

The Mandarin Moralist and the Reckless Rebel: the Improbable Literary Friendship of Du Fu and Li Bai

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Western readers know something about improbable literary friendships: Who, after all, would ever have paired the poetic revolutionary Emily Dickinson and her friend-by-correspondence, the prosy pedestrian Thomas Wentworth Higginson? With good reason, one critic has called this “one of the oddest literary friendships in American history” (Russell 149). But then who, on the other side of the Atlantic, would have anticipated a friendship between the fiercely devout Christian Gerard Manley Hopkins and the agnostic Robert Bridges? “One wonders,” writes one baffled critic, “on what the friendship subsisted, so little were Hopkins’s profoundest feelings appreciated by Bridges” (Nixon 265). These are certainly literary friendships so unlikely as to leave readers marveling.

However, for sheer improbability no literary friendship in the West can match the astonishingly unlikely yet remarkably strong friendship between the poet Du Fu and his contemporary Li Bai. The contrasts between these two are both numerous and striking. Yet the strength and duration of their friendship despite these contrasts, lends new meaning to the marvelous poetry written by both. For only rare poetry and even rarer love for the making of such poetry can account for a literary friendship that seems so unlikely as to defy ordinary expectations of the nature of friendship.

In his famous examination of the nature of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle acknowledges that many see in friendship “a kind of likeness and [therefore] say that like people are friends” (VIII.1). And now, as in ancient Greece, it is often supposed that friends will generally share basic life assumptions and evince broadly similar patterns of conduct. The modern anthropologist Steven W. Duck indeed reports that 20th-century research into the nature of friendship finds that friends do in fact tend to be “similar in personality.” Duck explains that “friendship is essentially concerned with the validation of different parts of the partners’ personalities and . . . it only proceeds when such validation is available” (399-400).

But anyone examining the lives of these two great Tang Dynasty poets—one a Mandarin manqué and the other a reckless rebel—will not find two individuals who are “similar in personality.” Quite otherwise. What is more, the disparities between the two are so pronounced that we may wonder how they could ever have provided each other with the “validations of different parts of [each others’] personalities” in the way Duck says is essential to friendship.

To begin with, Du Fu was a deeply serious Confucian moralist, devoted to wife and family and official duty. “Tu Fu the man,” writes critic William Hung, represents the widest sympathy and the highest ethical principles” (1-2). Literary historians inform us that Du Fu was known as a “good Confucian,” animated by an “idealistic humanitarian vision,” and was respected for his “unswerving loyalty to the government and unhesitating opposition to rebellion” (Cf. Holyoak xv; Hung 2). Li Bai, on the other hand, was a defiant social rebel, a bon vivant, a devil-may-care partier who loved good wine far more than he loved Confucian precepts. The wild life of Li Bai before he met Du Fu has been piquantly summed up by one biographer: “He had . . . committed murder, squandered a fortune, taken wives, acquired concubines, and played with prostitutes . . . had manifested a devout fondness for Taoist magic and alchemy; [and] had excited people’s jealousy by his drunken haughtiness” (Hung qtd. In Holyoak xvii).

Du Fu was a relatively young man when the two met. Li Bai was more than ten years older. Du Fu never captured a large contemporary audience with his polished but technically innovative verse. (“My whole life is just one bitter song— /“ Du Fu laments in the late poem “Struggling South,” “I found no one who cared for my sad music” (13-16). Only posthumously did he win critical and popular favor. In contrast, Li Bai basked in the literary limelight during his lifetime, not because of technical innovations or literary polish but largely because of his irresistible poetic voice.

We hear Li Bai’s irresistible voice—drunken and haughty, but compelling—in “Bring in the Wine”:

Bring in the wine!
 Keep the cups coming!
 And I, I’ll sing you a song,
 You bend me your ears and listen—
 The bells and the drums, the tastiest morsels,
 it’s not these that I love—
 All I want is to stay dead drunk
 and never sober up. (ll. 26-31)

What could be more different than the voice we hear in “My Thatched Roof Is Ruined by the Autumn Wind,” when a very sober Du Fu turns from contemplating his own wretched circumstances during the An Lu-Shan uprising to a very humane and very Confucian desire to do good to others:

I have lived through upheavals and ruin
 and have seldom slept very well,
 But have no idea how I shall pass
 this night of soaking.
 Oh, to own a mighty mansion
 Of a hundred thousand rooms,
 A great roof for the poorest gentlemen

of all this world,
 a place to make them smile (33-41)

Thus while Li Bai sings of how in “lovely wine / . . . together we’ll melt the sorrows of all eternity”(51-52), Du Fu staggers under the weight of Confucian responsibility to properly order society: “No sleep for me,” he writes in “Spending the Night in a Tower by the River,” “I worry over battles. / I have no strength to right the universe” (7-8).

Nor is the gap between the poets evident just in the difference between Li Bai’s carefree drunkenness and Du Fu’s sternly sober Confucian morality. Holyoak reminds us of another very important difference: “Du Fu’s poems reflect the history of his times” (xv)--as is evident, for instance, in the reference to battles in “Spending the Night in a Tower by the River” and in his deeply moving reference in “Song of P’eng-ya” to how his “baby girl gnawed at [him] in hunger,/And [he] feared that wild beasts would hear her cries” (9-10) as he tried to take his family to safety, out of the path of An Lu-shan’s rebel army. In contrast, Li Bai seemed to live above historical travail as he “brought the poetry of the gods down to earth with him” (Holyoak xv), as he does in “The Sun Rises and Sets,” allowing us to ride with Hsi-Ho, the Chinese goddess who drives the sun’s carriage, as she “wields the whip that drives along four seasons of changes--/The rise and the ending of all things” (14-16).

Even the apparent similarity that both men lost positions in the imperial court masks a fundamental difference. For Du Fu earnestly desired to discharge his duty as a court official and only lost his position by being too courageous—some might say foolhardy—in adhering to Confucian principles. For when he brought to the attention of the Emperor that he was dismissing a minister in violation of Confucian standards of justice, the Emperor did not change his mind about the minister; rather, he decided that for his meddling, Du Fu should himself leave the court for the jail (cf. Holyoak xviii). In contrast, Li Bai lost his lofty position as Imperial Court poet and became a “Celestial Exile” not because of any excessive scruples about Confucian morality but rather because of his drunken and heedless rudeness to the imperial eunuch, Gao Lishi, whom he ordered to remove his boots in front of the Emperor.

Given this catalogue of sharp differences, it is hardly surprising that poet and translator Keith Holyoak reports that “Chinese people see Li Bai and Du Fu as opposites, yin and yang” (xv). Yet despite the profound differences separating these two Tang Dynasty poets, the poetry they wrote to and about each other manifests a real and abiding friendship.

The genuine feeling of friendship comes through, for instance, “A Playful Gift for Du Fu,” in which the older poet Li Bai teases his younger friend over his gaunt appearance:

Since last we met,

what has left you so thin?
Looks like those poems you've suffered over
have cost you your last bit of fat. (5-8)

And something of the openness and candor of friendship comes through in
"Below Sand Hill City, Sent to Du Fu," when Li Bai complains:

The songs sung here
give me an empty feeling;
can't even get drunk
these days on the wine from Lu. (9-12)

But then adds
My affection flows
down south with the Wen River,
broad and deep,
my thoughts flow south to you. (13-16)

That affection comes through again in a poem in which Li Bai bids a very
reluctant farewell to his friend:

. . . we come to say goodbye,
climbing up
to gaze from Pianchi Tower.

When will we meet
back here by the Stone Gate road,
open a flask
and fill our cups once more?

.....
As thistledown flies,
so each must go his way—
but raise your cup,
let's linger one more hour. (2-8, 13-16)

Even deeper feelings of friendship come through, but going the other
direction in "Dreaming of Li Bai," in which Du Fu tries to express how much he
misses his now-exiled and absent friend:

If death parts us, the tears will dry one day,
But separation in life feeds endless pain.

.....
After you came to visit my dreams last night
I know how much I miss the friend who's gone.

.....
The sinking moon illumines my bedroom rafters—
Is that your face I see by light of the moon? (1-2, 5-6, 13-14)

Du Fu's deep longing to again be with his absent friend again finds voice in "Thinking of Li Bai at the World's End":

A cold wind blows
from beyond the ends of the earth.
What news do you send,
what are your thoughts, my master? (1-4)

Li Bai and Du Fu were without question polar opposites in many ways. But, as Taoists know, Yin and yang can actually do complement one another, even if their complementarity—as Taoists also know—resists rational explanation.

Yet even if rationality ultimately fails in explaining this highly improbable friendship, what can its surprising warmth and durability teach us? In part, it may suggest hidden aspects of both men's personalities. Did the Confucian moralist secretly wish to cast off social expectations? Did the wild rebel still retain a grudging respect for Confucian rectitude? Those contemplating the Du Fu-Li Bai friendship must ask such questions. But even more they must marvel at the sheer power of literary passion to transcend real personal differences in those who share that passion.

And in that transcendence, we may detect the ultimate meaning of the friendship between Li Bai and Du F.

In the *Nicomachaen Ethics*, Aristotle insists that the highest friendship must be based on a shared commitment to moral virtue:

Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good themselves. Now those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends; for they do this by reason of own nature and not incidentally; therefore their friendship lasts as long as they are good-and goodness is an enduring thing. (VIII.3)

In contrast, Aristotle identifies two other markedly inferior kinds of friendship based on utility or pleasure:

Now those who love each other for their utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other. So too with those who love for the sake of pleasure; it is not for their character that men love ready-witted people, but because they find them pleasant. Therefore those who love for the sake of utility love for the sake of what is good for themselves, and those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is pleasant to themselves, and not in so far as the other is the person loved but in so far as he is useful or pleasant. (VIII.2)

These two types of friendship Aristotle regards as only "incidental" friendships, inherently fragile and short-lived. "Such friendships," he remarks, "...

are easily dissolved . . . for if the one party is no longer pleasant or useful the other ceases to love him” (VIII.2).

Because the friendship of Li Bai and Du Fu lasted for decades, we can hardly suppose that it was based on utility or pleasure. Besides, it is difficult to even imagine that these two great poets were merely *using* each other to achieve personal ends. And since their friendship endured a long period of separation, it is just as hard to believe that it was sustained merely by the pleasure of being in each other’s company. Could it be, then, that this highly improbable friendship was of the sort that Aristotle regards as the highest sort of friendship, namely a friendship based on virtue?

Du Fu, of course, was always motivated by his deep commitment to the virtues defined by Confucianism, especially *ren* or “humaneness.” But what about Li Bai? The pursuit of virtue seemed very far from his mind. He was too busy ordering another flask of wine to trouble overmuch over *ren* or any other moral virtue. How could he have defined half of a friendship of virtue fulfilling the Aristotlean ideal?

Perhaps the key to the riddle lies in what poet and critic John Hollander calls “the *poetic* virtue,” namely, the power to “engage life,” but on the artist’s “own terms” (qtd. in Earnshaw¹¹⁰, emphasis added). Li Bai and Du Fu may not have been “alike in virtue” in ways that Confucius would have recognized. But they were profoundly alike in a “poetic virtue” that insisted on engaging life in powerfully artistic terms of life, even if the two poets defined those terms quite differently. Though they were decidedly unlike in personality and outlook, they did share a strong commitment to the defining virtue of the poet’s vocation—and consequently shared alike in its sometimes unpleasant consequences.

“A happy life,” writes Du Fu in “Thinking of Li Bai at the World’s End,” “is seldom a poet’s fate;/mountain demons rejoice to greet the traveler” (9-12). He no doubt recognizes in Li Bai another artist committed to “the poetic virtue” that invariably entails the “poet’s fate,” including “the mountain dragons” that leap up to greet the displaced artist-traveler. Li Bai, in turn, despite his kidding Du Fu about how “those poems you’ve suffered over have cost you your last fat” certainly recognizes in his thin fellow-poet someone whose shared commitment to poetic virtue make him a true friend, one united in the suffering that writing poetry sometimes requires, and in the aesthetic exultation it brings when completed successfully. In their shared commitment to “poetic virtue,” then, these two poets do finally turn out to be—despite remarkable differences in so many other ways—“similar in personality” in at least one important dimension. And in the wonderful poems they wrote to and about each other, they certainly “validated” each other in a sense that mattered a great deal to both.

Though it seems improbable in many ways, the friendship between Li Bai and Du Fu finally does reflect a kind of shared virtue—“the poetic virtue”—so

strong, so deep that it seems best to think of their friendship not as improbable but rather as inevitable.

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