this lodging house to return for all time to his own home. Old friends are grieved and mourn for him: this evening they give him a farewell banquet, offering a sacrificial food, pouring libations of clear wine. They look, and his face is dim; listening, they no longer hear the sound of his voice.

Alas, alas, this vast clod, earth, that illimitable high firmament, together produce all things, even me who am a man. But from the time I attained human estate, my lot has been poverty. Rice-bin and wine-pour have often been empty, and I have faced winters in thin clothes. Still I have gone happily to draw water from the brook and have sung as I walked under a load of firewood, going about my daily affairs in the obscurity of my cottage. As springs gave way to autumn, I have buried myself in my garden, hoeing, cultivating, planting or tending. I have rejoiced in my books and have been soothed by my zither. Winters I have warmed myself in the sun, summers I have bathed in the brook. There was little enough reward for my labor, but my mind enjoyed a constant leisure. Content with Heaven and accepting my lot, I have lived out the years of my life.

Men fear to waste their lives, concerned that they may fail to succeed. They cling to the days and lament passing time. During their life they are honored by the world, and after their death they still are mourned. But I have gone my own way, which is not their way. I take no glory in their esteem, nor do I feel defamed by their slander. I have lived alone in my poor house, drinking wine and writing poetry. Aware of my destined end, of which one cannot be ignorant, I find no cause for regret in this present transformation. I have lived out my lifespan, and all my life I have desired quiet retirement. Now that I am dying, an old man, what have I left to wish for?

Hot and cold hasten on, one after the other. The dead have nothing in common with the survivors. Relatives come in the morning, friends arrive in the evening, to bury me in the meadow and give comfort to my soul. Dark is my journey, desolate the grave. It is shameful to be buried extravagantly as was Huan Tui (whose stone coffin was three years a-making), and ridiculous to be parsimonious like Yang Wangsun (who was buried naked); for after death there is nothing. Raise me no mound, plant me no grove; time will pass with the revolving sun and moon. I never cared for praise in my lifetime, and it matters not at all what eulogies are sung after my death. Man's life is hard enough in truth; and death is not to be avoided.

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2. That is, the seasons pass.

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The poetry of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) is generally considered the high point of China's three-millennium-old history of poetry. Much compelling verse was written after the period, not least because the poetic giants of the Tang inspired later poets to write with self-conscious sophistication and skill. But later poets generally agreed that Du Fu, Li Bo, and their contemporaries had set a standard that could not be surpassed. For many centuries the elegant urgency and technical virtuosity with which these poets captured the world, as well as the scope of their poetic visions and themes, formed the basis for later poetic training and inspiration. The primacy of Tang poetry in the Chinese poetic canon continued until the early twentieth century, when Chinese intellectuals launched a revolutionary movement to replace the classical written idiom with vernacular spoken language. Today traditional poetry is popular once again, and the accomplishments of the Tang poets remain the high-water mark of what poetry can do.

Poetry and Tang Society

Every educated Chinese during the Tang Dynasty was expected to be able to spontaneously dash off a poem with grace, or at least technical competence. Poetry was a form of social communication, not an arcane and highbrow art. The sheer mass of Tang poems still extant—close to 50,000, by some 2,200 authors—clearly indicates how common poetry was in everyday life. Many of those whose poems survived spent their lives in some official government position, after taking the civil service examination that qualified them for office. Whenever these scholar-officials were sent to a new post in the vast territory of the Tang Empire they would take leave from their colleagues and friends with a “farewell” poem and expect a poetic gift in return. In their new province, they would make friends by going on pleasure excursions or visiting temples and invariably writing poems about their journeys. They could also write poems to praise the imperial court or to criticize its policies. Poetry thus was a cultural custom, a craft that taught people how to pay attention to and share the significant moments in their lives—to find something lovely in a scene; to convey feelings about separation and friendship, painful and pleasurable events; to thank a host for a splendid evening party; or simply to express what would otherwise be awkward or impossible to say. Though the practice of writing poetry was general, only some thirty or forty truly talented poets achieved renown as artists of the highest caliber. Yet some otherwise undistinguished writers produced a remarkable number of fine poems that would be read and memorized for the next thousand years.

The Origin of Tang Poetry

Chinese literature began with the folk songs and ritual ballads about historical events preserved in the Classic of Poetry (the 606 B.C.E.). Most of the poems in that collection have stanzas of four to six lines containing four to six characters
each, with end rhymes for every couplet. During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.—220 C.E.), about half a millennium after the compilation of the Classic of Poetry, a new genre of poetry emerged. Written in lines of five or seven characters and displaying a much more melodic and flexible rhythm, it became the basis for Tang poetry. During the century preceding the Tang Dynasty, poets began to experiment with introducing tonal patterns into their poems. Although variations in tone are common in many languages, including English, they are usually associated with sentence patterns. Chinesé differs in attaching tones to individual syllables. Poets started to arrange the tones of each syllable of the poem—in modern Mandarin Chinese, a syllable can be pronounced in one of four different tones—in symmetrical patterns. This innovation led to the birth of so-called regulated poetry, a verse form that requires syllables to alternate "level" and "deflected" tones and demands training to master. The spread of Buddhism in the first half of the first millennium may have helped spark the development of regulated poetry. Chinese monks translating Sanskrit texts into Chinese must have been struck by the absence of tones in Sanskrit, and this new awareness of a defining feature of their own language perhaps inspired the introduction of rules mandating the alternation of tones in poetry. Whatever the reason, the emergence of regulated poetry (also called "recent-style" poetry, as earlier poetic forms such as those used by Tao Qian came to be called "old-style" poetry) radically changed the reading and writing of poetry. By imposing more rules on the game of poetry, it enabled readers to judge poetic craftsmanship more objectively.

Both the prominent place of poetry in social communication and everyday life and these new technical demands gave poetry an unprecedented status in Tang society. Poetry was introduced into the prestigious civil service examination; successful aspirants were awarded the "presented scholar" degree (jinshi), a prerequisite for a career as a government official. Although there were debates about whether the inclusion of poetry composition was appropriate for such exams, and was later abolished, the tight formal requirements of the regulated poems made it easier to judge and compare the candidates' relative worth. Also, the candidates were forced to learn how to compose succinctly and eloquently. This skill would be useful in their later careers in government service, as they drafted many complex official documents.

**REGULATED POETRY OF THE TANG**

The two basic forms of regulated poetry are in four lines (jueju) and eight lines (lushi), although longer poems composed of several stanzas were also common. Regulated poetry placed a new emphasis on the couplet, a unit of two lines. For the ambitious Tang poet, couplets provided an opportunity to display virtuosity, as they provided a showcase for the parallelism required of the regulated poem. Consider Du Fu's "Spring Prospect," which describes the fall of the Tang capital to rebels in 755 and the destruction of the great Tang Empire against the backdrop of innocent spring.

The nation shattered, mountains and rivers remain;
city in spring, grass and trees burgeoning;
Feeling the times, blossoms draw tears;
hating separation, birds alarm the heart.
Beacon fires three months in succession,
a letter from home worth ten thousand in gold.
White hairs, fewer for the scratching,
soon too few to hold a hairpin up.

Let us examine how this five-syllable regulated poem reads in classical Chinese. Some of the rhymes and tones are hardly recognizable in the modern Mandarin pronunciation of the characters given here, but they did rhyme and tonally harmonize during the Tang Dynasty. "Level tones" are marked with a hyphen (-); "deflected tones," with a straight line (|):

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**FIRST COUPLER**

(Chinese characters)

| 圆破 | 山 | | 何在 |

| guó | pò | shān | hé | zài |

| (modern Mandarin pronunciation) |

| | | | |

| nation | shattered | mountain | river | remain |

| (tonal pattern) |

| | | | |

| (word-for-word translation) |

| 城 | 春 | 草 | 水 | 深 |

| chéng | chūn | cǎo | shuǐ | shēn |

| (rhyme word) |

| | | | |

| city | spring | grass | tree | grow | thick |

| | | | | | |

| feel | time | blossom | shed | tear |

| | | | | |

| (rhyme word) |

| 恨别 | 鸟 | 驿心 |

| hèn | bié | niǎo | jì |

| hate | separation | bird | alarm | heart |

| | | | | |

| 烽火 | 连 | 三 | 月 |

| féng | huǒ | lián | sān | yuè |

| beacon | fire | in | succession | 3 | months |
One of the most prominent poets of his time, Wang Wei was also a well-respected painter and musician. He confesses in one poem that he was a poet only “by mistake” and that he must have been a painter in an earlier life.

Wang Wei was born into an aristocratic family and passed the civil service examination at the age of twenty. He rose steadily in the ranks of the official bureaucracy but his career was interrupted in 755, when the frontier general An Lushan rebelled against the Tang—leading to the siege that occasioned Du Fu’s “Spring Prospect.” Although the emperor and his immediate entourage fled, many officials were captured by the rebels and forced to work for An Lushan’s military government. When the revolt was put down, Wang Wei escaped charges of collaboration only thanks to the intervention of his brother, a high-ranking government official. Once rehabilitated, he served in office until his death.

The An Lushan Rebellion was the most catastrophic event in three centuries of Tang Dynasty rule (618–907). That a simple frontier general of Central Asian origin could bring down an empire that was at the time the largest and most efficiently administered in the world came as a profound shock to the Chinese and their East Asian neighbors; and it became a defining moment for Wang Wei’s generation. Yet unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Du Fu, Wang Wei wrote almost nothing about it. The poem “While I Was Imprisoned in Puti Monastery” is unusual in this regard. Written when Wang Wei was held captive by An Lushan’s rebels, it describes efforts of the former Tang court musicians to resist the rebel government’s request to perform at its victory banquet. The poem was circulated after the rebellion as proof of Wang Wei’s resistance to the rebel government, thereby aiding his rehabilitation.

Although he could write in an ornate style on public court occasions, Wang Wei is known mainly for his ability to evoke tranquil scenes of rural retreat and convey a sense of dispassionate detachment from the world. His vignettes of recluse life combine simplicity and deliberate craft. He bought a retreat in the Zhongnan Mountains and later the “Wang River” estate outside the capital, which he and his friend Pei Di celebrated in a series of poems.

Wang Wei also painted the various scenic spots he mentions in his poetry. None of his original paintings are preserved, but the survival of many imitations suggests that they were very popular. Wang Wei is considered a pioneer of Chinese landscape art, known particularly for his monochrome painting, which uses black ink-wash on white paper; this technique allows the painter to depict landscapes dominated by white.

His interest in snow scenes is also evident in “White Rock Rapids,” in which he paints—in poetry—families washing white silk under bright moonlight, with white rocks and dark rushes implicit in the background.

Wang Wei’s poetry echoes his friendship with Buddhist monks and recluse and his commitment to Buddhism. Whereas other poets celebrated the landscape as it appears to the senses, Wang Wei often represents an insubstantiality that corresponds to the notion of the “emptiness” of things—the fundamental Buddhist conviction that all we perceive is illusion.
Zhongnan Retreat

In middle years I am rather fond of the Tao;
My late home is at the foot of Southern Mountain.
When the feeling comes, each time I go there alone.
That splendid things are empty, of course, I know.
I walk to the place where the water ends
And sit and watch the time when clouds rise.
Meeting by chance an old man of the forest,
I chat and laugh without a date to return.

In Response to Vice-Magistrate Zhang

In late years I care for tranquility alone—
A myriad affairs do not concern my heart.
A glance at myself: there are no long-range plans.
I only know to return to the old forest.
Pine winds blow, loosening my belt;
The mountain moon shines as I pluck my zither.
You ask about reasons for success and failure:
A fisherman’s song enters the shore’s deeps.

From Wang River Collection

Preface: My retreat is in the Wang River mountain valley. The places, to walk to include: Meng Wall Cove, Huazi Hill, Grained Apricot Lodge, Clear Bamboo Range, Deer Enclosure, Magnolia Enclosure, Dogwood Bank, Sophora Path, Lakeside Pavilion, Southern Hillock, Lake Yi, Willow Waves, Luan Family Shallows, Gold Powder Spring, White Rock Rapids, Northern Hillock, Bamboo Lodge, Magnolia Bank, Lacquer Tree Garden, and Pepper Tree Garden. When Pei Di and I were at leisure, we each composed the following quatrains.

Deer Enclosure

Empty mountain, no man is seen.
Only heard are echoes of men’s talk.
Reflected light enters the deep wood
And shines again on blue-green moss.

Lake Yi

Blowing flutes cross to the distant shore.
At day’s dusk I bid farewell to you.
On the lake with one turn of the head:
Mountain green rolls into white clouds.

Gold Powder Spring

Drink each day at Gold Powder Spring
And you should have a thousand years or more:
To soar on an azure phoenix with striped dragons,
And with plumage and tassels attend the Jade Emperor’s court.

White Rock Rapids

Clear and shallow, White Rock Rapids.
Green rushes once could be grasped.
Families live east and west of the water,
Washing silk beneath the bright moon.

Written on Crossing the Yellow River to Quinghe

A boat sailing on the great river—
The gathered waters reach to the end of the sky.
Sky and waves suddenly split asunder:
A commandery city—a thousand, ten thousand homes.
Farther on I see a city market again;
There seems to be some mulberry and hemp.
Looking back at my old home country:
The water’s expanse joins the clouds and mist.

While I Was Imprisoned in Puti Monastery, Pei Di Came to See Me. He Spoke of How the Rebels Ordered Music Played at Frozen Emerald Pond; after the Court Musicians Began to Play, Their Tears Fell. I Secretly Recited and Presented This to Pei Di

From ten thousand homes of grieving hearts arise wild smoke,
The hundred officials—when will they again attend court?
Autumn sophora leaves fall within the empty palace.
Next to Frozen Emerald Pond, music from pipes and strings.

1. All selections translated by and with notes adapted from Pauline Yu.
2. A fellow poet and minor official (b. 716), one of Wang Wei’s closest friends.
Farewell

Dismounting I give you wine to drink,
And inquire where you are going.
You say you did not achieve your wishes
And return to rest at the foot of Southern Mountain.
But go—do not ask again:
White clouds have no ending time.


Li Bo cultivated this reputation by writing poems that tell of encounters with immortals and of cloud-climbing excursions through the heavens.

Of the thousand-some poems by Li Bo that survive, many are written in the old verse form popular before the rise of regulated poetry during the Tang. Li Bo particularly liked to imitate folk songs and infuse his poetry with colloquial and bold language. In this way he could sometimes give voice to the common people's hardships: in "South of the Walls We Fought," for example, he echoes an older anonymous lament of soldiers fallen in battle, turning it into bitter criticism of the constant warfare of his time on the northern and northwestern frontier of Tang China against peoples such as the Tibetans.

Li Bo and Du Fu are considered the most important Tang poets, and readers and critics over the past millennium have devoted considerable effort to debating their relative merits and shortcomings. Quite apart from the greatness of their poetry, they made a particularly fitting couple, because they embody the two poles of poetic creativity that have been of greatest concern in the Chinese literary tradition: while Du Fu became the poet who captured, chronicled, and criticized reality within its limits, Li Bo came to stand for the poet who dedicated himself to breaking free from social convention and from the limits imposed by reality.

The Sun Rises and Sets

The sun comes up from its nook in the east,
Seems to rise from beneath the earth,
Passes on through Heaven,
sets once again in the western sea,
And where, oh, where, can its team of six dragons ever find any rest?
Its daily beginnings and endings,
since ancient times never resting.
And man is not made of its Primal Stuff—
how can he linger beside it long?
Plants feel no thanks for their flowering in spring's wind,
Nor do trees hate losing their leaves under autumn skies:
Who wields the whip that drives along four seasons of changes—
The rise and the ending of all things is just the way things are.

Xihe! Xihe!
Why must you always drown yourself in those wild and reckless waves?
What power had Luyang?

1. Translated by Stephen Owen.
2. Goddess who drove the sun's carriage.
3. According to legend, the lord of Luyang stopped the sun so that he could continue to fight in combat.
That he halted your course by shaking his spear?
This perversity of things, err from Heaven's will—
So many lies and deceits!
I'll wrap this Mighty Mudball of a world all up in a bag
And be wild and free like Chaos itself!

South of the Walls We Fought*

We fought last year at the Sanggan's source,
this year we fight on the Cong River road.
We washed weapons in the surf of Tiaozi,
grazed horses on grass in Sky Mountain's snow.
Thousands of miles ever marching and fighting:
until all the Grand Army grows frail and old.
The Xiongnu treat slaughter as farmers treat plowing;
since bygone days only white bones are seen in their fields of yellow sand.
The House of Qin built the wall to guard against the Turk;
for the House of Han the beacon fires were blazing still.

Beacon fires blaze without ceasing,
the marching and battle never end.
They died in fighting on the steppes,
their vanquished horses neigh,
mourning to the sky.
Kites and ravens peck men's guts,
fly with them dangling from their beaks and hang them high on boughs of barren trees.
The troops lie mud-smeared in grasses,
and the general acted all in vain.
Now I truly see that weapons are evil's tools:
the Sage will use them only when he cannot do otherwise.

Bring in the Wine

Look there!
The waters of the Yellow River, coming down from Heaven, rush in their flow to the sea, never turn back again.

Look there!
Bright in the mirrors of mighty halls a grieving for white hair, this morning blue-black strands of silk, now turned to snow with evening.
For satisfaction in this life taste pleasure to the limit,
And never let a goblet of gold face the bright moon empty.
Heaven bred in me talents, and they must be put to use.
I toss away a thousand in gold, it comes right back to me.
So boil a sheep, butcher an ox,
make merry for a while.
And when you sit yourself to drink, always down three hundred cups.
Hey, Master Cen, Ho, Danqui,*
Bring 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.
The sages and worthies of ancient days now lie silent forever, And only the greatest drinkers have a fame that lingers on!
Once long ago the prince of Chen held a party at Pingle Lodge,*
A gallon of wine cost ten thousand cash, all the joy and laughter they pleased.
So you, my host, How can you tell me you're short on cash? Go right out!

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4. Translated by Stephen Owen.
5. Four locations of Tang campaigns in the north and northwest.
7. Translated by Stephen Owen.
8. Two friends of Li Bo.
9. The scene of merry parties described by the poet Cao Zhi (192–232), the brother of Cao Pi, the author of "A Discourse on Literature."
The Hardships of Traveling the Road I

Clear wine in golden goblets, at ten thousand a peck:
Prized delicacies on jade plates, worth a myriad cash.
But I stopped the cup, threw down the chopsticks, was unable to eat:
I took out my sword, stared all around, my heart was blindly lost.
I wanted to cross the Yellow River, but ice blocked the waterway:
Was about to climb the Taihang range, but snow darkened the sky.
At my ease I let fall a line, sitting by the side of a stream;
Longed to be aboard ship again and dreamt of the realm of the sun.

The hardships of traveling the road—hardships of traveling the road:
So many branching roads!—and where now am I?
The long wind will smite the waves, and surely will come a time,
To hang straight the cloudy sail and cross the gray-blue sea!

Seeing Off Meng Haoran at Yellow Crane Tower,
on His Way to Guangling

My old friend bids farewell in the west at Yellow Crane Tower.
Amid misty blossoms of the third month goes down to Yangzhou.
His lone sail's far shadow vanishes in the deep-blue void.
Now I see only the Long River flowing to the edge of the sky.

In the Quiet Night

The floor before my bed is bright:
Moonlight—like hoarfrost—in my room.
I lift my head and watch the moon.
I drop my head and think of home.

Sitting Alone by Jingting Mountain

The flocks of birds have flown high and away,
A solitary cloud goes off calmly alone.
We look at each other and never get bored—
Just me and Jingting Mountain.

1. Translated by Vikram Seth.
2. Translated by Stephen Owen.
3. Translated by Vikram Seth.
4. Translated by Paul Kroll.
5. Translated by Paul Kroll.
6. A famous scenic spot in the southeastern city of Hangzhou.
7. Translated by Vikram Seth.
8. Translated by Stephen Owen.
A Song on Visiting Heaven's Crone Mountain in a Dream: On Parting

Seaforers speak of that isle of Ying—
but in blurred expanses of breakers and mist
it is hard indeed to find.

Yue men tell of Heaven's Crone,
appearing, then gone, it may be seen
in the clouds and colored wisps.

Heaven's Crone reaches to sky
and sideways runs to the sky,
its force stands over the Five Great Peaks,
it casts Redwall in the shade.

Mount Tiantai is forty and eight
thousand yards high,
yet facing this it seems to tip,
sagging southeastwardly.

And I, wishing to reach that place,
one dreamed of Wu and Yue,
I spent a whole night flying across
the moon in Mirror Lake.

The lake moon caught my reflection,
and went with me on to Shan Creek.
The place where Lord Xie spent the night
is still to be found there now,
where green waters are ruffled in ripples,
and the gibbon's wail is clear.

I put on the clogs of Lord Xie,
and scaled that ladder into blue clouds.
Halfway up cliffside I saw sun in sea,
and heard in the air the Heaven-Cock crow.

A thousand peaks and ten thousand turns,
my path was uncertain;
I was lost among flowers and rested on rock,
when suddenly all grew black.

Bears roared and dragons groaned,
making the cliff-streams quake,
the deep forests were shivering,—tiered ridges shook,

clouds hung blue,—portending rain,
troubled waters rolled,—giving off mists.

Thunder-rumbling in Lightening Cracks,
hill ridges split and fell;
thenthe stone doors of Caves to Heaven
swung open with a crash.

A billowing vast blue blackness
whose bottom could not be seen,
where sun and moon were gleaming
on terraces silver and gold.

Their coats were of rainbow,—winds were their steeds,
the lords of the clouds—came down in their hosts.
Tigers struck harps,—phoenixes drew coaches in circles,
those who are the Undying—stood in ranks like hemp.
All at once my soul was struck,—and my spirit shuddered,
I leapt up in dazed alarm,—and gave a long sigh.
I was aware only—of this moment's pillow and mat,
I had lost those mists and bright wisps—that had been here just
before.

All pleasures in our mortal world
are also just like this,
whatever has happened since ancient times
is the water flowing east.

When I leave you now, you go,—when will you ever return?
just set a white deer out to graze
upon green mountainsides,
and when I must go, I'll ride it
to visit mountains of fame.

How can I pucker my brows and break my waist
serving power and prestige?—
it makes me incapable
of relaxing heart or face.

9. Translated by Stephen Owen.
1. One of the islands of immortals.
2. A mountain near the ancient southern state of Yue.
3. A sacred Buddhist mountain in southeastern China (modern Zhejiang Province).
4. A 5th-century poet renowned for his landscape poetry he was also famous for supposedly inventing special mountain-climbing shoes.
Du Fu failed in his political ambitions, and his poetry was not widely read during his lifetime. But during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) he rose to the top of the poetic canon because of his versatility and ability to capture the dramatic historical events and spirit of his age. Ever since that time, Du Fu, together with Li Bo, has maintained the reputation as the greatest of Chinese poets.

Du Fu was the grandson of a prominent court poet. Although he dreamed of an official career, that dream was dashed after he twice failed the civil service examination. When An Lushan rebelled in 755, the imperial court escaped but Du Fu was left behind in the capital. Eventually he slipped through the enemy lines and made his way to the court of the new emperor in exile. There he briefly held one of the court positions he had so much desired; but following the recapture of the capital, he was exiled to a minor provincial post. He soon quit in disgust and embarked on a lifetime of travels. He first went to seek the help of relatives in northwest China, and then took up residence in Chengdu in Sichuan Province. In his later years Du Fu moved to Kuibou, where he produced his most admired poetry sequence, the "Autumn Meditations."

Du Fu is considered the "poet-historian" of Chinese literature, carrying out the Confucian duty to chronicle and criticize the events of his time. Prophetically, he grasped that the An Lushan Rebellion was an event of major historical proportions. But it was his ability to capture the rebellion's impact on his life and on the lives of the people around him that gave depth to his voice. In "Moonlight Night" Du Fu imagines his wife, whom he had managed to send to safety while he remained trapped in the occupied capital, watching the moon and worrying about him; "Qiang Village" conveys the riveting scene of reunion, after Du Fu has finally escaped from the capital and is reunited with his family. But the effects of the rebellion linger on even after it is quashed; a decade later, he devotes "Ballad of the Firewood Vendors" to the local working women in his new home in Kuibou who despair that the loss of life has destroyed the marriage prospects of an entire generation.

The greatness of Du Fu's poetry lies in its extraordinary range of themes, styles, and observations. His poetic mastery is particularly visible in his preferred verse form, the regulated poem, in which he can be not just witty but also prophetic and visionary. Even when he is sober and humble, his everyday observations can reach cosmic proportions and take the unsuspecting reader by surprise.

Painted Hawk

Wind-blown frost rises from plain white silk, a gray falcon—paintwork's wonder.

Body strains, its thoughts on the cunning hare, its eyes turn sidelong like a Turk in despair.

You could pinch the rays glinting on tie-ring, its stance, to be called to the column's rail.

When will it strike the common birds?—bloody feathers strewning the weed-covered plain.

Moonlight Night

From her room in Fuzhou tonight, all alone she watches the moon.

Far away, I grieve that her children can't understand why she thinks of Chang'an.

Fragrant mist in her cloud hair damp, clear luence on her jade arms cold—when will we lean by chamber curtains and let it light the two of us, our tear stains dried?

Spring Prospect

The nation shattered, mountains and rivers remain; city in spring, grass and trees burgeoning.

Feeling the times, blossoms draw tears; hating separation, birds alarm the heart.

Beacon fires three months in succession, a letter from home worth ten thousand in gold.

White hairs, fewer for the scratching, soon too few to hold a hairpin up.

1. Translated by Stephen Owen.
2. Translated by Burton Watson. This poem was written in 756, when Du Fu was held captive in the fallen capital of Chang'an during the An Lushan Rebellion and his wife and family had fled to safety in Fuzhou in the north.
3. Translated by Burton Watson. This poem was written when Du Fu was still a captive in Chang'an.
4. Officials used hairpins to keep their caps in place.
Spending the Night in a Tower by the River

And the raindrops ran down like strings,
Without a break.
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,
A building unshaken by wind or rain,
as solid as a mountain.
Oh, when shall I see before my eyes
A towering roof such as this?
Then I'd accept the ruin of my own little hut
And death by freezing.

I Stand Alone

A single bird of prey beyond the sky,
a pair of white gulls between riverbanks.
Hovering wind-tossed, ready to strike;
the pair, at their ease, roaming to and fro.
And the dew is also full on the grasses,
Spiders' filaments still not drawn in.
Instigations in nature approach men's affairs—
I stand alone in thousands of sources of worry.

Spending the Night in a Tower by the River

A visible darkness grows up mountain paths,
I lodge by river gate high in a study,
Frail cloud on cliff edge passing the night,
The lonely moon topples amid the waves.
Steady, one after another, a line of cranes in flight,
Howling over the hill, wild dogs and wolves.
No sleep for me. I worry over battles.
I have no strength to right the universe.

Qiang Village

Lofted and lifted, west of the clouds of red,
The trek of the sun descends to the level earth.
By the brushwood gate songbirds and sparrows chaffer,
And the homebound stranger from a thousand li6 arrives.
Wife and children marvel that I am here:
When the shock wears off, still they wipe away tears.
In the disorders of the age was I tossed and flung:
That I return alive is a happening of chance.
Neighbors swarm up to the tops of the walls,
Touched and sighing, even they sob and weep.
The night wastes on, and still we hold the candle,
Across from another, as if asleep and in a dream.

My Thatched Roof Is Ruined by the Autumn Wind

In the high autumn skies of September
The wind cried out in rage,
Tearing off in whirls from my rooftop
Three plies of thatch.
The thatch flew across the river,
Was strewn on the floodplain,
The high stalks tangled in tips
Of tall forest trees,
The low ones swirled in gusts across ground
And sank into mud puddles.
The children from the village to the south
Made a fool of me, impotent with age,
Without compunction plundered what was mine
Before my very eyes,
Brazenly took armfuls of thatch,
Ran off into the bamboo,
And I screamed with dry and throat raw,
But no use.
Then I made my way home, leaning on staff,
Sighing to myself.
A moment later the wind calmed down,
Clouds turned dark as ink,
The autumn sky rolling and overcast,
Blackest towards sunset.
And our cotton quilts were years old
And cold as iron,
My little boy slept poorly,
Kicked rips in them.
Above the bed the roof leaked,
No place was dry.

5. Translated by Paul Kroll. This poem was written in 757, when Du Fu finally rejoined his family after their separation during the turmoil of the An Lushan Rebellion.
6. About 250 miles.
7. Translated by Stephen Owen.
8. Translated by Stephen Owen.
9. Translated by Stephen Owen.
Thoughts while Travelling at Night

Light breeze on the fine grass,
I stand alone at the mast.

Stars lean on the vast wild plain,
Moon bows in the Great River’s spate.

Let there have brought no fame.
Office? Too old to obtain.

Drifting, what am I like?
A still between earth and sky.

Ballad of the Firewood Vendors

Kuizhou women, hair half gray,
forty, fifty, and still no husbands;
since the ravages of rebellion, harder than ever
to marry—
a whole life steeped in bitterness and long sighs.

Local custom decrees that men sit, women stand;
men mind the house door, women go out and work,
at eighteen, nineteen, off peddling firewood,
with money they get from firewood, making
ends meet.

Till they’re old, hair in two buns dangling to the neck,
stuck with wild flowers, a mountain leaf, a silver pin,
they struggle up the steep paths, flock to the market gate,
risk their lives for extra gain by dipping from salt wells.

Faces powdered, heads adorned, sometimes a trace
of tears,
cramped fields, thin clothing, the weariness of
stony slopes—
But if you say all are ugly as the women of Witch’s
Mountain,
how to account for Zhaojun, born in a village to
the north?

Autumn Meditations IV

I’ve heard them say, Chang’an’s like a chessboard;
sad beyond bearing, the happenings of these
hundred years!
Mansions of peers and princes, all with new
owners now;
in civil or martial cap and garb, not the same as before,
Over mountain passes, due north, gongs and
drums resound;
wagons and horses pressing west speed the
feather-decked dispatches.
Fish and dragons sunk in sleep, autumn rivers cold;
old homeland, those peaceful times, forever in
my thoughts!

4. Translated by Burton Watson. This poem comes from Du Fu’s most famous poetic cycle, “Allah Meditations.”
5. Feathers attached to military dispatches marked the message as urgent; Uighurs were threatening from the north and Tibetans from the west.

W with more than 2,800 poems, Bo Juyi (or Bai Juyi) stands out as the most prolific Tang poet. In “Last Poem” we see him on his deathbed, still busy scribbling poems to send back to his friends. Like no writer before him Bo Juyi recorded his daily life in poetry, considering such matters as his taste for fresh bamboo shoots, prices on the flower market, or the purchase of his beloved estate outside the capital. Seeking to write poetry as autobiography, he was also a highly self-conscious poet: in “On My Portrait” he laughs at himself, “some mountain man,” and reads in his own face signs portending ruin rather than success.

Bo Juyi wrote in many styles and guises, but his “New Music Bureau Poetry,” which drew attention to corrupt political practices and social abuses, was especially important to him. During the earlier Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.—220 C.E.) the imperial Music Bureau was founded to collect songs from the people and provide musical performances. Its mission reflected the Confucian conviction that rulers should adjust their policies to the needs of their subjects and that song and poetry were particularly effective