

ZEB RAFT

Stimulating Commentary: A View onto the Interpretation of Poetry in Early-Medieval China

ABSTRACT:

A commentary on the poetry of Ruan Ji (210–263), attributed to the eminent fifth-century writer Shen Yue and incorporated into Li Shan's edition of the *Wenxuan*, offers new insight into the interpretation of poetry in early-medieval China. This study presents the commentary in its entirety, identifying and discussing its interpretive strategies and examining its treatment of Ruan Ji's poetic diction. It suggests that the commentary reveals a way of reading poetry based in the idea of “stimulus” (*xing*), one of the foundational concepts of classical Chinese poetics, and that as such it can give us a finer understanding of how “expressive-affective poetics,” a key paradigm in the study of Chinese poetry, was realized between the Han and Tang.

KEYWORDS:

Ruan Ji, commentary, early-medieval poetics, rhetoric, diction, Wenxuan

Poetry” is a universal concept, but it is always realized locally, in specific traditions of writing, reading, and social practice. In the Chinese case, rich veins of commentary and criticism give us insight into the expectations that guided the composition, reception, and use of poetry in premodern China, and it is no exaggeration to say that the progress of Western scholarship over the past half-century is in great part due to its increased utilization of such material. These riches, however, are not evenly distributed, and in the study of poetic culture prior to the Tang, we face an imbalance in the kinds of literary information available to us. High-level descriptions of the art of literature, assessments of literary genres, judgments of individual writers, discourses on the historical development of poetic writing – such material we possess in fair abundance. What is generally lacking – in sharp contrast to the Tang and later periods – is a view onto “practical criticism”: the record of how individual poems were read.

It is this scarcity that gives special value to a small set of comments on the poetry of Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) attributed to the eminent fifth-century writers Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (384–456) and Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513). Whether these comments really issued from Yan and Shen is a matter that does not bear inquiry. Perhaps they did; at minimum,

➤ Zeb Raft, Associate Research Fellow, ICLP, Academia Sinica

they reflect poetic interpretation prior to the mid-seventh century, when they went into circulation with the source that preserves them, Li Shan's 李善 (d. 689) great commentary on the *Wenxuan*.¹ What the comments reveal, I suggest, is a way of reading poetry rooted in the theory of "stimulus" (*xing* 興), one of the foundational concepts of classical Chinese poetics.

Xing is identified as a primary attribute of poetry twice by Confucius in the *Analects* (8/8 and 17/9). Perhaps because of that association with the Sage, more than a third of the poems in the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*, or *Classic of Poetry*) are affixed with this label in the Mao-Zheng recension of that work, which was the only version to reach the Tang, and thence the present day, intact. The word comprises senses intransitive, transitive, and passive: to arise, to arouse, to be aroused. As the poetic principle of stimulus, it accounts for the distinctive "expressive-affective" sensibility of Chinese poetry, according to which the phenomena of the natural world are bound together – ontologically, psychologically, literarily – with the effects they have on their poet-observers. More generally, *xing* underpins what has been characterized as the "basic aesthetic attitude typical of *shi*-poetry, wherein suggestion is prized over exposition, 'less' over 'more,'" and where "readers are provoked to infer something more, or other, as the true meaning of the poem."²

While a full account of the concept of *xing* is beyond the scope of the present study, a single observation can furnish the basis for the discussion that follows.³ The use of natural imagery is undoubtedly the most prominent aspect of *xing* poetics. That is what is marked in the *Book*

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¹ For the text with commentary, see *Wenxuan* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1983; hereafter cited as *Wenxuan*), j. 23, pp. 1067–76; for a fully collated edn., see Liu Yuejin 劉躍進 and Xu Hua 徐華, eds., *Wenxuan jiuzhu jicun* 文選舊註輯存 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2017; hereafter cited as *Wenxuan jiuzhu jicun*), vol. 7, pp. 4263–303; for further discussion, see the appendix. The translations of the poems in this essay are my own, with reference to Donald Holzman, *Poetry and Politics: The Life and Works of Juan Chi (A.D. 210–263)* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976; hereafter, *Holzman*), and to Stephen Owen's translations in Stephen Owen and Wendy Swartz, *The Poetry of Ruan Ji and Xi Kang* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2017; hereafter, *Owen*).

² Kang-i Sun Chang, "Chinese Poetry," in Alex Preminger, T.V.F. Brogan et al., eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1993), pp. 190–91. Though its origins lie elsewhere, the key term "expressive-affective" is featured in the influential description of the Chinese poetic tradition at Pauline Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1987), pp. 31–37.

³ For a review of the concept of *xing* from the preimperial period through the Southern Dynasties, see Yan Kunyang 顏崑陽, *Shi bi xing xilun* 詩比興系論 (Taipei: Lianjing, 2017), pp. 71–119.

of *Songs*, in which the natural world stimulates (or was used artificially by the poets to stimulate) poems about the varied joys and hardships of human existence, and a preponderance of critical discussion has focused on the role of imagery – whether it is metaphorical or self-sufficient, experienced or represented.⁴ What should not be overlooked, however, is the other aspect of stimulation: not the natural world affecting the poet, but the poem affecting its audiences.⁵ That formative effect is probably what is intended when the *Analects* has Confucius say, apparently in reference to the education of young men, that people can be “incited by the *Songs* 興於詩,” and it is this sensitivity to poetry’s effects on its readers that explains why Chinese poetry was so often used to “do things with words” – or how, as the other *Analects* saying has it, “the *Songs* will help you to incite people’s emotions 詩可以興.”⁶

The Ruan Ji commentaries explored here offer a rare view onto how such responses to poetry were cultivated in the early-medieval period. The critical response, according to the following analysis, drew on the “less” that was given in the poem to develop it into something “more” – or something different. Particular attention was paid to the poem’s latent arguments, which the critic expanded, and to its diction, which was taken up into the critical response and examined for its subtleties and peculiarities.

RHETORIC: HOW FIFTH-CENTURY READERS WERE TAUGHT TO INTERPRET POETRY

Our source preserves only four comments from Yan Yanzhi, and their critical value is paltry. By contrast, Shen Yue is quoted seventeen times across ten poems, sometimes for brief remarks but often with fully-fledged interpretations. These ten poems will serve as the focus of discussion here, starting with the second poem in the *Wenxuan* se-

⁴ Such was the focus of Yu, *Reading of Imagery*, chap. 2 of which is the most extensive discussion of *xing* poetics in English, with somewhat wider reference to premodern and modern scholarship published earlier as a journal article: idem, “Allegory, Allegoresis, and the *Book of Songs*,” *HJAS* 43.2 (Dec. 1983), pp. 377–412. I have also found Dai Wei-qun, “*Xing* Again: A Formal Re-investigation,” *CLEAR* 13 (1991), pp. 1–14, insightful.

⁵ Thus, for example, Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), p. 40, discussing the concept of *xing*: “it was assumed that the outer poem could be used to affect the inner disposition of the listener.” For a general discussion that emphasizes (if at the risk of over-emphasizing) the reader’s role in traditional Chinese poetics, see Yanfang Tang, “Cognition or Affective Experience: Theory and Practice of Reading in Chinese and Western Literary Traditions,” *Comparative Literature* 49.2 (1997), pp. 151–75.

⁶ Translations of the *Analects* from Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), pp. 134, 212.

quence. Before looking at specific examples, however, we might outline the main rhetorical techniques Shen Yue's *xing* poetics most relies on: echoing, amplification, intensification, and dichotomization.

Echoing or appropriating the diction of the poem is perhaps the most prominent resource of this commentary. (To draw attention to this feature, words and phrases drawn directly into the commentary from the poems are marked in the Chinese texts below.) The simplest reason for tracking the language of the poems so closely is that the commentator is paraphrasing, explaining the meaning of complex lines or poems to an audience – students? – that might have otherwise misread them. But there is a deeper, formal significance to this technique. It is the process by which the language of the poem becomes the language of the reader, who learns how to pick up on its key words and fashion new constructs out of them. Repetition of diction, furthermore, is the point of departure for the attendant quality of amplification. In selecting and reassembling linguistic elements of the poem, the commentary frequently extends them into new territory, or gives them a slight twist, in the manner of a “trope.” The result is that what we might commonly call “interpretation” is actually, in the rhetoric of “stimulative” poetry, a tropical development of the poem – not an interpretation conceived by a critic but something turned out of the poem's words by a reader. This turning out, in turn, happens in two basic rhetorical directions. Pursuing the poem's “pathos,” the reader learns to intensify the emotional qualities of the poem, grasping its intent and reperforming it in a higher key. Similarly, the reader applies himself to the poem's “logos” by deploying a strategy of dichotomization, whereby polarities in the poem's narrative are accentuated, elaborated, and even invented, in order to sharpen the poetic effect.⁷

Our first selection, the second poem in the *Wenxuan* sequence, is Ruan Ji's treatment of a myth in which a man, one Zheng Jiaofu 鄭交甫, has a tryst on a riverbank with two goddesses, who “grant him their pendants” and then abandon him.⁸ The commentary ties the pieces of the poem together – and then gives them a little twist:

⁷ This account of the commentary's approach to interpretation coheres with but differs in emphasis from the brief discussion at Yu-yu Cheng, “Text and Commentary in the Medieval Period,” in Wiebke Denecke, Wai-yee Li, and Xiaofei Tian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature* (New York: Oxford U.P., 2017), pp. 126–27. I do find that the commentary has an interest in “elaborating authorial intent” – with stress on the word *elaborating*. Likewise, I find that the commentary is characterized by “empathy and imagined communion with the poet” – with emphasis on *imagined*.

⁸ For a discussion of this story, see Qiulei Hu, “Reading the Conflicting Voices: An Examination of the Interpretative Traditions about ‘Han Guang,’” *CLEAR* 34 (2012), pp. 1–13.

*Poem Two*⁹

The two goddess-consorts played along the riverbank,
 Roaming, soaring with the wind –
 And then Jiaofu held to his breast the pendants they left with
 him,
 Which seemed still to retain the ladies' lithe scent.
 The love they had shared lingered on,
 Never to be forgotten, not even (so they swore!) after a thousand
 years,
 For theirs was a beauty that could have toppled city walls, or
 beguiled the town of Xiacai,
 And their fair countenances bound themselves to his deepest
 feelings.
 But such powerful sentiments can only give rise to mournful
 thoughts –
 Best plant some Grass of Forgetting by your orchid chambers!
 See, abandoned by them, you no longer even bother to wash
 your hair!
 Wishing for rain (and for them), you can only resent the sun
 when it shines in the dawn!
 How is it that a bond that had seemed as strong as stone or
 metal,
 Can come, in a single morning, to be split apart in sorrow?

二妃遊江濱，逍遙順風翔。交甫懷環珮，**婉變**有芬芳。猗靡情歡愛，
 千載不相忘。傾城迷下蔡，容好結中腸。感激生憂思，萱草樹蘭房。膏沐爲
 誰施？其雨怨朝陽。如何**金石交**，一旦更離傷？

Shen Yue says: The ladies' litheness is not forgotten even after a thousand years, yet a relationship that had seemed as strong as stone or metal is casually severed in a single morning. [As Confucius said:] Never have I seen one as fond of virtue as he is of sensual pleasure. 沈約曰：**婉變**則**千載不忘**，**金石之交**，一旦輕絕，未見好德如好色。

The first phrase of the commentary quotes from the fourth and sixth lines of the poem; the second phrase draws on the penultimate and final lines. In this way, appropriation of the poem's diction ties the poem together, first in small sections and then as a whole. In so doing, however, the commentary also splits the poem apart, cleaving it into an upper part and a conclusion and producing the dichotomy that supplies, in Shen Yue's reading, the poem's interpretive value: a

⁹ See *Holzman*, pp. 120–21; *Owen*, pp. 29, 217–19. To avoid creating yet another way of numbering Ruan Ji's poems, I refer to them according to the *Wenxuan* order.

contrast – invoking *Analects* 9/18 and 15/13 – between the temptations of romantic love and the moral beauty of true friendship, the former impudently persistent, the latter inexplicably fragile.

The problem is that this is by no means the only or, for that matter, the best way to construe this poem. Neither of our authoritative English translations adopts this interpretation, nor does the translation given here. Contra Shen Yue, the final couplet can be understood as a simple metaphor for the bond of love, in continuity not contrast with the romantic theme established in the rest of the poem. Of course, the end result may be much the same, insofar as, with an eye on the whole poem, we are apt to understand romantic love as a figure for political estrangement. But at the level of close reading, these are two entirely different approaches to the poem. Shen Yue's interpretation is not just "one possible interpretation," but the output of a critical method that seeks to intensify the reader's experience by identifying dichotomies and developing the contrasts implied in them.

The other way Shen Yue shapes the reading of the poem is through direct intensification of its emotional affect. Ruan Ji laments the abruptness of the lovers' (friends') parting, "in a single morning" (*yi dan*). This is a cleverly played figure of speech, as it is also bound mimetically to the rising of the sun in the third to last line, via allusion to the *Book of Songs* (Mao 62). But that stroke of literary artistry is not Shen Yue's interest. Rather, he grabs this phrase and amplifies it in a way that accentuates the poem's inherent pathos: not merely "in a single morning," but "*casually severed* in a single morning" (*yidan qing jue*).

A similar emotional intensification features prominently in our second example, where the commentary is presented in three separate parts:

*Poem Three*¹⁰

(As the saying has it,) "Paths will form under fine trees" –
The peaches and plums of the Eastern Orchard. But then come
The winds of autumn, blowing the bean leaves into flight –
Whence begins the decline.

嘉樹下成蹊，東園桃李。秋風吹飛葢，零落從此始。

Shen Yue says: The season when the winds blow the bean leaves into flight basically refers to the days when the peaches and plums start their decline. Flower and fruit alike are destroyed, and even the branches are shorn bare of their leaves: there is no

¹⁰ See *Holzman*, pp. 155–56; *Owen*, pp. 31, 219.

longer the slightest thing left to enjoy! 沈約曰: 風吹飛蓬之時, 蓋桃李零落之日, 華實既盡, 柯葉又彫, 無復一毫可悅。

For all that is resplendent will one day be decimated,
And brambles grow in my old hall.
Away from this! I drive my horse in flight,
Fleeing to the foot of the Western Hills (to join the recluses) –
My own survival can scarcely be guaranteed,
Much less that of my beloved wife and children.

繁華有憔悴, 堂上生荆杞。驅馬舍之去, 去上西山趾。一身不自保, 何況戀妻子?

Shen Yue says: Glorious or decimated, going or coming: in the midst of this, there is no way for a man to guarantee even his own survival – much less that of his wife and children! 沈約曰: 榮悴去就, 此人本無保身之術, 況復妻子者乎!

A thick frost blankets the grass on the moors,
The year now in its dusk...
凝霜被野草, 歲暮亦云已。

Shen Yue says: The dusk of the year, a season of wind and frost – there is nothing to be done about it at all... 沈約曰: 歲暮風霜之時, 徒然而已耳。

Even as he draws heavily on the poem's diction for paraphrase, Shen Yue adds emotional intensity by filling out the poem's story-world with detail. In the first commentary segment, he quotes directly from the poem but quickly rephrases, moving from the specific plants named in the poem ("peaches and plums") to their genus terms ("flower and fruit"), and from the leaves of the proverbial autumn tumbleweed to branches that are "shorn bare." This imaginative flourish is not in the poem at all, but metonymically turned out from it, a vision of the delicate twigs to which the flower, fruit, and leaf of the poem's plants once (as "petals on a wet, black bough"?) cleaved. This leads into an emphatic enunciation of emotion that likewise resides not in the poem but in its reader, a reaction the poetic scene stimulates in the mind: "There is no longer the slightest thing left to enjoy!" The comment on the poem's final line, to be discussed in the second section of this essay, also moves from imitation of the poem's language to amplification of its emotion, with the emphatic "nothing to be done" (*turan*) and "at all" (the particle *er* 耳).

It is the second comment, meanwhile, that purports to tie the poem together with a theme – the inevitable vicissitudes of human life. The hallmark of Ruan Ji's poetic style is its combination of vividness and vagueness, a sensation described well by one of Shen Yue's younger contemporaries, the poetry critic Zhong Rong 鍾嶸: "The words sound so familiar, but the emotion bestowed in them feels far, far away 言在耳目之內, 情寄八荒之外."¹¹ This poem is a case in point: it feels simple and direct, until you try to tie together the story it is telling. The eternal cycle of seasons in the first four lines transforms into the specific scene of a mortal man witnessing the linear change of passing time. This sojourner formulates a cogent response to the scene that confronts him – escape from the cares of mortal existence – but then the ending couplet presents him forlorn again. Why?

The key to this question lies in the couplet that reads: "My own survival can scarcely be guaranteed, / Much less that of my beloved wife and children." Is the problem that he is not sure he will succeed in joining the immortals before he dies? Is it that he is sure, but cannot bear to give up his family and other mundane associations? Or is he, to the contrary, declaring that his desire to 'drive away in flight' is so strong that he is willing to abandon everything – only to fail mysteriously in the poem's final couplet. One inspired solution comes from the great critic Fang Dongshu 方東樹 (1772–1851), who observed that the poem makes easy sense when one reverses the taxis of the final two couplets, so that the frosts at the end of the year precipitate the uncertainty of survival.¹² An alternative lies in the associative thinking that motivated much third-century poetry, as the flight to the mountains melds naturally into legends of immortality in which the protagonist casts off his wife and children "like slippers," and then into doubts about the possibility of achieving immortality.¹³ But our commentary

¹¹ Wang Shumin 王叔岷, *Zhong Rong Shipin jianzheng gao* 鍾嶸詩品箋證稿 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo, 1992), p. 165. In its balanced regard for form and content, Zhong Rong's critical judgment seems superior to versions that emphasize only the second half of the statement, as in chap. 6 of the *Wenxin diaolong* ("The meaning of Ruan Ji's poems is distant and deep 阮旨遙深"), or the anonymous commentator, often assumed to be Yan Yanzhi or Li Shan, quoted after the first *Wenxuan* poem ("Much is hidden and obscured in his poetry 文多隱避").

¹² Fang extols the powerful poetic effect of this inversion. See Ji Fang 季芳, ed., *Ruan Ji "Yonghuai shi" jijiao, jizhu, jiping* 阮籍詠懷詩集校·集注·集評 (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2018), pp. 191–92.

¹³ The wish of Han emperor Wu himself, at *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982) 12, p. 468; minus the slippers, see also *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962) 67, p. 2927. The tendency of poetry in this era to transition from topos to topos in this manner is a main finding of Stephen Owen, *The Making of Early Chinese Classical Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), chap. 3 of which treats the theme of immortality.

takes a different tack. It renders this middle section abstract, the persona enunciating a general rule of the condition of “man” (*ren*): “in the midst of this (*ci*), there is no way for a man to guarantee even his own survival, much less....” To supply a reason for this rule, the commentary wrings a dichotomy out of the poem’s mimesis. It is due not only to the rise and fall of what is “glorious or decimated” (*rong cui*), a binary that derives almost directly from the poem, which speaks of the “resplendent” (*fanhua*) and the “decimated” (*qiaocui*), but also to “going or coming” (*qu jiu*), an abstract, symbolic contrary-compound that has been troped out of the poem’s entirely different, mimetic use of the word *qu*: “Away from this! I drive my horse in flight (*qu*), / Fleeing (*qu*) (to join the recluses) at the foot of the Western Hills.” From the standpoint of an understanding of the issues behind Ruan Ji’s poem, we may find Shen Yue’s distillation of this concept apt: *qu jiu* refers not just to “coming and going” but to official service or retirement, an important matter for Ruan Ji and other medieval poets and readers.¹⁴ Yet this interpretation is arrived at by twisting words out of their direct context in the poem itself.

Dichotomies are again at the forefront of the commentary’s approach to Poem Nine in the *Wenxuan* sequence. The poem is a simple exercise on a single allusion: at the advent of the Han, Shao Ping 召平, the Qin-dynasty “Marquis of Dongling,” retreated to the suburbs to become a melon farmer. The commentary is largely paraphrase, but with a noteworthy interpretative surplus.

*Poem Nine*¹⁵

You’ve heard the tale of the melons of the Marquis of Dongling,
Grown just outside the capital’s Green Gate,
Row upon row of them, crossing the field paths,
Mothers and their children, all corded together,
And in many colors, sparkling in the sunlight,
With the former Marquis’s honored guests, who visited from all
places.
(Indeed, as it has been said:) a tallow flame will burn itself
away, and
Accumulated riches will bring one harm. But
In commoner’s clothes, you may live out your lot (as the Mar-
quis did):

¹⁴ I thank a reviewer for emphasizing this point.

¹⁵ See *Holzman*, pp. 116–117; *Owen*, p. 35.

How could you presume to rely on imperial favor and emolument?

昔聞東陵瓜，近在青門外。連軫距阡陌，子母相拘帶。五色曜朝日，嘉賓四面會。膏火自煎熬，多財爲患害。布衣可終身，寵祿豈足賴。

Shen Yue says: When the Marquis of Dongling was wearing the clothes of a marquis, he had accumulated riches and the esteem of a nobleman. When he later came to plant his melons by the Green Gate, he was just a common man. But because he was good at his task, his melons came to be famed for their flavor. They grew across the field paths, shining in many colors, and he grew them not just for his own sustenance, but for the honored guests who would come to him. For truly, what is gotten is easily lost, and glory cannot be counted on for long. The tallow flame burns itself down for the sake of brightness, as men let themselves be dragged down by material wealth. In commoner's clothes, however, you may live out your lot – really, how could you think to rely on imperial favor and emolument! 沈約曰：當東陵侯侯服之時，多財爵貴；及種瓜青門，匹夫耳。寔由善於其事，故以味美見稱，連軫距陌，五色相照，非唯周身瞻己，乃亦坐致嘉賓。夫得固易失，榮難久恃，膏以明自煎，人以財興累；布衣可以終身，豈寵祿之足賴哉！

The poem uses the figure of speech “commoner’s clothes” (*bu yi*, literally “cloth robe”) in line 9; the commentary starts by converting this to its contrary, “the clothes of a marquis” (*hou fu*), just as it translates the original metonym, moving from the clothes to the “ordinary man” (*pifu*) they make. This is to carve out a sharp dichotomy between past – the Marquis – and present – the Marquis turned commoner – where the poem is focalized in the narrative present alone. Continuing, where the poem offers an evocative description of the fine melons (“in many colors, sparkling in the sunlight”), the commentary develops that figure through a sort of rhetorical catechism. Were these multi-colored melons just pretty, it seems to ask, or were they also tasty? They were also tasty. Were they grown by accident, or were they due to Shao Ping’s wisdom? Due to his wisdom. Were they for himself alone, or for himself and others? For himself and others. All of this serves to render the story-world of the poem more robustly. The commentator then applies this dichotomizing approach to the poem’s moral, pairing the poem’s skepticism of the durability of worldly glory with a broader lesson that is not stated in the poem – that “what is gotten is easily lost.”

Dichotomies are a strong feature of Ruan Ji’s poetry – and of couplet-based Chinese poetry in general – but the commentary’s zeal for

this mode of interpretation can outstrip what we can reasonably assert to be present in a poem, as in the following example.

*Poem Eleven*¹⁶

Back when I was fourteen or fifteen,
My aims were set on the ideals of books and poetry:
To wear the rough robes of a commoner, holding the precious
 jade of wisdom by my breast,
To join up with the aspirations of noble and impoverished
 scholars the likes of Confucius's disciples, Yan Hui and
 Min Sun.
(Yet now –) I throw open my window, gazing down upon the
 moors in all directions;
Climbing to a high place, I stare off toward what is on my mind:
Grave mounds, covering the hills,
Where ten thousand generations come together as one.
For what comes of worldly honor and fame,
After a thousand years have passed – or even just the hundred
 of a man's life span?
Thus I see what immortals like "Master Tomb Door" were up to –
And I laugh at myself in mocking scorn.

昔年十四五，志尚好書詩。被褐懷珠玉，顏閔相與期。開軒臨四野，登高望所思。丘墓蔽山岡，萬代同一時。千秋百歲後，榮名安所之？乃悞羨門子，嗷嗷今自嗤。

Shen Yue says: Before our time, many men have passed away, but though they may have "unhitched their carriages" at different points in time, what difference is there today, when they are all [buried] together in one hill? Thus the poet says, "Ten thousand generations gather as one." As for "Wearing the rough robes of a commoner but holding precious jade by my breast" and "Entrusting my love to books and poetry," or [on the other hand] "Opening a window onto the moors" and "Ascending 'high' to 'gaze' into eternity" – people may have different aims, but the rule that all will pass on is the same, and so he comes to see the meaning of Master Tomb Door's flight to immortality, and is laughing at himself [for having been so naïve]. 沈約曰：自我以前，徂謝者非一，雖或稅駕參差，同爲今日之一丘，夫豈異哉！故云萬代同一時也。若夫被褐懷玉，託好詩書；開軒四野，昇高永望；志事不同，徂沒理一，追悟羨門之輕舉，方自笑耳。

This poem tells a tale of wistful epiphany, the tempering of youthful ideals when confronted with an awareness of mortality. Grasping the

¹⁶ See *Holzman*, pp. 163–65; *Owen*, pp. 50, 223–24.

theme of mortality, Shen Yue carries it forward with a small flourish in the fine figure of “unhitched carriages,” at once a stock early-medieval metaphor for death and an image that a reader can fairly imagine out on the moors that feature in the poem. When it comes to the first part of the poem, however, the commentator upends the personal narrative that, I would strongly suggest, is obviously a part of any natural reading.¹⁷ The contrast put forth in the poem is a narrative one, between a young man’s ideals and the reality of mortality that he eventually comes to understand. The commentary transforms this narrative change into a logical juxtaposition in which various pursuits of life – the “different aims” (*zhi shi butong*) of the recluse scholar and the man engaged with society – coexist *within* the reality of mortality, alike subject to the rule that “all will pass on.” This is not a strong interpretation of the poem – but it derives from a strong rhetoric, one that seeks out and develops polarities in the poem’s dianoia.

As a critical strategy, dichotomy is itself a kind of trope, finding an idea in the poem and turning it out differently or more intensely, just as, at the verbal level, the commentary picks up on the poem’s words and carries them in new directions.

*Poem Five*¹⁸

The Heavenly Horses come out of the northwest –
Whence they follow the roads of the *east*;
天馬出西北, 由來從東道。

Shen Yue has said (*yun*): They come *from* the northwest, *to* the roads of the east. 沈約云: 由西北來東道也。

Springs and autumns go by without end –
What permanent guarantee could there be for honor and wealth?
春秋非有訖, 富貴焉常保?

Shen Yue says: The springs and autumns come in turn, like a bracelet that has no endpoint. Such is the permanent Way of Heaven. It is like how the Heavenly Horses originally come from the northwest, and then suddenly one finds them following the roads of the east – how much more easily one can go from wealthy to impoverished, or from honored to debased! 沈約曰: 春秋相代, 若環之無端, 天道常也。譬如天馬本出西北, 忽由東道; 況富之與貧, 貴之與賤, 易至乎?

¹⁷ This transformation in the commentary is also observed at Qian Zhixi 錢志熙, “Lun Wenxuan ‘Yonghuai’ shiqi shou zhu yu Ruan shi jieshi de lishi yanbian” 論文選‘詠懷’十七首注與阮詩解釋的歷史演變, *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產 2009.1, pp. 14–20, p. 17.

¹⁸ See *Holzman*, p. 158; *Owen*, pp. 33, 219.

Clear dew blankets the orchid marshes now –
 But freezing frost will come to soak the grasses of the moors;
 At dawn, an alluring youth –
 By dusk, ugly and old.

Who that is not an immortal like Prince Qiao
 Could possibly remain permanently beautiful and good?

清露被皋蘭，凝霜霑野草。朝爲媚少年，夕暮成醜老。自非王子晉，誰能常美好？

This poem's first two couplets are not firmly articulated, but their relation is not exactly impenetrable: the first couplet is a figure for the second, the displacement of the horses standing for the cosmic vicissitudes of the human realm. The commentator, however, clarifies the figure by intensifying it, making not a metaphor but a construction of *a fortiori* reasoning: in a world where horses move so extremely, then "how much more so" (*kuang*) the human condition! He then fills in this relationship with three specific tropes. The narrowest of these derives from the application of the dichotomizing technique to the words "wealth" (*fu*) and "honor" (*gui*) in the poem: the commentary pairs them with their antonyms, "poverty" (*pin*, "impoverished") and "debasement" (*jian*, "debased"), implied but nowhere mentioned in the poem text. Next is the broader philosophical trope that comes with the commentary's slight tweak of the "key word" *chang*, "permanence," which appears twice in the poem. In the poem, *chang* features negatively, in rhetorical questions; the point is *impermanence*, be it of "honor and wealth" or, in the final line, of the "beautiful and good." In the commentary, "permanence" becomes a positive property of "the Way of Heaven" (*tian dao*). It is simply that what is permanent is in fact a kind of impermanence: the "ease" (*yi*) with which change occurs, be it of the seasons or of the never-ending circle formed by a jade bracelet, the delicate material image – and the third and most poetical trope – that our commentator affectively discovers through his imagination of the poem.

"Permanence," translated as "constant" in line 14 below, is also the fulcrum on which the commentary develops a dichotomized reimagination of Poem Twelve. The poem appears to refer allegorically to the fall of the Wei (220–265) dynasty and the rise of the Jin (265–420), but the early commentators say nothing directly of this, and Shen Yue, amidst his slack paraphrase, focuses on its emotional tonality.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Owen, pp. 52–53, nn. 1–2. Li Shan notes the association of "Quail-Fire" with Jin, but makes nothing of it explicitly, and he links Peng Pond and Daliang to locations in Ruan Ji's hometown, where later readers (see Holzman, p. 30) have found in them a reference to the Wei.

*Poem Twelve*²⁰

At Peng Pond, I pace back and forth,
 Turning my head to gaze back at Daliang.
 (Here,) the green waters raise up their waves;
 (That way,) endless grasses on the moors,
 Where beasts dash in a criss-cross rush,
 Birds fly in soaring tandem, for
 Now is the season of Quail-Fire, the beginning of winter,
 When sun and moon gaze upon one another,
 When winds from the north sharpen the severe cold,
 When shadowed air lays down a faint frost.
 A traveler without a mate!
 Looking this way and that, my breast fills with sorrow.
 (As the saying goes:) Petty men will count up their achievements –
 But the gentleman follows a constant way.
 It is not that I begrudge the decimation that will come in the
 end –
 Thus I sing these words, to make this verse.

徘徊蓬池上，還顧望大梁。綠水揚洪波，曠野莽茫茫。走獸交橫馳，飛鳥相隨
 翔。是時鵲火中，日月正相望。朔風厲嚴寒，陰氣下微霜。羈旅無疇匹，俛仰
 懷哀傷。小人計其功，君子道其常。豈惜終憔悴，詠言著斯章。

Shen Yue says: “It is not that I begrudge the decimation that will come in the end”: it seems that what should not have been decimated has now reached the point of decimation, and that is because the gentleman has lost his way. “Petty men count up their achievements” and succeed, while “The gentleman follows a constant way” and is blocked, and thus reaches this point of decimation. The poet sings these words when feelings fill his breast as he gazes into the distance, and moreover because he is a traveler without a mate. 沈約曰：豈惜終憔悴，蓋由不應憔悴而致憔悴，君子失其道也。小人計其功而通，君子道其常而塞，故致憔悴也。因乎眺望多懷，兼以羈旅無匹，而發此詠。

The poem culminates in a lament, in the penultimate line, for the emotional “decimation” (*qiaocui*) that seems, to this poet, always to arrive so inevitably in human life – the word *qiaocui* appears three times in the Ruan Ji poems discussed by Shen Yue.²¹ The commentary amplifies this sentiment, intoning the word three times in succes-

²⁰ See *Holzman*, pp. 28–30; *Owen*, pp. 53, 224–25.

²¹ Here and in Poems Three and Fourteen. Yet the word appears only once in the 78 other pieces in the non-*Wenxuan* corpus of Ruan Ji’s *shi*-poetry. Thus it appears that the *Wenxuan* selection – or the Yan Yanzhi and Shen Yue selection that preceded and perhaps influenced it – particularly sought to emphasize the spirit of desolation.

sion and leveraging that theme to intensify the distinction set out in the poem, between “petty men” and “gentlemen.” It is not simply that one achieves his aims and the other does not, but that the petty man ought to be decimated but is not, while the gentleman by rights should *not* be decimated, but *is*. On the terms of this paradox, the gentleman at once experiences decimation because he has “lost his way,” in the sense that in an improperly ordered world the Way is blocked from ascendance, but also, quite to the contrary, precisely because he has followed the Way, for the true gentleman is bound to be alienated from an improperly ordered world. Thus, the interpretation the commentary arrives at is less an “interpretation” of the poem than a “response” built out of a rhetoric of dichotomy, giving a little twist to the poem’s “constant way.”

“Decimation” is again a key part of the poet’s vision in the following poem:

*Poem Fourteen*²²

Burning bright, the sun descends in the west,
 Its remnant light shining upon my robe –
 As a swirling wind blows the walls of my home, and
 Cold birds gather in groups. (It occurs to me that:)
 Even the Zhouzhou birds know [to help their brethren by] hold-
 ing one another’s wings in their mouths [when they drink,
 lest they topple over and drown],
 And even the Qiongqiong knows to care for [a friendly beast,
 because it will need its assistance in] a time of hunger.
 How is it, then, that this “man of the road”
 Should be bowed down in half like a stone chime, having forgot-
 ten whence he came?
 Was it pursuit of grandeur and fame that led to this? (Or not?)
 Your decimation brings sadness to the heart.

灼灼西隕日，餘光照我衣。迴風吹四壁，寒鳥相因依。周周尚銜羽，蛩蛩亦念飢。如何當路子，磬折忘所歸？豈爲夸譽名，憔悴使心悲。

Shen Yue says: When the weather has grown cold, even flying birds and running animals know to gather as a group for survival. The Zhouzhou-bird holds [its brethren’s] feathers in its mouth so that he will not fall over [when he drinks water], and the Qiongqiong-beast carries the Jue-beast because [he needs] the fair grasses [that the Jue gives him to eat] – and yet “the man of the road” only knows to advance forward, thinking nothing

²² See *Holzman*, pp. 117–19; *Owen*, pp. 37, 219–20.

of how he will return when dusk comes. The only thing he does with satisfaction is pursue grandeur and fame. Thus he reaches decimation and the [poet's] heart is saddened. 沈約曰：天寒，即飛鳥走獸尚知相依，周周銜羽以免顛仆，蛩蛩負蟄以... 美草，而當路者知進趨，不念暮歸，所安爲者，惟夸譽名，故致憔悴而心悲也。

If only you would fly about with the swallows and the sparrows,
And not seek to soar off with the great Brown Swan!
For when the swan soars off to roam over the oceans,
How could you possibly turn back mid-way?
寧與燕雀翔，不隨黃鵠飛。黃鵠遊四海，中路將安歸？

Shen Yue says: As for a person like this, he does not consider that his wings are small, and does not seek the swallows and sparrows as his companions, but instead desires to undertake a journey with the Brown Swan. Yet with one pump of its wings, the Brown Swan will soar off into the sky to roam over the oceans, and when the small-winged one chases after it but fails to catch up, where will he have to return to? The one who considers this man's situation would advise him to go along with the swallows and the sparrows, and not to fly off with the Brown Swan. 沈約曰：若斯人者，不念己之短翮，不隨燕雀爲侶，而欲與黃鵠比遊。黃鵠一舉沖天，輒翔四海，短翮迫而不逮，將安歸乎？爲其計者，宜與燕雀相隨，不宜與黃鵠齊舉。

The first block of commentary briefly (and incompletely) explains the allusions in the third couplet and then, more importantly, shows how the fourth and fifth couplets pick up on them. Worth noting is Shen Yue's apt handling of the figure of speech in line 7, the "man of the road" (*dang lu zhi*). This is indeed a standard kenning for a man in high office, as the passage from the *Mencius* (2A/1) cited here by Li Shan attests. At the same time, however, Ruan Ji's poetry is filled with imagery of wayward travelers and their hardships.²³ The commentary correctly sustains this ambiguity: it positions the man in a way ("advance forward" *jin qu*) that can be interpreted figuratively or literally, and it reinforces the mimetic aspect by emphasizing the vehicle, not the tenor, of the figure: "thinking nothing of how he will return when dusk comes." Thus, while it may be true that "[i]mages in [Ruan Ji's poetry]

²³ This motif in Ruan Ji's poetry would be distilled into an evocative anecdote: "From time to time he would drive his carriage out alone, following no particular road but going wherever his tracks might end up – whereupon he would burst into tears and return home 籍時率意獨駕，不由徑路，車跡所窮，輒慟哭而返"; quoted, from the 4th-c. work *Weishi chungiu* 魏氏春秋, in the commentary of Li Shan at *Wenxuan*, j. 21, p. 1008. For a discussion of the topos of "cardinal directions, roads, and pathways" in Ruan Ji's poetry, observing that it also "suggests the dual meaning of the *dao* [the Way] itself," see Nicholas Morrow Williams, *Imitations of the Self: Jiang Yan and Chinese Poetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 218–20.

were not plausible elements of the poet's perceptual field, integrated into a naturalistic scene, but rather selected for their emblematic functions," his images were still images, "naturalized by the [traditional] reader as part of a hypothetically perceived scene."²⁴ The mimetic, non-symbolic dimension of this figure has regularly been neglected, including in the two standard translations referenced here (Holzman: "men in power"; Owen: "those in office").

The second block of commentary is also paraphrase, but with a return to the rhetoric of dichotomy. In the poem, the final four lines are words of warning to this man of unrestrained ambition. The commentary restates this advice in its final two phrases, but not before rehearsing the sentiment from the complementary perspective of what the "man of the road" errantly thinks, or fails to think: "he does not consider that...but desires to..." (*bu nian ... er yu ...*). The commentary appropriates the poem's diction, "not seek" (*bu sui*, or "not follow"), but attaches this phrase not to the great Brown Swan, as in the poem, but to the swallows and sparrows instead. The effect is an unfolding of the poem's dramatic space, suggesting that the reader should hear not only what is said – the poet's advice – but what the non-speaking character thought as well. The commentary's depiction of the "man of the road" not as an abstract entity but as a character heard and seen in a tangible scene intensifies the dramatic impact, for it is in the mimesis that readers can best visualize him enacting the psychological processes of "not considering" and "making do with satisfaction" (*suo an wei zhe*), and thus feel more deeply the "decimation" that he suffers.

The commentary to the following poem is presented in one lump at the end, but it can be divided into three parts: a gloss on a point in the poem's diction, an explanation of one of the two allusions in the penultimate couplet, and a discussion that shows how the upper half of the poem "sets the basis" (*zhang ben*) for the allusions to come.²⁵

*Poem Six*²⁶

I climb up high, to gaze upon the moors in all directions,
And I turn my view to the north, into the folds of Green Mountain,
Where pines and cypresses form canopies over the hill crests,

²⁴ Yu, *Reading of Imagery*, pp. 138–39, 146.

²⁵ "Setting the basis" was a structural term of art in early-medieval commentary, explaining how an earlier section of a text foreshadowed a point to come. An early example is Du Yu 杜預 (222–285) at *Zuozhuan* 左傳, Yin 5. Li Shan uses the term at *Wenxuan*, j. 15, p. 654; 42, p. 1902.

²⁶ See Holzman, pp. 62–64; Owen, p. 47.

And birds in flight call out as they pass each other by.
 Feeling this deeply, there is burning and sourness in my breast:
 Unbearable, that my rancorous and poisoned thoughts should
 be so many.

Sir Li came to lament [the memory of pleasure outings by] the
 Eastern Gate [back home],

While Master Su once thought [his native] Three Rivers too
 small [to hold his ambitions]. (But look what happened to
 them: unhappy death abroad.)

Look for Benevolence, and you naturally shall find it (and not
 Rancor) inside you –

What use is it to sigh in regret?

登高臨四野，北望青山阿。松柏翳岡岑，飛鳥鳴相過。感慨懷辛酸，
 怨毒常苦多。李公悲東門，蘇子狹三河。求仁自得仁，豈復歎咨嗟！

Shen Yue says: Henan, Hedong, and Hebei constituted the
 Qin dynasty prefecture of Sanchuan (Three Waterways); the an-
 cients just called any kind of river a “He.” 沈約曰：河南、河東、
 河北，秦之三川郡。古人呼水皆爲河耳。

Master Su thought the Zhou too small for him to realize his
 ambitions, so he left, to wear the seal of prime minister in six
 states. The poem is asking whether it is possible that these two
 men could have failed to understand that the pursuit of ambi-
 tion will bring one into proximity with calamity. [For] to engage
 in the exchange of profitable things is to purchase calamity in
 advance, and yet they heedlessly did so anyway – that is [what
 the poem, alluding to the *Analects* (7/15, 7/30), means by] “Look
 for benevolence and you will find it inside you.” 蘇子以兩周之
 狹小，不足逞其志力，故去佩六國相印也。云二子豈不知進趨之近禍敗
 哉？常以交利貨賒禍，故冒而行之，所謂求仁得仁也。

“Pines and cypresses [on] the hill crests” – that is where
 the graves are. The ancients spoke of the rule that “all men are
 mortal,” a law from which no one is excepted, and he who un-
 derstands this rule will be satisfied with his destiny, be it great or
 small. Each pursues the pleasures within his lot, letting heaven
 steer his fate, and if, in the end, all join the same hill of soil,
 what difference does it really make? Thus, the poet speaks these
 lines upon “gazing at the folds of the hill,” to show that although
 it is true that all will depart this world, nonetheless there is
 something different in dying in one’s prime. Deep feelings take
 hold, as they truly will for anyone about to die, but people who
 die abroad in unfortunate circumstances will “feel rancor” and
 pine for life [rather than benevolence]. This sets the basis for
 the allusions to Master Su and Li Si that follow. 松柏岡岑，丘墓
 所在也。古有皆死之義，莫有免者焉。達者安小大之涯，各遂分內之樂，

委天任命，以至於俱爲一丘之土，夫何異哉！故因此望山阿而發此句，明徂謝之理雖同，夭逝之途則異也。感慨之來，誠逝者所不免，至於顛沛道夭，怨毒求生，蘇子、李斯張本也。

Li Si was a native of Chu who went to Qin and became the prime minister of China's first imperial dynasty – until his downfall in a succession crisis. As he was taken to the execution grounds, legend has it that he said he wished only that he might be able to return to his old home and live life as an ordinary man, hunting rabbits near the “Eastern Gate.” The poem invokes the second half of this story, artfully pairing it with the first half of a counterpart allusion to Su Qin 蘇秦, the master of persuasion who, frustrated with his lowly reputation in his home region, set out to win fame in the wider world and succeeded marvelously, becoming top minister in not one but all six of the states he engineered into alliance against the Qin – until the calumny of his competitors brought him shame and death in a foreign land.²⁷ The commentary, as it comes to us, briefly glosses the second of these allusions, passing over the first entirely. Perhaps that is partly because the story of Li Si's death was too well-known to require explanation, but a deeper reason may have to do with the commentary's intentions. Its purpose is not to explain allusions to the reader, but to model responses to those allusions, showing how they can be developed in the reader's mind. One allusion suffices for that purpose.

In line with what we have come to expect, we find a gap between what the allusions say in the poem and their realization in the commentary. In the poem, Li and Su are simple figures for the regret that is sure to be the issue of excess ambition. The key intertext here is *Analects* 7/15, where it is said that if only one dedicates oneself to the pursuit of “benevolence” (*ren* 仁, line 9 here) then benevolence will be easy to achieve, and there will be no cause to feel the “rancor” (*yuan* 怨, line 6) explored in this poem. In fact, this points toward a contradiction in values that is central to the entire Chinese poetic tradition: that while the benevolent man will show no rancor, the good poet will be intimately involved with that emotion, be it in the close proximity of “sad, yet not aggrieved 哀而不傷,” as Confucius famously interprets the first poem in the *Book of Songs* at *Analects* 3/20, or by directly using poetry to express one's grievances, as Confucius says (or is said to have said) in one of the passages in which he associates poetry with *xing*-stimulus: “[the *Songs*] can be used to express your rancor 可以怨”

²⁷ For their stories, see *juan* 69 and 87 of *Shiji*.

(*Analects* 17/9).²⁸ The right to rancor is the question Sima Qian meditates on in his treatment of Boyi and Shuqi, who will appear in the following poem, and rancor has a consistent presence in Ruan Ji's poetry – Stephen Owen singles out “vituperation” as “the one aspect of his poetry that was new (and perhaps shocking).”²⁹ Here, the commentary amplifies this foundational tension, turning the basic psychology of “regret” we find in the poem into a complex disjunction of temporal and cognitive states. What emerges is the tragic consciousness that results from the dramatic conflict of knowledge and action: for Su Qin and Li Si do not just experience regret after the fact, as they do in the poem, but sense their sad fates from the beginning, yet insist on their ambitions all the same. To accentuate the disjunction, Shen Yue tropes down from the lofty arena of state politics in the poem to a more expressly negative counterpart – the “exchange of profitable things.”

Returning to the first half of the poem, the commentary uses the familiar technique of dichotomy to work out a nuanced variation on the theme of rancor. It starts by glossing out the synecdoche in the second couplet, reminding the reader that the image of “pines and cypresses” stands for the gravesites they cover. This leads into the rule, expressed in the poem, that “all men are mortal.” The commentary develops this idea dialectically, establishing a distinction between those who live life according to its normal course, on the one hand, and those who “die in their prime,” out of harmony with nature. These two types converge on the rule of mortality, but the former are satisfied with what life has given them, whereas the latter experience the rancor that anchors this poem. The commentary's subtle unveiling of an argument lurking in the poem's third couplet, which on its surface appears simply parallel or constative, is intriguing – and convincing?

The main purpose of commentary in the stimulative mode, then, is not to put a poem on firmer ground, but to nurture readerly reflexes that develop, extend, and even transform what the poem has said.³⁰ The first commentary passage to Poem Ten in the *Wenxuan* sequence offers another good example:

²⁸ Translations modified from Waley, *Analects of Confucius*, pp. 99, 212.

²⁹ Owen, p. 19.

³⁰ The Mao-Zheng commentary to the *Book of Songs* can also be understood this way, but the idea that the purpose of a commentary was not simply to gloss and explain but to represent the text according to a certain rhetoric or hermeneutic has broader application beyond poetry, as a recent discussion of the *Laozi* demonstrates: Michael Puett, “Manifesting Sagely Knowledge: Commentarial Strategies in Chinese Late Antiquity,” in Paula M. Varsano, ed., *The Rhetoric of Hiddenness in Traditional Chinese Culture* (Albany: SUNY P., 2016), pp. 303–31.

*Poem Ten*³¹

I stroll out Upper East Gate,
And I gaze north, toward Mount Shouyang.
In its foothills there are recluses, picking bracken;
On its slopes, groves of fine trees.

步出上東門，北望首陽岑。下有采薇士，上有嘉樹林。

Shen Yue says: Boyi and Shuqi (who fled to seclusion on Mount Shouyang) would not even accept food from the Zhou (whose rulers were righteous) – how could one possibly accept it *unrighteously* (that is, from a bad ruler)? 沈約曰：夷齊尚不食周粟，況取之以不義者乎？

When will a *good* day come?
Now, freezing frosts soak the lapels of my robe,
As a cold wind shakes the ridges of the hill,
Black clouds forming a layered darkness.

良辰在何許？凝霜霑衣衿。寒風振山岡，玄雲起重陰。

Shen Yue says: [When the poet says] “When will a good day come,” he is saying that the ways of his world are treacherous, and that this is *not* a good day. With wind and frost come in tandem, more than one thing is being laid to waste. With black clouds and layered darkness, many things are covered and blinded. Thus [in the opening of the poem] he gazes at Mount Shouyang and sighs, entrusting his intentions to the enunciation of the example (*ji yan*) of Boyi and Shuqi. 沈約曰：良辰何許，言世路險薄，非良辰也。風霜交至，凋殞非一；玄雲重陰，多所擁蔽；是以寄言夷、齊，望首陽而嘆息。

A goose cries out on its southward flight;
The Tijue bird issues its mournful tone.

鳴鴈飛南征，鵽鳩發哀音。

Shen Yue says: When this bird calls out, the fragrant things die – and when the fragrant things have died, all that remains is stinking carcasses. 沈約曰：此鳥鳴則芳歇也。芬芳歇矣，所存者梟腐耳。

A pale essence floats on the *shang* sounds of autumn:
Forlorn, and ravaging my heart.

素質遊商聲，悽愴傷我心。

Shen Yue says: The arrival of the essence of withered paleness is brought about by the *shang* sounds that are employed in

³¹ See Holzman, pp. 25–27; Owen, pp. 39, 220.

the season of autumn. The character *you* (“travels on”) should be [the homonym] *you* (“is brought about by”); the ancients did not write with a stable set of characters. 沈約曰：致此彫素之質，由於商聲用事秋時也。遊字應作由，古人字類無定也。

The poem mentions “Mount Shouyang” and “picking bracken” and the commentary again reminds readers of the relevant association: Boyi and Shuqi, subjects of the Shang dynasty who went into reclusion at Mount Shouyang when the wayward Shang were overthrown by the Zhou. These are the very same moral exemplars that Confucius praises, in the *Analec*s passage that was central to the preceding poem, for having sought and found benevolence and so being free (perhaps) of rancor, but the inflection of the reference is different in this poem, which sees its speaker descend into a hopeless, not to say rancorous, depression. The salient point here is that Boyi and Shuqi starved to death eating bracken on that mountain, having, in the famous phrase of the *Shiji* account, “righteously declined to eat the millet of the Zhou 義不食周粟.”³²

The commentary, however, again twists a new meaning out of this reference. First, it dichotomizes the concept of “righteousness” (*yi*): “righteously” becomes “unrighteously” (*buyi*). The grammar remains roughly adverbial, as if righteousness or its absence still applied to the actions of Boyi and Shuqi, but Shen Yue has shifted the terms of the argument, eschewing the straightforward interpretation of the allusion – that despite or even because of their righteousness, they died a miserable death. Setting aside the fact that Boyi and Shuqi had criticized the Zhou king Wu, the commentary invokes the stereotyped view of the Zhou as a model polity – the classics were composed in its praises – and transfers the quality of “righteousness” to the Zhou state.³³ Through dichotomy and transposition, an *a fortiori* argument is constructed: if one is willing to decline the favor of a good state, then how much more so (*kuang*) ought one be willing to decline the favor of a rotten one. That would refer, the reader is left to assume, to an unrighteous state like the Jin, whose usurpation of the Wei Ruan Ji was thought to have resisted.³⁴

³² *Shiji* 61, p. 2123.

³³ This transposition is not entirely Shen Yue’s invention, because early accounts (notably, *Mencius* 4A/13) had allowed the two gentleman to reject the Shang and adhere to the righteousness of the (posthumously recognized) Zhou king Wen, before righteously rejecting the king Wu when he conquered Shang.

³⁴ A modern study proposes that Shen Yue’s commentary might have been written between 499 and 501, when the Liang dynasty was replacing the Qi, and that Shen Yue was using Ruan Ji’s poems to express his inner feelings in that dark moment. If so, the reorientation

When the speaker in the poem asks rhetorically about a “good day” (*liangchen*), the commentator spells it out: this is “*not* a good day” (*fei liangchen*). Where the poem sketches out a dark and melancholic scene of wintry weather, the commentator responds with a hyperbolic interpretation in which “*many things*” (*fei yi*, “not just one thing”) are laid to waste. The hyperbole reaches a fever pitch in the comment to the fifth line, where the symbolism of the “Tijue” bird (commonly translated as “shrike”) is glossed, but then extended grotesquely: “and when the fragrant things have died, *all that remains is stinking carcasses*.” This is not the proverbial “expressive-affective poetics” of subtlety and nuance, but a demonstrative rhetoric that takes the poem’s language and ideas and alchemizes them into some still stronger affect in the reader’s mind.

DICTION: FIFTH-CENTURY ENCOUNTERS WITH THIRD-CENTURY POETIC LANGUAGE

Shen Yue’s commentary draws heavily on the language of Ruan Ji’s poems, and not just for purposes of paraphrase: he picks up words and tropes off of them, building the poems out in tangent lines. One crucial aspect of this attachment to diction is that the commentary at times gives attention not just to the words, but to the nature of Ruan Ji’s language – and the contemporary reader’s distance from it.

Poem Seven depicts a beautiful autumn night – though one that brings the speaker sadness. It is a simple yet mysterious scene, with a single recorded comment from Shen Yue:

*Poem Seven*³⁵

The start of autumn augurs cooler air –
Crickets already sing from amidst my bed curtains.
And so, stirred by the things of nature, many worries come to
fill my breast,
A furtive sadness overtaking my heart.
I could say many words about this – but to whom?
I could speak at length about it – but to what person?
開秋兆涼氣，蟋蟀鳴牀帷。感物懷殷憂，悄悄令心悲。多言焉所告，繁辭將
訴誰？

of the personal anguish in this poem into an attack on an “unrighteous” dynasty would have made for rather sharp criticism. See Konba Masami 今場正美, “Tōkon kō chika ni okeru Shin Yaku to Gen Seki ‘Eikai shi’ chū ni tsuite” 東昏侯治下における沈約と阮籍‘詠懷詩’注について, *Gakurin* 學林 36–37 (2003), pp. 207–31.

³⁵ See *Holzman*, p. 133; *Owen*, pp. 48, 223.

Shen Yue says: [The poet] repeats his words, as [when the *Book of Songs*] says, “I long for it! I long for it!” 沈約曰: 重言之, 猶云懷哉! 懷哉!

A soft breeze billows my sleeves,
The bright moon glitters its pure radiance,
As dawn’s rooster seems to sing from the treetops –
Summoning my mount, I rise to make my return.
微風吹羅袂, 明月曜清暉。晨雞鳴高樹, 命駕起旋歸。

If there is an interpretative key to this poem, it would be the reference to the *Book of Songs* (Mao 26) in line 4: “a furtive worry comes to my heart (*you xin qiaoqiao*), / Beleaguered by all those petty men 憂心悄悄, 慍于群小.” Thus, when the poem speaks of “furtive sadness” (*qiaoqiao*) in his heart (*xin*), it is an allusion to “petty men,” the kind who will bring a good man to grief. Shen Yue, however, appears to have had nothing to say about the poem’s intentions; focusing only on the “repeated words” (*chong yan*) in lines five and six, he cites a different poem from the *Classic*. But why would these lines, and these alone, need or deserve comment?

More than a thousand years later, the inspired and idiosyncratic critic Wu Qi 吳淇 (1615–1675) would also place this couplet at the center of his interpretation of the poem: it is not, he explains, the speaker but the autumn crickets that are mindlessly droning on in the poet’s ear, as if they had “many words” to say.³⁶ In Donald Holzman’s modern formulation, “the lines echo the song of the crickets.” But Shen Yue is taking note of something different. One way of understanding his gloss would be to take it as an interpretation of the phrases “many words” (*duo yan*) and “speak at length” (*fan ci*, or “layers of words”) as a narrative description of what the poem’s speaker was actually saying: he was repeating himself, in the manner of the poet in the *Book of Songs* (Mao 68), who exclaimed “I long for it! I long for it!” That poem, incidentally, continues to fill in the complement of this desire: “What month will I be able to return home? 曷月予還歸哉,” a plaint that matches the resolution of the present poem. But in terms of diction that is not quite right, for the phrases “many words” and “speak at length” do not imply repetition. The better reading of Shen Yue’s commentary, I believe, is that it is glossing not what is happening within the poem’s narrative but an oddity on the poem’s linguistic surface. The real issue is that lines five and six use different words to say exactly

³⁶ Ji, *Ruan Ji “Yonghuai shi,”* p. 369. Wu Qi also underscores the poem’s smooth pivot from the “singing” (*ming*) of crickets in the first six lines to that of the dawn rooster in the final couplet.

the same thing. If fifth-century poets ever wrote couplets like this, they did not do so very often, and in the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, Liu Xie 劉勰, another of Shen Yue's contemporaries, rails against this kind of repetition of content ("bifid thumbs of meaning 義之駢枝") and diction ("warts of literary writing 文之疣贅").³⁷ It is in this frame of reference that our commentator points to the poem from the *Classic*, as a stylistic reference point for Ruan Ji's unorthodox use of repetition.³⁸

Thus, it appears that the poetic idiom of the third century, and especially of the rather disjointed poetry of Ruan Ji, felt a little odd to the fifth-century reader, or apprentice poet. One clear indication that the commentator considered these poems different from the contemporary norm is his labelling, in two instances, of Ruan Ji's diction as that of "the ancients" (*guren*). This occurs once in Poem Six, where a line reads: "Master Su thought his Three Rivers region too small 蘇子狹三河." The commentary explains: "Henan, Hedong, and Hebei constituted the Qin-dynasty prefecture of Sanchuan (Three Waterways); the ancients just called any kind of river a 'He' 河南、河東、河北, 秦之三川郡. 古人呼水皆爲河耳." On its surface this explanation appears straightforward, but it is actually an inscrutable statement in its received form. To see why, we must first sort out the difference between "Sanchuan" ("Three Waterways"), which is referred to in the commentary, and "Sanhe" ("the Three Rivers Region"), the place name used in the poem. Sanchuan was a commandery established by the kingdom of Qin in 250 BC; in the Han dynasty it would be known as Henan 河南. Comprising the Luoyang area, Sanchuan derived its name, as the *Han shu* commentator Wei Zhao 韋昭 (204-273) informs us, from the region's three "waterways" – the Yellow River (He) to the north, and the two tributaries that join together just south of Luoyang, the Luo 洛 and the Yi 伊.³⁹ Sanhe, by contrast, had a much broader scope of reference. Indicating the greater area east of the Hangu Pass 函谷關, in the Han it was used as a group designation for not one but three commanderies – Henan, Hedong, and Henei 河內.⁴⁰ That is, Sanchuan, which is to say Henan, was a part of a greater Sanhe region.

³⁷ Liu Xie, ed. Zhou Zhenfu, *Wenxin diaolong zhushi* 文心雕龍注釋 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1982) 32, p. 355.

³⁸ Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200), editor and annotator of the received *Book of Songs* and a natural reference point for any poetry commentator in the early-medieval period, notes such "repeated words" (*chong yan*) in several poems in the *Classic*, although not in the one cited by Shen Yue here; see Kong Deling 孔德凌, *Zheng Xuan "Shijing" xue yanjiu* 鄭玄詩經學研究 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 2021), pp. 277-78.

³⁹ *Han shu* 1, p. 15. Wei Zhao was an exact contemporary of Ruan Ji.

⁴⁰ Again, the information is from Wei Zhao, at *Han shu* 1, p. 34. This designation is confirmed by identical glosses from other commentators at *Han shu* 37, p. 1984 (Ru Chun 如淳,

With this information in hand, we can detect a problem in the commentary. The first phrase – “Henan, Hedong, and Hebei” (that is, “south, east, and north of the Yellow River”) – actually constitutes a simple gloss on “Sanhe,” the place name used in the poem. This is essentially the same gloss of Sanhe that we find in the *Han shu* commentaries noted above, “Hebei” in our text very possibly being a corruption of “Henei,” either in the later transmission of the *Wenxuan* or in the manuscript Li Shan consulted. The problem is that our commentary does not present this information as a definition of Sanhe at all, but of Sanchuan, claiming that Sanhe in the poem is an “ancient” substitution for Sanchuan. But that is simply not true, for Sanhe and Sanchuan are not two ways of saying the same thing. What, then, might the commentary be saying here? It is not unreasonable to speculate that in some more perfect state it actually did present “Henan, Hedong, and He[nei]” as a gloss of Sanhe, but then went on to claim that the poem was actually referring to Sanchuan.⁴¹ The commentary would make such a claim because Sanchuan is a more precise reference for Su Qin, who hailed from the Luoyang area.⁴² But it is the argument that Shen Yue presents for this substitution that is important. It would have been very easy for him to resolve the poem’s diction by pointing to more obvious explanations, including rhyme – *he* is here in a rhyme position, where *chuan* would not have fit – and general poetic liberty. Indeed, “Sanhe” is used in a very general manner in two other Ruan Ji poems, both times in rhyme position. Instead, he posits a difference between “ancient” and modern usage. He is focused on, and wants his readers to focus on, differences in the diction.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the comments attributed to Yan Yanzhi can also be analyzed from the perspective of attention to latent distinctions in the poems’ diction. The generally accepted interpretation of Yan’s commentarial approach is that he only provided basic glosses, rather than weaving together the overall meaning of a poem, as Shen Yue does, much less speculating about its allegorical interpretation, as later commentators were wont to do.⁴³ This is true,

fl. early-3d c.) and 14, p. 394 (Yan Shigu 顏師古, 581–645). Note also that Wei Zhao’s definition is quoted three times in Li Shan’s *Wenxuan* commentary, but not here – perhaps because to do so would have meant contradicting Shen Yue’s gloss, as Li Shan received it?

⁴¹ That is, something like: “Sanhe is Henan, Hedong, and Henei. Here is meant the ‘Sanchuan’ established by the Qin; it is just that the ancients would call any kind of river a ‘He’ [三河,] 河南、河東、河(北) [內也。謂] 秦之三川郡; 古人呼水皆爲河耳。”

⁴² See *Shiji* 69, p. 2241.

⁴³ See Qian, “*Wenxuan* ‘Yonghuai’ shiqi shou zhu,” pp. 15–18; also Stephen Owen, “Poetry and Its Historical Ground,” *CLEAR* 12 (December 1990), pp. 116–18. From different stand-

but there is one weird thing about Yan's glosses: two of his three extant notes are concerned with the same piece of diction, "a fine tree" (*jiashu* 嘉樹), as it features in two separate poems. In the instance of the line "Paths form beneath fine trees 嘉樹下成蹊," in Poem Three, Yan says that "In the *Zuozhuan*, Jisun has a fine tree 左傳, 季孫氏有嘉樹."⁴⁴ Since that passage involves a meeting (and an exchange of quotations from the *Book of Songs*) between high ministers of (the ancient states of) "Jin" and Lu, it is possible that Yan is implying a political allusion here, though if he had such an intention he left it unexplained. Perhaps this is what Zhong Rong meant when he complained that Yan Yanzhi "was afraid to explain the intent 怯言其志" of Ruan Ji's poems.⁴⁵ Be that as it may, he happens to gloss a similar phrase in Poem Ten, at the line "On its slopes, groves of fine trees 上有嘉樹林." In abridged or perhaps garbled form, Yan refers to the *Shiji*: "The *Shiji* 'Chapter on Divination' says that 'a fine forest is one without insects' 史記龜策傳曰: 無蟲曰嘉林."⁴⁶ What he seems to be pointing to is not just a different reference, but the need for the reader to cultivate a sensitivity to distinctions in language. The superficial collocation *jiashu* ("fine trees") is not one thing but two, and the well-conditioned reader should be able to see that *jiashu* is itself above, while here, modifying "grove," it is really *jialin*, as seen in the *Shiji* passage.

Returning to Shen Yue, identifying distinctions or peculiarities in the poetic diction also appears to be at the heart of his explanation of the first couplet of Poem Five. The poem says: "The Heavenly Horses come out of the northwest – / Whence they follow the roads of the east 天馬出西北, 由來從東道." The commentary paraphrases: "They come from the northwest, to the roads of the east 由西北來東道也." In one sense, the validity of Shen Yue's gloss is confirmed by the source, supplied by the Tang commentator Li Shan, from which this couplet

points, both of these studies argue that early readers, unlike later commentators, were not intent on projecting highly specific satirical interpretations onto Ruan Ji's poetry. Insofar as such interpretations are often tortuous, tendentious, and tedious, this is a salutary intervention, but I think we do not actually know that Yan Yanzhi, Shen Yue, and their contemporaries would have rejected specific figural readings in favor of what Owen (p. 115) describes as a more general, "typological" mode of interpretation. From another perspective, we can only suspect that they would *not* have rejected them, given the allegorical framework attached to the *Book of Songs*, the font of the *shi*-poetry tradition.

⁴⁴ Referring to Zhao 2. See Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition: "Zuozhuan"; Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* (Seattle and London: U. Washington P., 2016) 3, pp. 1336–37.

⁴⁵ Wang, *Zhong Rong Shipin*, p. 165.

⁴⁶ Compare *Shiji* 128, p. 227, which describes at more length the idyllic and untouched forests where tortoises can be found.

derives, a court lyric of the Western Han dynasty celebrating the arrival of “heavenly horses” that reads in part: “The heavenly horses come, / From (*cong*) the western extremes, /... / Traveling hundreds of *li*, / To follow (*xun*) the roads of the east 天馬徠, 從西極; ... 徑千里, 循東道.”⁴⁷ The received recension of the *Han shu*, produced by the seventh-century scholar Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645), quotes the third-century commentator Zhang Yan 張晏 for a gloss that is almost exactly the same (馬從西而來東也) as the one presented here as Shen Yue’s. This overlap hardly gives us confidence in our material, even if the complexities of manuscript transmission and commentarial cross-fertilization preclude the simple conclusion that this “Shen Yue” has cribbed a gloss from elsewhere.

Original or not, Shen Yue is glossing not the Han song here but its transformation in Ruan Ji’s poem, and he is not pointing to a Han source, as Li Shan’s method would have him do, but guiding the reader’s interpretation of the poem’s diction, taking what it says and prodding us to read it in a certain and rather unnatural way. Shen Yue’s construal takes “northwest” (*xibei*) from the first line of the couplet and interpolates it between the words *you* (“from”) and *lai* (“come”) in the couplet’s second line. This is strange because the line is readily legible on its own, without any such intervention: the compound *youlai* can simply mean “forever” or “always.”⁴⁸ This is a straightforward reading that produces good sense in the line, and in the couplet a fine poetic contrast that perfectly serves the purposes of the poem. Thus, Donald Holzman’s translation (emphasis added) casts this bit of “antiquity” aside: “The Heavenly Horses are bred in the northwest, / But, *from of old*, they follow the eastern road.”⁴⁹ Shen Yue seems to be suggesting that a third-century poem’s language can harbor different meanings even when the expressions appear to be relatively direct.

In the opening couplets of Poem Three, the commentary likewise seems intent on revealing oddities in Ruan Ji’s poetic diction where we might otherwise not notice them, or need to. “Paths will form under

⁴⁷ *Han shu* 22, pp. 1060–61; Li Shan cites it using a more regularized orthography. Note also the poet’s tropological approach to his source: *cong* appears in the poem and in the Han song, but in the poem it is shifted over to the place held in the song by its synonym, *xun*. In this sense, the poetry and the commentary share a common poetics.

⁴⁸ For example, from the late-3d.-c. poet Zuo Si’s 左思 “Poems on History”; *Wenxuan*, j. 21, p. 991: “Heroes meet with trouble, / So it is always been (*youlai*), from antiquity on 英雄有屯邅, 由來自古昔.”

⁴⁹ Owen’s translation splits the difference, reading *youlai* as “always” but finessing *dong dao*: “The horses of Heaven are from the northwest, / they have *always* followed *the road eastward*.”

fine trees' – / The peaches and plums of the Eastern Orchard. But then come, / The winds of autumn, blowing the bean leaves into flight – / Whence begins the decline 嘉樹下成蹊, 東園桃與李. 秋風吹飛藿, 零落從此始." This passage describes a natural transition from spring to winter, moving from "peaches and plums" – trees known for their flower in spring and fruit in summer – to the "decline" (*lingluo*) of fall. A progression like this seems unlikely to cause too much difficulty for any reader, but Shen Yue's gloss takes special care to tie the two couplets together: "The season when the winds blow the bean leaves into flight basically refers to the days when the peaches and plums start their decline 風吹飛藿之時, 蓋桃李零落之日." As in the preceding example, the commentator is intervening in these two couplets in a particular syntactical way, taking line 2's "peaches and plums" and making it a determinative for line 4's "decline." The effect is to naturalize the relationship of the two couplets, lest they be interpreted as an abstract contrast between flourishing and failing.⁵⁰ As a kind of dichotomy, such an abstract contrast is not just a good reading of the poem but perfectly in tune with the approach this commentary takes elsewhere – one can easily imagine an alternate iteration that expanded and expounded on such a parallel. Instead, the commentator here – who is, to be sure, winding up for an amplification of the poem's affective impact ("*there is no longer the slightest thing left to enjoy...*") – chooses to clarify the two couplets by drawing our attention to the poem's manner of expression and guiding us to a naturalized narrative.

The final line of Poem Three is also something we might not think twice about were it not for some differential information in the extant textual record. "The year now in its dusk... 歲暮亦云已," the speaker portentously intones. This understanding of the line is in accord with the gloss of Shen Yue, which reads: "The dusk of the year, a season of wind and frost – there is nothing to be done about it at all... 歲暮風霜之時, 徒然而已耳." As noted earlier, this is paraphrase that, with the addition of "nothing ... at all" (*turan*), intensifies the emotional impact. But there is a hidden interpretive problem here, located in the final word of the line and of the poem. In fact, the Chinese character that appears there was in question. The Kujō 九条 *Wenxuan* manuscript records the main text of the anthology, without commentary, but with numerous notes from varying commentaries appended in its margins. There, to the left of this character, the sound gloss 似 has been added – indicat-

⁵⁰ Qian, "Lun *Wenxuan* 'Yonghuai' shiqi shou zhu," p. 17, notes this distinction and affirms Shen Yue's reading, calling the abstract contrast an erroneous interpretation.

ing that the character in question was not *yi* 已 at all, but *si* 巳.⁵¹ The forms of these graphs are so close that, absent a gloss like this one, it is extremely hard to tell when a text has intended one and when the other. If we look closely at the Kujō main text, it seems the graph there really is *si*; the commentary of the Five Ministers in the Xiuzhou 秀州 edition, which all things considered stands as our earliest printed representation of the *Wenxuan*, also appears to be *si*, and the text-proper of the Chen Balang 陳八郎 edition seems to testify to *si* as well.⁵²

The graph itself does not really matter, because there was a known degree of interchangeability, if not simple confusion, between 已 and 巳, and between the words they represented.⁵³ At issue is what the *word*, however it was written or pronounced, meant: is it an “empty” emphatic marker, as Shen Yue’s reading specifies with the gloss of *er yi er* 而已耳, or is it a substantive, as other glosses and commentaries interpret it? Li Shan, apparently glossing *yi*, cites a dictionary for the definition “to be completed” (*bi* 畢). The Kujō manuscript, identifying the graph as *si*, also defines it this way, while the Five Ministers commentator uses a synonym, “to be finished” (*jin* 盡). Translators have followed suit: “The twilight of the year draws to its close” (Holzman); “and the year’s twilight is done” (Owen). If we look for the collocation 云已 in poetry of Shen Yue’s era, we also find a number of substantive applications.⁵⁴ It is the potential for that kind of construal that explains Shen Yue’s intervention here: he is making a distinction between Ruan Ji’s “antique” diction and the way the “moderns” used the poetic language. And in so doing, I would suggest, he reads a line of poetry the way it should be read. The substantive reading dulls the line with redundancy, while Shen Yue’s comment, by avoiding that repetition, channels the poem away from an interpretation wedded to the literal

⁵¹ The sound gloss is transcribed at *Wenxuan jiuzhu jicun*, vol. 7, p. 4271, but not the definition referred to below. There is a photographic reproduction of the Kujō manuscript in the National Taiwan University library (shelfmark 1379 p.369, scroll 12 for this reference).

⁵² For the Xiuzhou edn., see volumes 28–29 in the *Yuwei Hanji zhenben wenku* 域外漢籍珍本文庫 collection (Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue, 2011), ser. 1, j. 23, p. 4a; for Chen Balang, see the facsimile edn. produced in 1981 by the National Central Library in Taiwan, j. 11, p. 22b. The *Wenxuan jiuzhu jicun* prints *yi* throughout its transcriptions of the text and commentaries.

⁵³ Per the comments of Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), who believed that the two graphs were interchangeable in the Han (and thus in the time of Ruan Ji?), and distinguished only from Tang dictionaries; see *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1998), j. 14B, p. 745.

⁵⁴ For example, the poet Yuan Shu 袁淑 (408–453): “The soldier’s service is not yet finished (*yun yi*), / His prime years gone to waste 勤役未云已經，壯年徒爲空。” See Lu Qinli 邊欽立, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983; accessed via the Scripta Sinica database), p. 1212, with other examples at pp. 1239 (He Yan 何偃, 413–458), 1421 (Xie Tiao 謝朓, 464–499), and 1638 (Shen Yue himself).

value of words and toward the more impressionistic, emotive style that typifies Ruan Ji. Perhaps this was the more sensitive mode of reading into which the commentary sought to initiate its readers.

This brings us, finally, to the second time the commentary openly resorts to “antique” usage as an explanation of the text, in its gloss of the challenging penultimate line of Poem Ten: 素質遊商聲, translated above as “a pale essence floats on the *shang* sounds of autumn.” The commentary supplies a paraphrase: “The arrival of this essence of devastation and paleness is brought about by the *shang* sounds that are employed in the season of autumn 致此彫素之質, 由於商聲用事秋時也.” The key phrase here is “brought about by” (*you yu*), an interpretation that Shen Yue goes on to justify with an adjustment to the poem’s text: “The character *you* (‘travels on’) should be [the homonym] *you* (‘is brought about by’); the ancients did not write with a stable set of characters 遊字應作由, 古人字類無定也.” As in the case of “Sanhe” and “Sanchuan,” the claim is that in the olden days of the early-third century, linguistic usage – here, the written form – was less precise – and liable to be misconstrued by fifth-century readers.

Many readers over the ages have adopted Shen Yue’s reading, even to the extent of emending the text.⁵⁵ There is attested usage of the character 遊 (or 游: the two graphs were not readily distinguished) where 由 is intended.⁵⁶ The idea of a “pale essence” deriving from the autumn sounds vaguely seems to resonate with other lines in Ruan Ji’s poetry, including “A pale wind (*su feng*) produces a faint frost 素風發微霜” and, from Poem Twelve, above, “Shadowed air lays down a faint frost 陰氣下微霜.”⁵⁷ However, a number of later critics and commentators, including Wu Qi, Jiang Shiyue 蔣師燭 (1743–1798), Huang Kan 黃侃 (1886–1935), and Chen Bojun 陳伯君 (1895–1969), explicitly decline to follow Shen Yue.⁵⁸ If the two characters can be interchanged, there is no certainty that they have been, and “floating” or “traveling” on the sounds of autumn does have its justifications.

⁵⁵ Holzman and Owen both follow Shen Yue. Note that although 由 is sometimes listed as a variant by scholars (e.g., Lu Qinli) who use the Sibu congkan edn. of the *Wenxuan*, no early *Wenxuan* text has this reading. An emendation that can be traced back to the mid-12th-c. Ganzhou 贛州 *Wenxuan* and, as far as the extant record allows, no further, it may be due to that edition’s systematic conversion of a Five Ministers main-text into one of Li Shan, here confusing Shen Yue’s note with a collation note.

⁵⁶ A similar exchange is noted by Li Shan elsewhere; see *Wenxuan*, j. 44, p. 1982; *Wenxuan jiu zhu jicun*, vol. 14, p. 8762.

⁵⁷ Lu, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, pp. 500–1.

⁵⁸ See Ji, *Ruan Ji “Yonghuai shi,”* pp. 284, 287, 295, 298.

To review the poem, we begin with its speaker on a walk, gazing out onto the hills where the recluses dwell. He wishes to join them, but the weather is cold, dark, and forbidding, and he is overcome by the scene: the honking of a flock of geese soaring southward overhead, and the caw of the Tijue, a bird whose call was said to lead to the death of all vegetable life. It is this perception that leads the poet to say something about the “pale essence” and the “sounds of Shang,” the musical mode conventionally associated with autumn. If, as Shen Yue would have it, this line is to be understood as “the pale essence *comes from* the sounds of autumn,” then it is following up on the legend of the Tijue. If, however, we follow the received text, then the poem’s imagery – the white frosts of line 6 and the pale geese superimposed upon the dark sky in line 9 – seems to be “floating” on the soundscape, a twin impression that reaches the poet’s ears and eyes and ‘ravages his heart.’ Intact, the line is wonderfully startling, and it produces a narrative ending typical to Ruan Ji’s poetry. Emended, it is a rather tame continuation of the allusion that immediately precedes it, and ends the poem in a realm of abstraction that is more rare for Ruan Ji, for all his abstrusities. This, I think, is what those readers who object to “breaking” (*po* 破, to use Huang Kan’s word) Ruan Ji’s fraught diction here see.⁵⁹

The diction is fraught because an examination of the word *you* 遊/游, “travel/float,” in the poetry of Ruan Ji’s era does not turn up anything that exactly matches its apparent use here. Yet the grounds for a surprising usage did exist. The *Shuowen* definition is “pennants on a flag 旌旗之流也” – an image well-suited to poetic appropriation.⁶⁰ Poets had already unmoored the word from the literal, in the form of a common and evocative transitive application: “I let my vision/mind/ thoughts/spirit roam” (*you mu/xin/si/hun* 遊目/心/思/魂). Meanwhile, birds, sounds, and other things regularly rose and rode on the winds in third-century poetry: “The pneuma of my soul will be whisked off by the wind 魂氣隨風飄,” we find Ruan Ji saying elsewhere.⁶¹ Most importantly, the poets of Ruan Ji’s age did show an interest in innovation at the level of diction. “A startling wind whisks away the sun 驚風飄白日,” wrote Cao Zhi (192–232), the greatest poet of the older generation. Li Shan and other *Wenxuan* commentators would be left at pains to explain this entirely novel use of the word “whisks” (*piao*).⁶² Ruan

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 295.

⁶⁰ *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 7A, p. 311, where Duan Yucai shows 流 to be 旌. If we take the *Shuowen* text as received, it means “the flowing of a flag [in the wind].”

⁶¹ Lu, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, p. 503.

⁶² See *Wenxuan*, j. 24, p. 1117, and *Wenxuan jiu zhu jicun*, vol. 8, pp. 4455–56. “The sun belongs to the heavens, while wind is born of the earth,” says Li Shan, proceeding to explain

Ji himself innovates around a similar word of windborn motion. In the poem under discussion here, the line “A cold wind shakes (*zhen*) the ridges of the hill 寒風振山岡” may not immediately draw the eye, but the slightly catachretic use of “shake” (hills only “shake” in an earthquake, which is the cognate 震) is unattested in extant poetry from his time. Elsewhere he wields this trope still more emphatically: “Rosy blossoms shake forth their fragrances 朱華振芬芳”; “A friendly wind shakes forth her perfume 順風振微芳.”⁶³ If Ruan Ji could write that way about sensual allure, which he despised, he might write this way about the pure starkness of autumn, which he at once lamented and prized.

The point is not to overturn Shen Yue’s reinterpretation of this line, nor to exhaust the arguments on either side, but only to insist on a little room for what the text as received really does say. In the overall interpretation of the poem, it is not a problem of great significance: whatever the “pale essence” is doing, it represents the spirit of moral integrity through adversity which is the main theme of the poem. What is important is to see that Shen Yue is not just providing a (possibly correct) explanation, but identifying and normalizing an irregularity in the poem’s diction that his readers might have found problematic – or intriguing. In adding such comments it is likely that Shen Yue was guided not just by the problems inherent to Ruan Ji’s poetry but by a more general poetic concern as well. The late-fifth- and early-sixth-century literary moment was a time of great poetic innovation, with advances in prosody – in which Shen Yue played a significant role – and intense refinements of poetic sentiment. For all the experimentation that went on, however, that spirit of innovation was attended by some strong prescriptive or perhaps reactionary tendencies – including admonishments to avoid bizarre or “precipitous” (*xian* 險) diction. We even have a record of Shen Yue himself saying as much, in his dictum that writers should observe “three kinds of easiness” (*san yi* 三易): refraining from recondite allusions, producing texts suitable to be read

the disjunction by yoking it to more conventional equine and aquatic metaphors: “When he says ‘whisks,’ [he is saying that when] the floating light bolts away and suddenly is gone in the west, leaving but a remnant glow, this seems to resemble (*si ruo*) having been whisked away by the wind 夫日麗於天，風生乎地，而言飄者，夫浮景駿奔，倏焉西邁，餘光杳杳，似若飄然。” Cao Zhi, who had a general fondness for the word “whisk,” uses the exact same image in another poem (*Wenxuan*, j. 27, p. 1286, where it is paired with more common vehicles: “The light gallops off, flowing away in the west 光景馳西流”).

⁶³ See Lu, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, pp. 499 and 500, with another “shaking” of the landscape at 507. These are awkward phrases, and translators (*Owen*, pp. 43, 45; *Holzman*, pp. 32, 144) let the word disappear into paraphrase: “gives off” (*Owen*, pp. 43, 45), “shed” (*Holzman*, p. 32), “leaves” (*Holzman*, p. 144).

aloud, and making use of common vocabulary.⁶⁴ It is in that context, I suggest, that the purple patches in Ruan Ji's diction caught the eye of the commentator, who quarantined them, for the better edification of his "modern" readership.

Attention to poetic diction is a distinct feature of the Shen Yue commentary, both in the way he grasps individual words in the poems as handholds for his own interpretations, and in his glosses of specific, potentially problematic words. If at times he seems to grasp the words a little too firmly, we might be wary of such a limiting tendency in the medieval commentarial tradition generally, not least in our use of Li Shan, the indispensable *Wenxuan* commentator who incorporated Shen Yue's annotations to Ruan Ji's poetry into his own. A case in point is a Ruan Ji poem Shen Yue did not comment on (or perhaps one for which Li Shan declined to preserve his commentary). The second couplet of the famous poem that opens the *Wenxuan* selection reads: "A thin curtain reflects (*jian*) the bright moon, / While the pure breeze billows my robe 薄帷鑑明月, 清風吹我衿." The word *jian* produces the memorable poetic image of a curtain serving as a "mirror" for the moonshine; in Stephen Owen's rendering, "The thin curtain *gave the image* of the bright moon." But Li Shan leads the reader in a different direction with a dictionary definition: "According to the *Guangya* (*Expanded Glosses on the Diction of the Classics*): 'to mirror' (*jian*) means 'to shine' (*zhao*) 廣雅曰: 鑑, 照也." Commentators dance around this gloss, without addressing the fact that the reading it produces – "the thin curtain is shined on by the bright moon" – is a terrible verse with awkwardly inverted syntax.⁶⁵ Actually, Li Shan's "shine" does indirectly point us toward the basis of Ruan Ji's innovation – something like the opening couplet of the last of the Nineteen Old Poems: "The bright moon, o how lustrous, / *Shining down on* (*zhao*) my gauze bedcurtain 明月何皎皎, 照我羅床幃."⁶⁶ Ruan Ji's "mirroring" is an invention off that common base. Early-medieval poets seem to have intuited this: a generation after Ruan Ji, Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300) would turn the trope tighter, writing, "A pure breeze stirs the curtain, / As the morning moon *lights* my

⁶⁴ Xiaofei Tian, *Family Instructions for the Yan Clan and Other Works by Yan Zhitui* (531–590s) (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2021), pp. 200–1.

⁶⁵ To restrict ourselves to the scholarship that has been cited here – this poem has been translated many times – Holzman, pp. 229–30 (with discussion) stows the commentary gloss in a modifier ("My thin curtains *reflect* the *shining* moon"), while Yu, *Reading of Imagery*, p. 133, accommodates both views with a prepositional phrase: "Through the thin curtain the bright moon *shines*."

⁶⁶ *Wenxuan*, j. 29, p. 1350. Gu Zhi 古直 (1885–1995) cites this line alongside Li Shan's gloss, indicating, I think, that the gloss points us to the referent and not the reading of the line; see Ji, *Ruan Ji "Tonghuai shi"*, p. 162, and Holzman, p. 230.

dark room *like a candle* (zhu) 清風動帷簾，晨月燭幽房。⁶⁷ Consciously or not, the Tang commentator glosses over Ruan Ji's trope, reining in his reader's poetic imagination.

CONCLUSION:

“EXPRESSIVE-AFFECTIVE POETICS” IN EARLY-MEDIEVAL CHINA

There is a dedicated treatment of *xing* in the *Wenxin diaolong*, the great literary treatise that appeared in Shen Yue's lifetime, but it is very narrow in scope. Pairing “stimulus” (*xing*) with ordinary “metaphor” (*bi* 比), Liu Xie centers his discussion on the poetics of imagery: *bi* uses images that are easily interpreted and is said to pertain to the “manifest” (*xian* 顯) realm of “reason” (*li* 理) and “categorical” (*lei* 類) thinking, while *xing*, defined as that which “arouses emotion” (*qi qing* 起情), is an art of the “hidden” (*yin* 隱), leveraging the objects of the natural world for associations that are frequently obscure.⁶⁸ In these obscure associations lies an oblique connection with the material discussed in this essay: when the *Book of Songs* presents the image of the fish-hawk or the dove – such are Liu Xie's examples – a reader would not know that the former is referencing the sharp division between male and female, and not its fierce nature as a bird of prey, or that the latter is being used for its associations with chastity, and not to imply that married couples are *like* birds. “Like the light of dawn, not yet fully bright,” Liu writes – that is, the images are lucid and perspicacious, but the ideas they convey remain to be illuminated – “*their meaning becomes clear only when a commentary has been provided* 明而未融，故發注而後見也。” “Like the light of dawn, not yet fully bright” is an apt description of the poetry of Ruan Ji. But the commentary does not so much resolve this indeterminacy as it helps the reader formulate a response to it.

The *Wenxin diaolong* chapter leaves the impression not only that *xing* was merely a technique of imagery, but that the subtleties of that technique died with the *Book of Songs*, being displaced in later ages by the obviousness of *bi*-metaphor. But this characterization is largely part of the metanarrative in Liu Xie's work, which consistently finds ancient principles and their modern disappointment, and Zhong Rong, another contemporary voice, comes closer to capturing the importance

⁶⁷ The text of the Li Shan *Wenxuan* would come to erase this trope as well, reading “shine 照” for “light up like a candle 燭.” There is ample evidence (two extant manuscripts, all other printed edns., a gloss in the Five Ministers commentary, etc.) to show that this is a transmission error; see *Wenxuan jiuzhu jicun*, vol. 9, pp. 5557–58. But the error is telling.

⁶⁸ For text, translation, and discussion of this chapter of the *Wenxin diaolong*, see Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, pp. 256–62. The translation below is my own.

of *xing* as a key component of poetry, or even a fundamental poetic principle: “When there is something left to savor beyond what is said in the poem’s words, that is *xing* 文已盡而意有餘, 興也.”⁶⁹ Whether we count this as a revolutionary reformulation, or just a critic saying aloud what everyone already knew, this orients the concept of *xing* toward the aesthetic and emotional capacities of the reader, who shall delight in the pains and pleasures of intuiting what the poet has so artfully not said. The role of the teacher would be to cultivate those capacities, and in Shen Yue’s commentary we find an example, I suggest, of what such instruction might have looked like.

As a specimen of literary criticism, the Shen Yue commentary to Ruan Ji’s poetry may prove somewhat less than trenchant, though it does effectively underscore and elaborate some of the poet’s major themes: vainglory, rancor, desolation, and death. More importantly, as an illustration of *xing*-poetics, it takes us well beyond Zhong Rong’s pithy definition, to say nothing of the airy disquisitions of Liu Xie, allowing a granular view onto what the actual reading of poetry looked like, which is to say, of the methods that a reader could use to get into and then go beyond the words of the poem. Perhaps this “practical” *xing*-poetics is better conceived of as something akin to an athletic training than to what we usually think of as “literary criticism.” It disciplines the reader to identify and normalize special moments in poetic diction, and to leverage structures of thought – notably, dichotomy, a logic that would have been very familiar to the medieval era’s writers of verse couplets and parallel prose – that allow the poem and its emotional content to be understood, appropriated, and extended in the reader’s mind. This kind of reading discipline is bound to be limiting and distorting in some ways. Yet much in the way training in a sport fixes postures and motions in order that they may be exercised freely in the game, it opens up on a field of poetic response to poetry. That is, this example suggests, what “expressive-affective poetics” looked like in early-medieval China.

Appendix: The Materials

Fifth-century commentaries, quoted in a seventh-century commentary to a sixth-century anthology’s selections of a third-century poet, all transmitted in printed editions dating to the eleventh century and later. What could go wrong.

⁶⁹ There is a perceptive discussion of “the beyond” as a central motif of *xing* poetics from medieval times onward at Yu, *Reading of Imagery*, pp. 206–16.

We associate these comments with Yan Yanzhi, Shen Yue, “and others” because that is what the note under the title tells us in Li Shan’s edition of the *Wenxuan*, submitted to the Tang court in 658. But what did Li Shan really see? As one modern scholar points out, though we generally assume Li Shan actively incorporated earlier commentaries into his own, we do not know this for certain: he cites dozens of commentators, and it is entirely possible that some of them had already been incorporated into the *Wenxuan* texts Li Shan studied, or passed down within the teaching traditions that preceded his work.⁷⁰ It is worth noting that no bibliography records the existence of this particular commentary, suggesting the possibility that it never circulated independently. And while we are questioning its provenance, we may momentarily go so far as to doubt the commentary’s authenticity altogether: Yan Yanzhi wrote a famous poem featuring Ruan Ji and was associated with his poetry by the critic Zhong Rong, while Shen Yue lived through not one but two dynastic transitions that mirrored the one Ruan Ji was supposed to have projected in his poetry.⁷¹ The evidentiary value of the simple fact that their names happen to be attached to the commentary in the sole form in which it comes to us is slight.

Returning to the title note, it actually reads: “With annotations by Yan Yannian, Shen Yue, et al. 顏延年沈約等注.” What does the designation “et al.” refer to? Unidentified commentators? Confusion in the manuscript text Li Shan drew from? Scholarship rarely dwells on this point, and still less, if ever, on the other patent anomaly in the note: that Yan Yanzhi is called by his formal, public name, Yannian, while Shen Yue – who is known by his public name, Shen Xiuwen 沈休文, elsewhere in the *Wenxuan* – is just “Shen Yue.” Why? We do not know. Further signs of disorder can be found within the text of the commentary itself. The Yan Yanzhi comment on Poem Ten is cited irregularly in two respects: it follows the notes of Shen Yue and Li Shan, rather than preceding them, and it is attributed to “Yan Yanzhi,” not “Yan Yannian.” That comment also quotes inexactly from the *Shiji*, just as his citation of the *Zuozhuan* in Poem Three is imprecise. Shen Yue’s comment to the fifth poem of the series, meanwhile, is also cited out of the expected order, and it is prefaced with “Shen Yue *yun* 云” instead of the expected “Shen Yue *yue* 曰.” Scholarly consensus recognizes a lacuna in the Shen Yue commentary to Poem Fourteen, and as I have argued in the body of this essay, one of his notes to Poem Six is superficially intact but very likely corrupted.

Most notably, although “et al.” is specified in the title note, there is no clear indication in the text which comments belong to the “et al.” category. Rather, it is not that there is no indication: some fifty-one commentary passages have been left unattributed, and our natural assumption must be that most of them are due to

⁷⁰ A possibility observed by some, e.g., Liu Feng 劉鋒, “Li Shan zhu *Wenxuan* liucun jiu-zhu zonglun” 李善注文選留存舊注綜論, *Guangxi shifan daxue xuebao* (zhexue shehui kexue ban) 廣西師範大學學報(哲學社會科學版) 54.6 (2018), pp. 111–17, and Wang Dehua 王德華 and Ge Yajie 葛亞傑, “Cong Dunhuang ben *Wenxuan* canjuan kan Li Shan zhu diben de ‘jiu zhu’” 從敦煌本文選殘卷看李善注底本的‘舊注’, *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 135 (Mar. 2019), pp. 337–64.

⁷¹ It is also curious that Shen Yue passes over Ruan Ji entirely, moving directly from the Jian’an to the Western Jin, in the famous capsule history of poetry appended to his *Song shu* 宋書 biography of Xie Lingyun. Is that cause to doubt the attribution? Or is it, to the contrary, a reason to think, with Konba Masami, that politics, not literary interest, was the main motivation for his commentary?

“et al.,” whoever that may have been. But no one likes that solution. Some scholars have assumed or asserted that all of the unlabeled material actually belongs to Li Shan. Of course this cannot be right, because then there would be no “et al.” to account for at all.⁷² Others, driven by the feeling that a commentary with Yan Yanzhi’s name below the title really *should* have more than just four comments by him, have assiduously sought to attribute the unmarked comments to Yan.⁷³ That is wishful thinking. The truth is that some of the unattributed commentary passages probably do belong to Li Shan, but we cannot be certain which. Most of them do in fact present themselves in Li Shan’s trademark form, citing literary precedents for poetic diction – which is not to say that they are definitely his. Roughly a dozen of the passages appear in a more expansive, explanatory style that is generally less like Li Shan – which is not to say they are not his after all.

The key obstacle in assessing this material is the nearly complete absence of extant manuscript evidence. True, this is the condition for most of the *Wenxuan* – but far from all of it. For about one-fifth of the anthology we have manuscripts containing Tang commentary, either recovered from Dunhuang or, most importantly, in the “collected commentaries” edition known as the *Wenxuan jizhu* 文選集注, a work likely compiled from Tang sources in late-tenth-century Japan. These sources almost always reveal the Li Shan commentary in a better state of preservation. For another (partially overlapping) quarter of the whole we also have an early-eleventh-century printed edition; this is of less importance, but can still help unravel problems in the later editions for which it or its close relative served as a source. Such evidence would not answer all of our questions, and it might open up more problems, but it would grant us a fuller view of a textual object that, in its current state, cannot quite be taken at face value.

⁷² See Qian, “*Wenxuan* ‘Yonghuai’ shiqi shou zhu,” p. 15, attributing one unlabeled interpretation to Shen Yue on stylistic grounds. Two studies correct Qian’s error, both pointing out that the textual evidence sometimes adduced for that understanding relies on editions of the *Wenxuan* in which all of the commentary included by Li Shan is systematically prefaced with “Li Shan says”; see Yu Su 于溯, “Li Shan *Wenxuan* ‘Yonghuai shi zhu’ zhong de jiu zhu wenti” 李善文選‘詠懷詩注’中的舊注問題, *Nanjing daxue xuebao (zhexue renwen kexue shehui kexue)* 南京大學學報(哲學人文科學社會科學) 2011.1, pp. 126–33, and Fan Zhixin 范志新, “*Wenxuan* ‘Yonghuai shi’ wei biao ming xingshi zhuwen de guishu wenti” 文選‘詠懷詩’未標明姓氏注文之歸屬問題, *Wenxue yichan* 2011.6, pp. 139–43.

The same confusion exists in Western language scholarship, notably in regards to the famous general comment on the first poem. In the introduction to his recent translation (*Owen*, pp. 11–12), Stephen Owen takes it to be Li Shan’s view. Earlier (*idem*, “Poetry and Its Historical Ground,” p. 116) he attributed that comment to either Yan Yanzhi or Shen Yue, while *Holzman*, p. 7, regarded it as the opinion of Yan Yanzhi. Wherever we end up, “et al.” needs to be the starting point of any reevaluation.

⁷³ See esp. Fan, “*Wenxuan* ‘Yonghuai shi,’” p. 142, building on the view of Huang Kan. Fan makes the peculiar claim (p. 141) that the “et al.” comments may have been contemporary critiques of Yan’s interpretations that were then adopted and incorporated into the commentary by Yan Yanzhi himself. Yu Su, meanwhile (“Li Shan *Wenxuan* ‘Yonghuai shi zhu,’” pp. 128–30), advances an ingenious argument: since so few comments are attributed here to Yan, and because those so attributed are of such dubious quality, it is conceivable that most of the unlabeled comments are actually Yan’s, while those with his name attached are *not*, the two having been mixed up in the course of transmission. So does the aporia of textual uncertainty drive two perceptive and useful studies into the marshes of pure speculation – whereupon the reader can only burst into tears and return home.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Holzman* Donald Holzman, *Poetry and Politics: The Life and Works of Juan Chi (A.D. 210–263)*
- Owen* Stephen Owen, in Owen and Wendy Swartz, *The Poetry of Ruan Ji and Xi Kang*
- Wenxuan* *Wenxuan* 文選 (Shanghai guji chubanshe typeset edition)
- Wenxuanjiuzhujicun* Liu Yuejin 劉躍進 and Xu Hua 徐華, eds., *Wenxuan jiuzhujicun* 文選舊註輯存