Du Fu Transforms: Tradition and Ethics amid Societal Collapse. By Lucas Bender. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center Press, 2021. Pp. xiii + 411. $65.00 hardcover.

Lucas Bender's *Du Fu Transforms*, in its simplest sense, sets out to bring a new perspective on the perennial question of what makes Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) so special—a goal that almost all books about Du Fu share. More intriguingly, however, Bender confronts that fact directly and weaves it into his methodology. Rather than merely repeating well-worn claims about the poet's unparalleled innovativeness or uniquely empathetic and ethical spirit, he aims to get at the real Du Fu by disentangling the poet's own queries and explorations—be they literary, spiritual, or both—from the stubborn effects of what Bender terms "recordizing readings": the entrenched practice of reading Du Fu's writings almost exclusively as reliable biographical records of his life experiences. Bender strenuously objects to this practice on several grounds, taking particular aim at what he views as its disregard for (if not outright denial of) the centrality of the poet's aesthetic imagination and intentional approach to the technical skills he puts at its service, a disregard that derives from the longstanding and increasingly anachronistic assumptions about the nature of poetry writing. These, he argues, are the legacy of Song- and Qing-dynasty critics, which has been absorbed and amplified by the influential work of such scholars as Pauline Yu and Stephen Owen. This practice of recordizing reading, he argues, is at odds with what Du Fu was most likely trying to achieve in his own time, and, therefore, does considerable injustice to his true achievement.

In a strong echo of Robert Ashmore's 2010 book on Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–427),[1] Lucas Bender's *Du Fu Transforms* proposes to correct centuries of misreading by identifying key early and contemporaneous texts on literary writing that reflect the poetic standards and beliefs current in Du Fu's lifetime, and to recover the true nature of Du Fu's poetic intentions and achievements by reading his poetry through the lens of those texts. Tang-dynasty poetic discourse was characterized, he shows, not by a preference for biographical self-documentation—or even "authentic" self-expression (narrowly defined)—but by a "tropological" poetic practice, in which poets enunciate points of coherence between their experiences and those of a range of inherited personae. Bender's chronological examination of Du Fu's poetry, specifically as it relates to this practice, reveals a trajectory from a youthful acceptance of tropological categories as an adequate ethical framework for poetry, through a period when

[1] Robert Ashmore, *The Transport of Reading: Text and Understanding in the World of Tao Qian (365–427)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Du Fu "failed" in his attempts to adhere to this framework, and finally, to an end-of-life, post–An Lushan Rebellion realization that, in fact, the tropology had failed him—not the other way around. This trajectory, which reads as a definitive victory for our ever-melancholy and self-critical poet, Bender proposes, accounts for Du Fu's late-age rebellious and innovative poeticization of the mundane and the quotidian, and a tradition-bending meta-awareness of the function of tropological modes of writing as such.

There is much to commend this book, from the erudition that underlies the weaving together of traditional commentary, historical context, contemporary literary theory, and close reading, to the often-elegant writing that improbably brings Du Fu to life yet again—providing us with one of the forgotten joys of single-author studies. Bender successfully fine-tunes our understanding of Du Fu's relationship with both his inherited tradition and his real-life experiences and, in the process, offers thought-provoking readings of a wealth of poems, many of which are rarely discussed or translated. The timing of his work allows him to both benefit from and play off of Stephen Owen's complete translation of the entire Du Fu corpus, a circumstance (whether prescient or fortuitous) that endows his book with particular value.

Among the more transformative (to borrow a word from Bender's title) aspects of this book are its insights into how ethical and poetic concerns, brought so vividly into contact with one another during Du Fu's lifetime, work themselves out in this single poet's oeuvre. Investigating what it means for a poet, or for any artist perhaps, to create while fearing for the very survival of the culture and values that they hold dear, Bender argues that these were the real stakes for Du Fu—not just how to write poetry, but how to write poetry that would continue to matter, and to do so on what seemed to be the eve of the destruction of the world as he knew it. It is this aspect of the book, its willingness to foreground the impact of Du Fu's ambivalence and anxiety on his poetry, that makes it both memorable and worthwhile; it is here, in the restoration of Du Fu's humanity (and not just his humaneness) that we see the true fruits of Bender's approach to the material. And, although he never makes it obvious, readers of Bender's book cannot but notice the relevance of this portrait of Du Fu to artists—indeed, all people (us scholars included)—living at the inflection point of our own era.

There are places in the book where one sees the author struggling to work out a problem, and although they may provoke impatience in some readers, I would argue that these are valuable as well. To take one example: Bender appears to be at pains to distance himself from the tradition of "recordizing reading" he so strenuously critiques while executing a work that depends on that tradition's most recognizable methodology: that of reading a poet's work teleologically, as a true representation of his psychological and artistic evolution as it responds to and reflects on a specific historical context. Bender clearly believes there is a significant difference between reading poetry as a non-fictional record of the poet's year-to-year life (a practice

with which he disagrees) and reading it as a non-fictional record of his year-to-year investigation into his relationship with the poetic tradition. One would wish to see a more explicit discussion of the qualitative distinction between the two, so critical to the thesis of this book.

A second point of tension arises whenever Bender claims that Du Fu is unique in his appreciation of the inadequacy of conventional categories of poetic expression, and in his consequential drive to reform it. This view is baked into the book's hypothesis; but Bender seems torn between the belief that everyone shares this position and the conviction that it needs to be proven. This slight wobble can become a distraction at times, compelling the reader to think of all the other "unique" and expressively restless poets before Du Fu. An ample amount of scholarship exists, for example, to demonstrate that this same brand of uniqueness was true of Du Fu's slightly older contemporary, Li Bai 李白 (701–762), whom he openly admired.[2] Bender does mention in passing that Li Bai was meta-poetically aware, too (without acknowledging any sources or offering examples), but relegates this to a one-sentence footnote, observing simply that Li Bai did it differently. When uniqueness (whether through meta-poetic awareness or any other feature of the oeuvre) constitutes the core of an argument, then it is de facto based on a comparison of some kind. It is disconcerting to find the substance of that comparison left wholly implicit. If Bender, perhaps understandably, wanted to avoid succumbing to the convention of pairing Li and Du, there are still other poets with whom he could and should contend: Tao Yuanming (in his embrace of the mundane, a poetic practice that the author surprisingly identifies as beginning with Du Fu) or Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) (in his own resolute rejection of the tropologies of his day). What great poet has not, in fact, become just that through their search for a poetic language that better suited their life and times than that which they inherited? Will our appreciation of Du Fu be in any way marred by a recognition that he is not absolutely unique in this regard?

These two criticisms aside, *Du Fu Transforms* makes an enduring contribution to our understanding of this inexhaustibly stirring poet, about whom, until now, it has long seemed that there was little left to say. Bender's impatience with received wisdom and his questioning of the legacy of seemingly unassailable scholars in our field, both ancient and modern, are refreshing. Furthermore, in a field that has all but turned

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[2] My own 2003 study of Li Bai details precisely this phenomenon—Li Bai's recognition of the inadequacy of the received tradition as a means to express his own experience, and his consequent creative use of the conventionality of convention as a new means of writing poetry. That is but one source out of many that point in this direction.

away from single-author studies in its drive to become more thematic and theory-driven, Bender reminds us that, at least in some cases, single-author studies provide the very best lens through which to examine in real terms the effect of historical and other ambient forces on human beings, and on artists in particular.

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