Elegies for Empire: A Poetics of Memory in the Late Work of Du Fu. By Gregory M. Patterson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2024. Pp. 288. $49.95.

When I was a graduate student two decades ago, there was a common assumption, rarely stated explicitly but frequently relied on implicitly, that the "one-author study" was already passé methodologically, and that we needed instead to address broader topics in our work. Fortunately, more recent graduates have ignored this caution, with the result that we now have four English-language monographs on Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) just within the past decade, including the volume under review.[1] This is a salutary shift in the direction of Western sinology. Chinese literature is too vast and multifarious to be summed up in conveniently quotable nostrums and epoch-spanning generalizations, and demands instead painstaking research on individual writers and texts. Moreover, in the case of a seminal, prolific, and altogether superlative poet like Du Fu, there is always space for a new monograph. Gregory Patterson's well-written and thoughtful study does a splendid job of retracing Du Fu's writings during the brief period of two years or so (766–768) that he spent in Kuizhou 夔州, at the mouth of the Three Gorges in present-day Chongqing. Patterson attempts to unify Du Fu's cornucopian creativity in this period under the rubric of "poetics of memory," which occasionally fits awkwardly onto the materials under discussion; but his close readings of individual poems are compelling and do much to explain Du Fu's literary achievement within a contemporary literary-critical vocabulary.

Patterson's strength lies in the sensitive reading of key passages that show off Du Fu at his best. He opens with an exegesis of just four lines from a much longer poem, originally accompanied by a lengthy prose preface as well, "A Ballad on Viewing the Sword Dance of a Disciple of Madame Gongsun" 觀公孫大娘弟子舞劍器行 (Patterson's translation, pp. 1–2):[2]

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[1] In addition to the work under review here: Ji Hao, *The Reception of Du Fu (712–770) and His Poetry in Imperial China* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Lucas Rambo Bender, *Du Fu Transforms: Tradition and Ethics amid Societal Collapse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021); and Jue Chen, *Du Fu: The Song Dynasty Making of China's Greatest Poet* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

[2] The preface identifies the specific date of the occasion that provided the impetus to the poem: the nineteenth day in the tenth lunar month (15 November) in 767. See Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), #20.102, 5:335; Xiao Difei 蕭滌非, ed., *Du Fu quanji jiaozhu* 杜甫全集校注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2014), 18.5308.

The space of fifty years is like turning over a palm, 五十年間似反掌
a maelstrom of wind and dust darkened the royal house. 風塵溷洞昏王室
The Pear Garden Disciples dispersed like smoke, 梨園弟子散如煙
yet here the dancer's remnant form glows under a cold sun. 女樂餘姿映寒日

In this astonishing poem, Du Fu encounters the dance student of the master he had seen perform at court back when he was a mere four-year-old (in 716, or fourth year of the Kaiyuan 開元 reign [713–741], according to his preface), so the "space of fifty years" is not hyperbole. In the intervening years, Du Fu has not just witnessed the familiar calamities of senility and death, but the epochal An Lushan Rebellion. Far away from the capital where he had intended to lead a triumphant career, a chance encounter with a master of the Sword Dance brings to life before his eyes a memory from childhood. It provides a concise model for what Patterson terms the "poetics of memory," in which "Du Fu's recollections imaginatively produced his objects of identification, while also shaping his perceptions of the external vehicles that disclosed them in the present" (p. 9).

This quotation provides a splendid opening to the book, though I would quibble with one detail. Patterson frequently refers to and borrows from Stephen Owen's complete translation of Du Fu's verse; the second line here is rendered there as "a vast storm of windblown dust darkened the royal house."[3] The rhyming compound *hongdong* 溷洞 actually has a slightly different meaning related to other rhyming compounds like *hongmeng* 溷濛 or most famously *hundun* 混沌, all closely related phonologically: "confused and chaotic," or "muddled and murky." It thus points to the amnesiac effect of the passing years, which Du Fu's "poetics of memory" then works to counteract.[4]

The remaining five chapters of the book engage Du Fu's Kuizhou poetry in relation to five distinct topics: the frontier, the Three Gorges, the visual arts, autobiographical narrative, and regulated verse recalling Chang'an. The first three of these relate more to subject matter and the latter two more to form. But the third chapter on visual arts, especially painting, strikes me as key to the book in that it straddles content and form, with Du Fu's poetry on painting implicitly commenting on his aesthetic values more generally. This chapter, entitled "The Realm of Powder,

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[3] Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, #20.102, 5:335.

[4] One other slight quibble has to do with the title of this introduction: "Memory in the Twilight of Empire." A well-known recent study of the Opium War by Stephen R. Platt was entitled: *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age* (New York: Vintage, 2019). But in 767, the Tang had re-established its control and the Chinese imperial order had another eleven hundred years of life ahead of it.

Ink, and Resemblances: Social Memory in Poems on Visual Arts," offers a careful untangling of the different layers of reality, illusion, and artifice throughout Du Fu's poems on painting. Patterson begins by examining the earlier traditions of poems on painting and a couple of Du Fu's own earlier works in this vein, notably "A Song of Painting: Presented to General Cao Ba" 丹青引贈曹將軍霸, translated in full (pp. 135–38). As Patterson rightly observes, the poem vividly contrasts the painter Cao Ba at the apex of his career during the Kaiyuan period, creating works so realistic they seemed genuine (*zhen* 真), with his fallen state today as a refugee: "The poem's illusionistic art is concentrated in its memory passages, the sheer vividness of which captures attention and compels belief" (p. 142). Similarly, in "Director Yang Further Brought Out a Painting of Hawks in Twelve Panels" 楊監又出畫鷹十二扇 (pp. 144–45), Du Fu begins by discussing the painter Feng Shaozheng 馮紹正, but abruptly swerves to a recollection of the capital: "I remember when to the Lishan Palace . . ." 憶昔驪山宮. The poem ends with the hawks still faithfully serving their lord within the imaged world, just as it was before the rebellion.

These poems artfully contrast the constancy of painting with the transformations of the world, while relying on Du Fu's personal memory as a bridge between past and present, art and truth. Thus, I would quibble slightly with the term "social memory" used in the title of this chapter; it seems to me rather that Du Fu's emphasis is very much on his own memory, in the ordinary sense of "memory." The meaning of "memory" is at issue throughout the book, of course, and is strained perhaps to its furthest limit in the first chapter on "Alien Kuizhou," dealing primarily with the Lao 獠 minority. This is an excellent essay on its own, previously published in *CLEAR* (*Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*), but Patterson's concluding claim of relevance strains plausibility: "It is because of this productive defamiliarizing of the self that the poems on local culture are so essential to understanding Du Fu's poetics of memory" (p. 60).

Chapter two on "historical memory" confronts a more fundamental issue, Du Fu's poetry on historical topics. Patterson cites the classic "Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine" 高唐賦 by Song Yu 宋玉 (n.d.), and then traces its echoes as they reverberate throughout Tang lyric poetry. The leisurely but enjoyable tour of Tang precedents concludes with Li Bai's "Lodging Beneath Wu Mountain" 宿巫山下 (p. 78). Interestingly, this poem was probably written quite a while before Du Fu's time in Kuizhou, as it is dated to 725 by Yu Xianhao 郁賢皓.[5] Patterson's translation of the second half of this poem (p. 78) misrepresents one key point:

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[5] Yu Xianhao, ed., *Li Taibai quanji jiaozhu* 李太白全集校注 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2015), 19.2532.

The rain's appearances were blown off by the wind,	雨色風吹去
and traveling south I neared the Chu kings.	南行拂楚王
On Gaoqiu Mountain I yearned for Song Yu—	高丘懷宋玉
seeking antiquity, the tearstains on our clothes one and the same.	訪古一霑裳

Rather than the "Chu kings," it seems simpler to understand that line as referring to the Goddess, transformed into rain and cloud, and brushing past the garment of the King of Chu, as in the rhapsody. There is no note for Gaoqiu 高丘, which may or may not be an actual mountain; it is an allusion to the "Lisao" 離騷 (Sublimating sorrow), line 216, and according to modern scholar Huang Linggeng 黃靈庚, it is the "Mound of Gao," or burial place of Chu ancestor, Gaoyang 高陽.[6] In other words, even if Li Bai is physically present at Mount Wu while he writes this poem, his mind is with Qu Yuan 屈原 (c. 340 B.C.E.–278 B.C.E.) and Song Yu, seeking out—or perhaps, "visiting"?—antiquity. In a similar vein, Du Fu's "Singing My Thoughts on Ancient Traces" 詠懷古跡 poem (pp. 79–80), also referring explicitly to Song Yu, is perhaps better understood as a meditation on antiquity than on memory. Indeed, the final section of this chapter treats the *huaigu* 懷古 theme in Du Fu's Kuizhou poetry, focusing particularly on his poems on Zhuge Liang. Patterson's reading of these poems is subtle and moving: "Like the evanescent trails of the Goddess, the opaque foliage of Zhuge Liang's cypress both promises and defers access to history" (p. 109).

While the first three chapters cover a wide range of topics, the fourth and fifth chapters engage Du Fu's more autobiographical poetry. Chapter four treats "Autobiographical Memory in Narrative Poems." It opens with a fascinating reflection on some previous studies of these poems, in particular William Hung's classic biography, *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet*.[7] Patterson reminds us of Hung's wonderful and absurd analogy between reading Du Fu and a polar bear listening to a recording of bird song (p. 161), and argues that previous scholars have sometimes overlooked Du Fu's form and technique in these verses.[8] Patterson's sensitive readings of "Travels of My Prime" 壯遊, "Past Travels" 昔遊, and "Expressing My Cares" 遣懷 (miswritten as 遷懷 on p. 157) are compelling, particularly as these poems do show us Du Fu sifting through his memories, reshaping them in form, building up a composite representation

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[6] See Nicholas Morrow Williams, *Elegies of Chu: An Anthology of Early Chinese Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 9 and 261.

[7] *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952).

[8] One recent exception is Lucas Rambo Bender's article, "Three Narrative Sequences from Du Fu's Exile on the Western Frontiers," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 51.1 (2021): 1–68.

of his position in the present moment. My one objection to the methodology of this chapter is with the scattered attacks on a straw man, interpreting the Chinese critical tradition of *shishi* 詩史, or "history in verse," as assuming that all these poems are transparent and immediate statements of fact, as when Patterson writes: "Although exponents of that method discovered in the late life-narratives a prefiguration of their own dreams of immediacy, these stories speak through the formal and rhetorical conventions of travel poetry" (p. 191). There is no citation to any particular critic here, so it is not obvious whose "dreams of immediacy" we are discussing, but I think the casual reader would assume that they are being attributed to Chinese critical practice. Without belabouring the point, I would simply mention that one popular way of appreciating Du Fu's poetry in premodern China consisted of compiling *jiju shi* 集句詩 (poems of reconstituted verses), reassembling new poems out of separate lines of Du Fu's verse, completely abstracted from their original contexts. While the reception of Du Fu's verse is a vast subject of inquiry on its own, far exceeding the scope of the book under review, one still has to be careful in how one represents or summarizes it.[9]

Chapter five engages with the sequence that many readers consider the apex of Du Fu's achievement, the eight "Autumn Inspirations" 秋興. As Patterson rightly notes, these have already been studied and translated extensively (p. 223), so he instead aims to approach them from a distinctive angle, within the tradition of Tang court poetry. This strategy is compelling, and the Tang precedents that he cites do seem to anticipate Du Fu's achievement in a number of ways. Patterson's readings of other Kuizhou poems are also insightful, as when he discusses "Regarding Things in the Gorges" 峽中覽物, showing how it inverts chronological order, describing how a memory can overpower experience of the present (p. 211). This trajectory leads naturally into the last three of the "Autumn Inspirations" poems, reaching a fitting climax to the volume as a whole. Patterson's translations of these poems are not too adventurous, resembling the straightforward and legible versions in Owen's *Poetry of Du Fu*. For the knottier and more challenging passages in Du Fu's regulated verse, it is always worth consulting David McCraw's bold and often brilliant renderings too.[10] For instance, I was disappointed to see that Patterson borrows Owen's "brown swans" for *huanghu* 黃鵠 (p. 231).[11] While it is true that there is a variant of the swan with grey-brown

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[9] On this point, see, e.g., Jue Chen's discussion of the many varied understandings of *shishi* just in the Song dynasty, in his book, *Du Fu*, pp. 84–119.

[10] David R. McCraw, *Du Fu's Laments from the South* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992).

[11] Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, poem 17.31, vol. 4, p. 359. Patterson's text has 黃鶴. McCraw renders this couplet, "Pearlsewn curtains, painted pillars surround yellow cranes; / Brocade hawsers, ivoried masts arouse white gulls. . . ." (*Du Fu's Laments from the South*, p. 203).

feathers in addition to white ones, swans, like their counterparts *hu*, are proverbially white. Moreover, the *huanghu* in medieval literature represents the untainted, incorruptible figure to which conflicted officials aspire; less a "brown swan" than a "golden crane," as in Qu Yuan's "Divination" 卜居: "Should I pair wings with the golden crane, / or compete for grub with chicken and mallard?"[12] There is also an unfortunate typo on p. 225: A prominent reference to the *Elegies of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭), once again to Song Yu but in this case his "Nine Phases" 九辨, is mistakenly identified as the "Nine Songs" 九歌, confusing a critical point in Du Fu's relation to literary tradition.

Patterson concludes this well-written volume with a fine reading of a poem by Wei Yingwu 韋應物 (c. 737–c. 793), suggesting interesting avenues for future research, and reminding us of the continuing importance of "memory" as a theme in Tang poetry. On the whole, however, this volume would have been stronger if it did not conflate a number of different concepts that share the name "memory" in academic English: "social memory," "historical memory," and "autobiographical memory" (a tautology). This smacks to me of the "fallacy of equivocation": just because a number of different major topics in Du Fu's work can accurately be referred to under the rubric of the English term "memory" does not mean that they are organically related in such a way that they should be treated as a whole. Rather, what Patterson has achieved here is to leave us with enjoyable new readings of Du Fu's work on the varied themes of cherishing antiquity, on literary tradition, on visual art, and, of course, on memory itself. The individual memory of the poet is indeed represented better in Du Fu's work than in that of any earlier Chinese writer, and would be well worth a dedicated study in the future. But the important topic of personal memory might be studied more deeply if it were distinguished from topics like the writer's relation to antiquity, which was far more prevalent in medieval literature prior to Du Fu than memory per se.

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[12] Williams, *Elegies of Chu*, p. 82.