other forms and forgot myself, I was staring into muddy water and mistaking it for a clear pool. Moreover, I have heard it from the Master, ‘When you go into a place, you inevitably follow its customs.’ Now I was wandering in Diaoling and forgot myself, just as the a strange bird which brushed my forehead was wandering in the chestnut grove and forgot its true nature. The forester of the chestnut grove took me as someone worthy of execution, and that is why I have not come out of my courtyard.”

Like the poem, this parable describes a proliferating hierarchy of violence, with the mantis preying upon the cicada, the bird upon the mantis, Zhuangzi upon the bird, and the official upon him. Zhuangzi’s answer to this vision of the world is to escape, to refuse to be influenced by its “customs” (su 俗) by cutting off contact with anything other than himself—an answer that, according to the medieval commentary on this text by Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), is an allegory for going into reclusion from an age of disorder. The irony in this sort of answer for Du Fu, however, is that he in his “mountain pavilion” is already living in isolation; and if even in his reclusive “courtyard” he still finds himself within cycles of violence—and moreover, within imperially sanctioned cycles of violence, given the authority he exercises as a Chinese master in “cursing at” (chi 叱) his barbarian slave—then it becomes unclear whither he might retreat further. The bitter humor of the poet’s fixing his eyes upon the “gray river,” therefore, derives not only from the absurdity of drawing deep philosophical conclusions from such trivial domestic affairs, but also from the undecidable question of whether

62. *Zhuangzi zhu* 莊子注, with annots. by Guo Xiang 郭象, Yinying Wenyuanj Siku quanshu edition (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1985), 7.18b–19a (excising Guo Xiang’s commentary, which is discussed summarily below). Much of this text could, of course, be translated differently. I have generally followed Guo Xiang’s rendering here, as this is the commentary Du Fu seems most likely to have seen.
he is at the end of the poem still gazing into “muddy water” or reflecting upon himself in the “clear pool” that Zhuangzi claims to have found in withdrawal from the world. Du Fu seems to know his own reflection but there seems to be nowhere to escape a world that, all the way down to chickens and bugs and all the way up to an empire now constantly at war, seems to be pervaded by violence and destruction.

The poem thus inverts the flow of significance that Guo Xiang sees in Zhuangzi’s animal parable, that Xie Jingchu and Lu Yuanchang see in Du Fu’s decision to privilege the chicken over the bugs, and that Wang Sishi regrets not seeing in the final line. Instead of aiming at the public world via the medium of microcosm, that is, Du Fu is actually concerned with the recluse’s domestic world of chickens, bugs, and slaves—this is what gives the poem its absurd, humorous air—but finding them ineluctably permeated by the destructiveness that prevails in the contemporary empire. In a reversal, in other words, of the procedure we have been tracking to this point, whereby Du Fu tried and failed to make his humble experiences continuous with the imperial center, this poem tries and fails to find a space discontinuous from it, a space wherein he could put into practice the (public) value of reclusion. Lu Yuanchang is thus right that the chicken and the bugs become allegorical figures, and Wang Sishi is also right that Du Fu neither looks for nor finds a public message here. Put together, however, these interpretations suggest a dark mockery of the poet’s naiveté, both in thinking that he could escape the destructiveness of an empire at war with itself, and also in hoping that that war might someday end. Where in his vegetable allegories Du Fu tried to make his complaints about nature’s iniquity merely allegories of the times, and where in “Assessing the Cutting of Trees” he tried to make them a symptom of his place in Kuizhou, here his complaints end in the reflection that there is no escape from the kinds of destruction that are playing themselves out on the national stage.

This recognition would be crucial to much of Du Fu’s great poetry in his later travels down the Yangzi river, which sometimes inhabits a world that seems to have broken free from the gravity of the imperial center. Yet as in those later poems, Du Fu’s growing detachment from imperial values was not always such a darkly absurd affair as it appears in “Ballad of Binding a Chicken.” The following poem on a similar subject, for example—a poem, by the way, that seems to refer to “Ballad,” despite its usual placement earlier in the collection—is far lighter stuff, if its quite raucous humor is nonetheless underwritten by a similar sense of the poet’s world.

催宗文樹雞柵 Urging Zongwen To Make Haste Setting Up a Chicken Coop

吾衰怯行邁，In my decline I fear long journeys,63
旅次展崩迫。so stopping a while, I relax from my rushing on.
愈風傳烏雞，They say Silkie chickens are good for rheums,
4 冬卵方漫喫。but only in autumn can you indulge in eating their eggs.64

63. This opening line may recall Confucius’ complaint, “Deep indeed is my decline! For a long time, I have not dreamed of the Duke of Zhou” 甚矣吾衰也！久矣吾不復夢見周公.
64. This translation follows Zhao Cigong’s note, to the effect that you should not eat the spring eggs because they will grow into chickens, the meat of which is good for one’s health (note that this is still folk medicine in China); you can eat the autumn eggs, though, because the chicks will not survive the winter. Owen, by contrast, reads the couplet as enjambed: “they say black chickens’ / autumn eggs should be plentifully eaten.”
自春生成者，Those that have been born since the spring, therefore,
隨母向百翮。are about a hundred wings following their mothers.
驅趂制不禁，We drove them off but couldn’t keep them away,
喧呼山腰宅。and it was all racket at my mountainside house.
課奴殺青竹，I thus gave my slave the task of drying green bamboo:
終日憎赤幘。all day long we’ve hated their red turbans,\(^{65}\)
踏藉盤桉翻，Stomping about, the plates and table overturned—
塞蹊使之隔。so block their paths and keep them out.\(^{66}\)
牆東有隙地，East of the wall there is fallow land:
可以樹高柵。there can we set up tall coops.
避熱時來歸，At the moment, I’ve come home to escape the heat,
問兒所為跡。and ask my son how the work is going.
織籠曹其內，Have a cage woven and put the flock inside,
令入不得擲。making them get in so they can’t get away;
稀間可突過，If they can get through the openings,
觜爪還污席。they’ll be back to soiling our mats with beaks and talons.
踏藉盤桉翻，Stomping about, the plates and table overturned—
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令入不得擲。making them get in so they can’t get away;
稀間可突過，If they can get through the openings,
觜爪還污席。they’ll be back to soiling our mats with beaks and talons.
倚賴窮歲晏，Relying on them we can get through the end of the year,
撥煩去冰釋。managing bothers until we leave when the ice melts.
未似尸鄉翁。I’m not yet quite like the old man of Shixiang.
拘留蓋阡陌。keeping them detained in the fields here.71

Like “Assessing the Cutting of Trees,” this poem is quite obscure in parts, to the point, indeed, that the seventeenth century commentator Huang Sheng 黃生 calls it “the strangest poem in all of Du Fu.”72

The basic structure of the verse, however, is clarified by its similarity to the vegetable allegories and the poems to slaves that we examined earlier. Again, Du Fu is creating a miniature empire down in his Kuizhou hermitage, trying to remediate the chaos and civil war that are plaguing his backyard. In his directions to his son Zongwen, who is to “take charge of” his minor officials—the family’s slaves—Du Fu envisions turning the destructive bug-eating predators of “Ballad of Binding a Chicken” into virtuous ministers, possessed of the constancy and diligence predicated of gentlemen in the Shijing. Du Fu is thus preparing his son to take over from him the inheritance of Chinese culture and its civilizing responsibility, which he can perhaps be seen as inculcating in the boy—or testing—by means of the poem’s elaborate classical allusions.

By now, however, we recognize easily how absurd these allusions are, applied to chickens; indeed, the reference to “Wind and Rain” 風雨 in line 29 performs a characteristic Du-Fuian deflation by taking literally that Ode’s use of chickens as a metaphor for higher virtues. The whole poem, in fact, is a bit too raucous to take very seriously at all—that is, up until the final lines, which perform the kind of tragic twist that we observed in a number of poems above. Du Fu prepared this twist in the first four lines of the poem, which discuss both the transitoriness of his lodging here in Kuizhou and also his chronic illnesses, topics that (we might remark) would hardly have needed to be explained to Zongwen. If Du Fu goes to the trouble of explaining them here, it is because they contrast precisely with the constancy and faithfulness that he attributes to his (prospectively tamed) chickens, which will inevitably prove to be of only temporary use to a man who is merely waiting for the ice to melt and who, moreover, is not long for this world. And this, of course, is why Du Fu is tasking his son with overseeing the construction of the coop, and passing on to him his mastery of Chinese culture: unlike the immortal of Shixiang, Du Fu will soon die, no matter how many black chickens and autumn eggs he eats. The poem’s injunctions to preserve the cultural heritage and to use its ideals to tame the world are thus simultaneously mocked, trivialized, and affirmed. They will not save the poet, and yet in his southern wanderings are all he has to pass on to his children.

The poem’s comic, perhaps bitter, perhaps gentle puzzle, then, is what exactly Du Fu is leaving to his heirs, whether it be to Zongwen, to Mid-Tang writers, or to late-imperial commentators—the same question, that is, that Stephen Owen opened in the observation with which I began this essay. The cultural tradition that Du Fu deploys in this poem has by this point been thoroughly ironized and undermined, but yet maintains its hold upon the poet in a what we might call a tragic mode.

71. The “old man of Shixiang” was an immortal mentioned in the Liexian zhuan 列仙傳 who had several thousand chickens. He let them all roost at night in the trees, and let them wander freely in the daytime. But since he had given each one a name, they would come when he called.
Du Fu can play iconoclastically with public ideals now that he can longer take them completely seriously, but at the same time, those public ideals remain the only connection he has with his forebears and with those speculative generations who will come after. He can, for this reason, neither enjoy the private subjectivity of the Mid-Tang, nor embody the high moral seriousness of the common Song-through-Qing image of the "Poet Sage." His tone is something more complex and more contradictory than either: sad, bitter, penetrating, and playful—a protean voice that I have struggled to describe throughout this essay, and that the later tradition has struggled to absorb. Like the legacies of all great masters, perhaps, his was too rich to be simply inherited—it had to be simplified, changed, and tamed.