

THREE POEMS OF TU FU

Translated from the Chinese by Chao Tse-Chiang

A SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF TU FU

Tu Fu (712-770 A.D.) lived in the T'ang Dynasty, the golden age of Chinese poetry. He and Li Po (701-762 A.D.) were close friends. Yuan Chen (779-831 A.D.), a great poet, remarked: "Ever since there have been poets, Tu Fu is the greatest." However, Li Po and Tu Fu rival each other in poetic fame.

Tu Fu was born in Yao Wan, a village near Kung Hsien in Central China. One of his ancestors was a general of the highest rank, and his grandfather a poet of renown. From childhood he appreciated the dance, wrote poetry, and practised calligraphy. In boyhood he won the respect of contemporaneous men of letters. In early manhood he travelled in East China to meet well-known poets and Buddhist monks, and enjoyed hunting and archery there. Then he went to Ch'ang-an, the capital, in Northwest China, for a literary examination for a chin-shih degree; but he failed to pass because of the incompetence of the chief examiner. Later he took another examination, but he again failed because of the treachery of the Prime Minister. Subsequently he lived in poverty, selling medicinal herbs for a living. Since youth he had been ambitious to be a statesman, so to Emperor Hsuan-tsung he submitted three pieces of rhymed prose on state ceremonies and social institutions. The Emperor, admiring his writing, summoned him to report to the Academy of Literati for a special examination. Consequently he was ordered by the Bureau of Appointments to wait for a government position. He waited four years. Finally he was made Registrar for the Crown Prince. Then the An Lu-shan rebellion broke out, which for a brief period usurped the throne of the T'ang Dynasty. He became a refugee, and one of his children died of starvation. When he learned that the Crown Prince had been enthroned as Emperor Su-tsung, he rushed to the Court-in-Exile to pledge his loyalty. Consequently he was appointed State Counsellor. But, owing to his protest to the new Emperor against the demotion of another Prime Minister, he was banished to a border town to serve as Director of Education. After his resignation there occurred a famine. Destitution forced him to pick acorns and chestnuts for food. He wandered to a city where he built a hut with financial help from his cousin and settled for a few months. During that time a governor-general made him a military adviser; but as the result of a few careless words, the governor-general almost killed him. He resigned his post, roved with his family in the scenic Three Gorges, and dwelt in a village as a farmer. In his declining years he suffered from tuberculosis and deafness in his left ear.

Hoping to receive monetary support from his good friend and his uncle, he undertook a long trip to Lei-yang in South China; but, after encountering a flood and privations, he returned northward. On his arduous journey he died somewhere between T'an-chou and Yo-chou at the age of fifty-nine.

In the opinion of many Chinese poets and critics, Tu Fu is the prince of Chinese poets. On the one hand, he makes a synthesis of the poetic devices used before his age; on the other, he is the poet who has had the strongest influence on later poets. He has been called the Poet-Sage, because he wrote in the tradition of the Book of Odes, the most ancient anthology of Chinese poetry, and because he wrote in the spirit of Confucius, the greatest Chinese humanist. He is exquisite and sweet, sonorous and magniloquent. His style is marked, to use his own words, by "purified freshness" and "mellow maturity."

Chao-Tze-chiang.

ON SEEING FLOWERS FALLING BEFORE A BOAT IN A STORM

Peach branches beside houses
 Near the river
 Stretch over the sparse hedgerows
 In spring's cold
 And drizzle, the green water
 Luring shadows.
 Jealous of red blossoms,
 Wind blows them down;
 The hard-pressed, lazy petals
 Lie by the boat,
 Thus intimidated
 By water-sheen
 And vigour of the wind.
 I, resenting
 Their frivolous canopy
 Over my breast,
 Solemnly and distinctly
 Refuse to greet them.

Long soaking postpones their flight;
 They would desire
 To fly at even half
 Their usual pitch.
 More delicate than feathers,
 They are matted
 In sand and teased by grass.
 Butterflies
 And bees, by nature, are wild.
 The dragonfly,
 That stealer of glances,
 Avoids the shriek.

THE OFFICER IN SHIH-HAO

At dusk I lodged in Shih-hao Village.
 A recruiting officer came that night.
 An old man climbed the wall and fled;
 His old wife ran outdoors to stare.
 How furious the officer's shout!
 How bitter the woman's lamentation!
 As she advanced, I heard her say:
 "My three sons were defending Yeh;
 One sent a letter back, saying
 The other two had died in battle.
 Let the living live ignobly!
 The dead are everlastingly gone!
 There are no men left in my home.
 I have only a suckling grandson
 Whose mother, for her son, remains.
 She comes and goes in a tattered skirt.
 Although I am a feeble crone,
 Sir, let me follow you tonight.
 When you rush to the Ho-yang front,

I can at least cook your breakfast."
 Deep in the night, her voice failed;
 I seemed to hear her sobbing moan.
 At daybreak, I resumed my journey;
 Only the old man bowed farewell.

ELEGY ON THE RIVERSIDE

The Aged Rustic from Small Mound,
 With stifled sobs,
 Steals along the Winding River
 On a spring day.
 The thousand palace gates stand locked
 On the Riverside.
 These slender willows and fresh reeds—
 For whom are they green?
 When the rainbow standards fluttered
 In the South Park,
 All, all things there glowed in colours.
 The First Lady
 Of the Morning Sun Palace attended
 The King in his coach.
 Leading the cavalcade, the ladies
 With bows and arrows,
 Rode on the white horses that champed
 At their gold bits.
 One lady, looking toward the sky,
 Shot at the clouds;
 When a winged pair came dropping,
 Laughter burst out.
 Where can we see those shining eyes
 And sparkling teeth?
 The wandering ghost, besmeared with blood,
 Will not return.

The Limpid River flows to the east;
 The Sword Cliffs sink.
 The living and the dead want news
 Of each other.
 Those with a heart shed tears enough
 To drench their breasts.
 Grass and flowers by the River,
 Will you perish?
 The Tartar horses fill the city
 With dust at twilight.
 The yokel, to flee from the town south,
 Looks towards the north.

COMMENTARY AND NOTES ON *ELEGY ON THE RIVERSIDE*

Tu Fu mourns the death of Yang Kuei-fei, the favourite concubine of Emperor Hsuan-tsung, and laments the decline and temporary fall of the T'ang Empire. This poem may be said to illustrate the Chinese conception of the epic. The hero, or rather the heroine, is described in such a concise and compressed manner that she, to the English reader, may lack complete individuation. Thus this poem is not heroic in the Homeric and Virgilian sense. In Chinese poetry the quality of the epic inheres in that of the historical lyric. Tu Fu, known as the Poet-Historian, expresses through lyricism his personal sufferings in the epical defeat of the Emperor and the outrageous misconduct of the concubine. It would be appropriate to say that this elegy is a lyric-epic.

The Aged Rustic from Small Mound: This is a name Tu Fu gave himself. He considered himself an ungainly old yokel who once lived in Shao-ling, or Small Mound, a village to the southeast of Ch'ang-an, the Capital.

The First Lady of the Morning Sun Palace: She was Empress Chao Fei-yen of the Han Dynasty. Tu Fu used her to symbolize Yang Kuei-fei in order to avoid explicit satire on the concubine and to express his Confucian spirit of the Mean.

The wandering ghost: The ghost of Yang Kuei-fei who was hanged at the request of the Royal Army because they regarded her as the cause of the Empire's fall.

The Limpid River: A symbol for Yang Kuei-fei whose tomb was on the south bank of the clear Wei River, or Limpid River.

The Sword Cliffs: A symbol for Emperor Hsuan-tsung who escaped through the two Sword Cliffs when the Capital fell to the rebels.

The Tartar horses: The cavalymen of An Lu-shan, the Tartar who led the rebellion.

Looks towards the north: Tu Fu looked forward to the return of the Royal Army which had retreated north of the occupied Capital.