Introduction

Footnotes are classicists’ epigrams; translations, classicists’ costume dramas; many commentaries, where the text serves merely as an incitement, as a field for articulating a self, are classicists’ idylls.

To write about reading and understanding is a difficult proposition, in part because both ideas, although fundamental to our mental lives, tend to dissolve into complexity and paradox when examined too closely. We think of them, through an enabling forgetfulness, as simple and straightforward, but when we pause to reflect on them, they elude easy comprehension. As a way of approaching the group of issues to be addressed in the following chapters, it will be useful to begin by focusing on the range of quite disparate things we can mean when we speak of “a reading” of a poem.

The simplest and most immediate sort of “reading” is an oral recitation, a live performance in real time. One reading can differ from another through differences in emphasis, or in the ligatures and pauses that articulate underlying structure, or by variations in timbre, pitch, volume, and cadence, along with a range of less tangible qualities in delivery by which we distinguish one reader’s voice from another’s. In sum, by the different ways in which each reading allows the audience to hear the presence of the text through the presence of the reader. We also refer to readings by different readers, or distinct readings by the same reader, as “interpretations” of the poem, as we might speak of different interpretations of the same musical notation. We likewise often speak of accounts of a poem’s meaning, divorced from actual recitation, as readings. But even in these cases, the idea of a real-time oral reading underlies the idea of interpretation, and even serves as its guarantee. For to call a complex and discursive explanation of a poem’s meaning “a reading” suggests that, once properly assimilated and taken into ac-
count, that explanation, no matter how intricate it might initially seem, could become a way of hearing the poem. This idea of “a reading” includes as well a certain range for variation, implying that any given reading is one way of doing something that might be done in other ways, all of which might equally be valid readings. To judge another reader’s interpretation to be a valid reading means that we can imagine hearing it that way, even if we ourselves prefer to hear it in a different way; when we say a reading is invalid, we mean that we simply cannot hear it that way.1

In the case of poems far distant from us in time, or in their cultural, historical, or linguistic frames of reference, however, the situation becomes more complicated. The idea of a “live” reading—the possibility of hearing and understanding an ancient text in real time in a way that somehow corresponds to or recreates the experience of an original audience—may still be said to underlie the enterprise in some sense. The volume of linguistic, historical, and cultural lore required simply to point the way toward such a reading, however, eventually reaches such proportions that the idea of hearing the poem in real time seems not so much a possibility as the ever-receding horizon of an ascetic discipline that eventually becomes an end in itself. Under these conditions, the project of reading merges with that of producing commentary, which interrupts a text and breaks it into fragments, and the idea of recapturing the state of the live reading is outbalanced by the sheer weight of contextual information one needs to bear in mind as the poem unfolds. Validity or invalidity itself ceases to be a matter of “being able to hear it that way” or not and takes on the guise of a scholarly argument about authenticity, to be adjudicated by debate among specialists. One might invoke what one musicologist has said in relation to the informing logic of the Early Music movement in western classical music: at a certain point an “authentic” performance comes to mean “a performance accompanied by a good set of programme notes.”2

This quip provides a useful point of comparison, but we need not rush to endorse its implied value judgment too unreservedly. Although it seems only natural to value immediacy and spontaneity over the endless second-order mulling of scholarly arcana, to view the question in these terms is to overlook the compensating pleasures of the scholar, for whom the very arcaneness of the lovingly accumulated fragments of
knowledge about the poem’s distant world becomes part of the gratification of a sustained and fulfilling labor. In the midst of this labor, those spontaneous moments in which the scholar seems to hear the poem are made precious by their very fleetingness, and by the effort that went into seeking them. The very distance between the reconstructed world of the poem and the lived world of the scholar becomes a source of pride and of a distinct identity, an extraterritoriality of the mind. The elusiveness of the poem’s voice bestows a form of sacredness on even the most seemingly trivial scholarly labors carried out under its aegis. As much as for any progress toward a real-time hearing of the poem, these labors become significant as a mode through which the scholar communes with its world. Commentary may break up the poem’s text and thereby defer the time at which we imagine being able to hear it “live,” but it is founded on the implicit promise of a whole and perfect utterance that will, or might, be reconstituted at the end of all the interruptions. The quest to recapture that perfect enunciation sanctions and rewards the shutting out of the scholar’s own mundane reality. Commentary becomes an alternative mode of idyll.

This account of the twists and turns encountered along the way toward “a reading” incorporates elliptical autobiography as well as allegory about the guiding assumptions and convictions underlying modern scholarship on premodern Chinese poetry, both in China and elsewhere. Although it is only fair to be frank about the genesis of one’s motivating questions, however, this book focuses on questions of reading confronted by Chinese readers of the Six Dynasties period in relation to their own classical tradition, particularly questions of voice, time, and the presence or absence of the author. The central argument to be presented is that Tao Qian 陶潛 (365–427) is above all the most readerly poet of his age, and that this readerliness was crucial to the vast impact his works had in turn among later readers.

What, then, is the most relevant model of reading or readerliness to apply when seeking to understand this dimension of Tao Qian’s work? For him, as for many of his contemporaries, the most emblematic kind of reading was the reading of the classics—centered on what we call the “Confucian” Five Classics, but also including the subsidiary body of
texts often loosely designated under the rubric of books of the “sages and worthies” (sheng xian 聖賢). Much space in the following chapters will be devoted to reconstructing the conventions of thought and expression relating to reading and readers that characterized Tao Qian’s era, with the aim of demonstrating how Tao Qian’s poetry draws on those conventions in the way it frames questions about meaning and understanding, and in the sorts of answers it suggests to those questions. The point in doing this is not to argue that Tao Qian was a conventional writer, but to try to gain a better appreciation of how Tao Qian created a distinctive and original poetics out of the materials provided to him by traditions about texts and reading.

One way to begin such a reconstruction is by examining some of the traditional pieties and rhetorical commonplaces about reading that were part of the language of the time. What were the stakes, the guidelines, and the purposes and benefits conventionally associated with writing and reading, and how in turn were these implicated in beliefs about authority, whether textual or cultural? We find many of the relevant conventional beliefs about the vocation of reading packaged in a delightful poetic vignette by the Western Jin scholar Shu Xi 束皙 (263–302),5 “A Fu on Reading”:

耽道先生，
澹泊閑居。
藻練精神，
呼吸清虛。
抗志雲表，
戢形陋廬。
垂帷帳以隱几，
被紈素而讀書。
抑揚嘈囋，

Master Rapt-in-the-Way—
placid and bland, he dwells at leisure.
He adorns, he perfects, his vital spirits;
he blows out, he breathes in, the pure and the subtle.
His aims soar as high as the clouds’ outer bounds; 5
he hides his form away in a crude cabin.
With curtains lowered, he leans on an armrest,
and clad in light silks, he reads;
Rising and sinking, ringingly resonant;

i. ll. 1–8: Compare the scene-setting here for the recitation of Master Rapt-in-the-Way with the opening of Shu Xi’s “Apologia for Dwelling in Obscurity” (“Xuan ju shi” 玄居 謝): “Shu Xi dwelt in retirement, his students assembled in attendance. He’d lowered the curtain and was deep in conversation, laughing while propped on his armrest.” One of his students questions him, observing, “rapt in the way (dan dao 聶道), you perfect your mastery of the classics.” Further on, the interlocutor observes that Shu Xi “imprisons the great way [i.e., as embodied in Shu Xi himself] in a meager hut; torturing his form in a brushwood chamber” (JS, 5: 51.1428).
or swift, sometimes slow;
elegant and easeful, rich with depth;
now contracted, now drawn out long.

He intones “Cocklebur”—
loyal ministers are gladdened;
he chants “Tarragon”—
filial children are saddened.
He invokes “Great Rat”—
greedy folk depart;
he sings “White Colt”—
worthy gentlemen return.

And thus,
Shun chanted poems to the end of his days;

ii. l. 13: *Song* 頌 here should be understood as equivalent to *song* 誦, “recite aloud.” “Cocklebur”: The *Shi jing* poem “Juan er” 卷耳 (*Mao* #3). The poem presents a woman gathering cocklebur by a roadside and longing for her absent lover. Traditional interpretations associated this with the longing solicitude with which good rulers of antiquity sought out virtuous men to administer their kingdoms, avoiding unfairness or nepotism. See *MSZY*, 1–2.9C (SjJ, 1: 277C), and *Shi san jia yi ji shu*, 1: 1.23. I have borrowed from Arthur Waley’s translations in rendering the titles of these *Shi jing* songs in English.

iii. l. 14: “Tarragon” is “Lu e” 蓼莪 (*Mao* #202), a lament by a son whose official duties prevent him from observing proper mourning rites for his parents. An anecdote from near Shu Xi’s time suggests the conventional associations of this poem (and also provides a real-world parallel to Shu Xi’s “Master Rapt-in-the-Way” as an exemplary reader of the classics): Wang Pou 王裒 was a recluse whose father had been unjustly killed by Sima Zhao 司馬昭 (211–65), father of the Jin founder Sima Yan 司馬炎 (237–91). Wang, who lived under the Jin as a classics teacher, was said to have been moved to fits of weeping every time he read the lines “Alas for my father and mother; / for their weariness and trouble in bearing me!” His students eventually removed this poem from the curriculum in order to spare his feelings. See Wang Pou’s biography in *JS* 7: 88.2278.

iv. “Great Rat” is “Shuo shu” 碩鼠 (*Mao* #113), a poem of invective, spoken in the person of a serf cursing and vowing to leave an overbearing and avaricious overlord.

v. l. 16: “White Colt” is “Bai ju” 白駒 (*Mao* #186). The text of the poem is enigmatic: it focuses on the colt, while implying some ties of affection between the speaker and the colt’s rider. Traditional interpretations treat it as lamenting the loss of worthy gentlemen from the court. See *MSZY*, 11–1.166A (SjJ, 1: 434A) and *Shi san jia yi ji shu*, 2: 643.

vi. l. 18: The image of Shun as a sage intimately involved with music and poetry appears frequently in early Chinese writing about the origins and purpose of both. The *locus classicus* for this image is drawn from *Shu jing*, “Shun dian,” where Shun utters what will be-
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仲尼讀易於終身。 Confucius read the *Changes* throughout his life.\textsuperscript{vii}

原憲潛吟而忘賤, Yuan Xian chanted to himself and forgot his lowliness;\textsuperscript{viii}

顏回精勤以輕貧。 Yan Hui studied hard and thereby thought little of poverty.\textsuperscript{ix}

倪寬口誦而芸耨, Ni Kuan recited orally while weeding and hoeing;\textsuperscript{x}

買臣行吟而負薪。 Maichen walked chanting as he carried kindling.xi

賢聖其猶孳孳, how see how even the worthies and sages have worked hard at this—

況中才與小人。 how much the more so must we middling talents and petty men?\textsuperscript{26}

There is an element of whimsical humor in this depiction of an idealized reader,\textsuperscript{7} but, as we will see, it nonetheless can show us a great deal about Six Dynasties reading and interpretation. The opening lines em-
phasize the Master’s withdrawal from the mundane realm and hint at the enhanced spiritual powers that this withdrawal allows him to develop. As in Daoist meditation practices, his preparations for recitation involve breathing exercises that help enable the particular sort of spirit-wandering that follows. The themes of hiding, shutting out, and obscuring in this poem reflect crucial aspects of the figure of the classicist scholar. As we shall see, the image of a powerful and far-roaming mind confined in a crude hut is a recurrent emblem in this period for the power of reading itself. We can identify two key dimensions in this image, both of them essential to much of the discussion in the following chapters: first, the vast disproportion between the scholar’s outward social guise and his concealed power; and second, the possibility that the scholar’s chosen mode of dwelling might cause some observers to overlook him or to misconstrue his true identity and worth.

The lowering of the curtain at line 7 signals a final degree of enclosure and inward focus. There follows a truly remarkable literary depiction of the lilt and cadence of a reader’s voice as he recites. Lu Ji’s 陆机 (261–303) “Fu on Literature” (Wen fu 文賦) contains impressionistic descriptions of the literary effects of reading that offer partial parallels, but here, in contrast to those passages, what is presented is not the effects of text as such but the act of reading, imagined as a physically embodied and real-time enunciation by a particular reader. This reader is also imagined as an ideal reader, and, as we see in the ensuing lines, his reading seems in a quite tangible way to bring the texts to life.

The series of poems from the Shi jing recited by the Master, along with a corresponding list of effects that his recitation of each poem is imagined as producing among his hearers in the outside world, are coded to indicate that each poem is not merely being repeated but is in a stronger sense restored to its primordial aim and efficacy. The effects described mirror exactly what the classicist tradition told traditional readers each poem was fundamentally intended to do. For medieval readers, this notion of primordiality of effect was not grounded in the idea of the original voices of the historical men and women whom modern scholarship attempts to hear through the “noise” of the quaint moralizing of an intervening tradition. Rather, it was a primordiality of moral effect as posited by that very tradition—that is, the status of these poems as part of the legacy of the sages, especially of Confucius.
In fact, it is particularly in those instances in which traditional exegesis pointed to a fundamental significance of the poem not at all evident in the poem’s words (as here particularly in the cases of “Cocklebur” and “White Colt”) that an enunciation of that poem realizing that significance provides the most compelling vision of the tradition’s vindication. To restate this point from a slightly different perspective, to the extent that such poems (or, for that matter, this passage in Shu Xi’s fu) require the reader or listener to draw on a shared body of traditional knowledge to provide a context for understanding them, the act of understanding, of getting the correct message from a text that does not state that message outright, becomes an affirmation of that shared knowledge and of group solidarity among the insiders to the tradition.

This notion of group identity and solidarity is developed in the closing section of Shu Xi’s fu, which catalogs exemplary readers down the ages, from the sages Shun and Confucius to scholars of the Han, and concludes with an exhortation to the readers and hearers of the fu itself to strive to emulate these exemplars. It is notable that after the two sages who head this list, the figures Shu Xi chooses as exemplary readers share affinities beyond the practice of reading: each reads in a state of poverty or social degradation, and for each, reading is a consolation and a means of forgetting these straitened circumstances. In the fu’s central section, the Master’s recitations from the Shi jing present an idealized vision of reading as a way of reactivating the legacy of the classics. This concluding section exemplifies an idea of reading as a mode of communion with those sages and worthies who through the ages have shaped and sustained that legacy. The idea of reading as a means of forgetting proves to be essential to medieval discourse on reading and scholars. The debased outward circumstances of those worthies of the past prove paradoxically necessary to our sense of their power: the direr their lot, the greater the power we attribute to them of being able to forget that lot in the transport of their reading. This equanimity in the face of adversity is in turn the clue that can lead later readers to detect the inner power belied by their outward circumstances.

Thus in the stories of impoverished scholars in the concluding section of Shu Xi’s fu we recognize similarities to the dynamics of askesis and power that underlay the introduction of the Master himself. His very name, Rapt-in-the-Way, points to a key aspect of the exemplary
reader: the capacity for delight. The ability to be absorbed in study to the point of forgetting one’s mundane cares was displayed most centrally for traditional readers by Confucius and his most advanced disciple, Yan Hui. The sage described himself as one who “in his passion forgets to eat; who in his joy forgets his worries, and who is unaware of the approaching of old age” 发憤忘食, 樂以忘憂, 不知老之將至.17 And Confucius said of Yan Hui, “How worthy is Hui! With a single basket of food, a single ladle of drink, in a crude lane—where others would not be able to bear their anxiety—Hui does not alter in his joy. How worthy is Hui!” 賢哉回也!一箪食,一瓢飲,在陋巷,人不堪其憂,回也不改其樂. 賢哉回也!18 Through his reading and his joy, Master Rapt-in-the-Way reaffirms his commonality with the lineage of readers who have found joy and forgetfulness in the same pursuit.

One further dimension of Six Dynasties thought about reading reflected in Shu Xi’s fu concerns the power of reading to edify. The Master’s recitations from the Shi jing are a vision of edification in practice, and the concluding lines remind the audience of an obligation not simply to admire the exemplary readers of the past but to seek to emulate them. Underlying all these suggestions of modes of edification mediated by reading is the suggestion of the personal edifying power embodied by the Master himself.19 The interweaving of ideas about the edifying influence of texts and the edifying influence exerted by a morally exemplary person is a pervasive feature of early medieval thought about texts and about scholars.20 As we will see, texts may exert an edifying effect that makes them a form of personal presence; similarly, a morally exemplary person may have an edifying effect that is felt, understood, and communicated through analogies to ancient exemplars known otherwise only via reading. To experience either sort of influence is to gain access to a fellowship made up of the sages and worthies and their texts that stands apart from historical time.

The transmitted accounts of the Eastern Han recluse Huang Xian 黃憲 (75–122) offer a revealing example of this fellowship in action. Huang was humbly born, the son of a cattle veterinarian. Both his reputation and his reported influence are remarkable for their lack of specificity about anything that Huang did or said, yet the reports of his magnetic influence persistently describe it in language of sagely and near-sagely virtue derived from the Analects, and especially through im-
explicit and explicit comparisons to Yan Hui, with whom local worthies identify him to such a degree that designating Huang as Yan Hui becomes a coded way of indicating to others that one has properly divined Huang’s near-sagely virtue: Xun Shu 荀淑 (83–149) meets the fourteen-year-old Huang Xian and immediately says to Yuan Lang 袁閬 (fl. c. 131), another scholar in the region, “Did you know your state had a Master Yan [that is, a Yan Hui] in it?” Yuan Lang replies, “Oh—have you seen our Shudu [Huang Xian’s 宇]?” Whatever the historical veracity of this episode, the anecdote hinges on a particular point—that one worthy is able to infer correctly, and without any further clue, that the “Yan Hui” just mentioned must be Huang Xian. Just as texts can become the medium for a personal knowledge of the ancients, so the presence of an actual person may be experienced and communicated as the reprise of an exemplar known otherwise only through reading.

Fan Ye’s 范曄 (398–445) comment on Huang’s biography in the *Hou Han shu*後漢書 observes:

Of Huang Xian’s conversation and opinions, or of the gist of his manner, no report is handed down, yet of all the scholars and superior persons who saw him, none failed to submit to the depth and vastness of his personality and rid themselves of their own flaws and pettiness. Might this be because the Way was complete in him and his nature perfect, so that there was “no [specific] virtue by which to call him”? The opinion of Xian held by my great-grandfather, the Marquis Mu, was that Xian was dispassionate in his acceptance of circumstance, and fathomless like the Way itself; that none could put a name to his depth or shallowness, nor would anyone venture an opinion as to his standards of purity or worldliness. If he were to have entered the school of Confucius, might he have been one who was “almost there”?  

Yan Hui was remembered as the disciple who was “almost there,” that is, almost a sage like his master Confucius. The lack of circumstantial detail concerning Huang Xian’s accomplishments or opinions, or even his personal style, forces later readers to infer the power of his personality indirectly from its edifying effects on those who had met him in person. Fan Ye’s great-grandfather imagined Huang Xian transported back to the time of Confucius to become a sort of doppelgänger to Yan
Hui, just as other contemporaries had experienced being with Huang Xian as tantamount to meeting Yan Hui in the flesh. For later readers, the fragmentariness of such first-hand reports about Huang Xian only heightened the alluring sense that to have met with him face to face would have been to experience firsthand the community of Confucius’s school.

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What, then, does this all have to do with Tao Qian? The argument advanced in the following chapters amounts to revisiting Zhong Rong’s 鍾嶸 (~468–518) assessment in the Shi pin 詩品 (“Grades of Poetry”) that Tao was “the lineage-founder of all the eremitic poets from antiquity to the present,” with the proviso that we need to take more fully into account the complex of issues and concepts surrounding the figure of the “hermit,” or alternatively, the “unworldly scholar,” in medieval China. Once we do this, however, an updated construal of Zhong Rong’s evaluation sheds light on a number of nagging issues relating to Tao Qian’s intellectual context and convictions as well as to the particular sort of poetic text he instituted.25 The “unworldly scholar” is a figure who turns his back on the world, but who in the very act of doing so invites audiences of both contemporaries and latecomers to claim him as an intimate on the basis of a shared experience of reading.

For many readers over the centuries, the most striking thing about Tao Qian has been the way in which they have felt directly addressed by the poet’s voice. The poetic device of apostrophe provides a useful analogy both for this quality in Tao’s works and for Tao’s relationship to his own era: the poet seems to turn away from his world and to speak to us on intimate terms.26 Apostrophe provides an alluring and perhaps even necessary model for thinking about lyric as a genre, since part of what it means to understand a poem is to be able to feel addressed by it, even if only in a temporary and imagined way. In Tao’s case, the attractions of this way of thinking about poetry have been enhanced by the widely held belief that Tao Qian was not appreciated as a poet in his own age.27 A related question addressed by modern readers of Tao Qian has been that of autobiography: along with the sense that Tao Qian seems to address us person to person, against the grain of the dominant poetic styles of his period, goes the notion that he alone
among his contemporaries speaks in his own voice. Paradoxically, however, in Tao’s writing, just as we saw in the cases of Shu Xi’s Master Rapt-in-the-Way and of the persona named Shu Xi in his “Apologia for Dwelling in Obscurity,” the autobiographical voice in Tao Qian is inseparable from projections of an idealized self-image that patently have an element of playful fabulation about them.28

An instructive debate has evolved around the issues of autobiography and the immediacy of Tao’s poetic voice. One strand of this argument was set in motion by Stephen Owen’s essay “The Self’s Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography.” In the context of the traditional critical reception of Tao Qian, Owen presents a distinctly contrarian analysis of the autobiographical in Tao Qian. Rather than simply turning to his readers to confide in uncharacteristically direct and transparent language what he thinks and feels and who he is, Tao, according to Owen, adopts a rustic persona through a “desire for simplicity, rather than simplicity itself.”29 In this more conflicted operation, readers come to appreciate Tao and to hear his real voice not through the alluring simplicity of the poetic persona but through the tension between that persona and the more complex and volatile self that underlies it.

Many readers will recognize here an effort to claim Tao as a poet who seems simple but who on closer examination turns out to be surprisingly modern, closer to us than we might have thought. For some, such a reading provides a renewal of the vividness with which the poem addresses us. In feeling addressed in this way, we are like the medieval readers of the catalog of Shi jing poems as recited by Master Rapt-in-the-Way: on the basis of long-term reading practices that had formed them as readers, they could reflexively supply the shared body of knowledge about the classic texts and hear what was being described as a vision of the renewal of the classics and a vindication of their commentarial tradition. Like them, we modern readers who hear Tao’s idyll as succeeding as poetry just where it fails to sustain simplicity are responding in terms of our own formation as readers.

For other readers, however, Owen’s effort to read tension and complexity into the relation between self-image and authentic self in Tao amounts to an imputation of bad faith. Charles Yim-tze Kwong’s Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition: The Quest for Cultural Identity sides with authenticity in a way that downplays the difficulties and paradoxes
involved in the quest. Emphasizing that the presence of fictional elements in poetic autobiography “does not always mean self-conscious role-playing or defensive image-building,” Kwong maintains that “the empirically fictional elements in his work may be experientially and expressively authentic.” Reading under these assumptions, Kwong also finds confirmation of Tao’s authenticity in the instability and conflict he sees in the work, as, for example, in his reading of Tao’s violation of a taboo against writing about one’s own poverty. But Kwong insistently refers any such conflict back to the real experience of an authentic Tao Qian, rather than allowing any suspicion of interpretive aporia to enter into the relation between poet and text, or between text and reader.

Another strand of this discussion arises from Zhang Longxi’s comments on the “autobiography” question. His critique of Owen’s argument takes a tack initially quite opposite from Kwong’s. Although he, like Kwong, attacks the “doubleness” of Owen’s analysis of the tensions between self and self-image in Tao, Zhang, rather than insisting on an authentic Tao speaking through the text, maintains instead that we must face the fact that all we have are texts. He notes that “the image of Tao Qian as a farmer-recluse is presumably not the Tao Qian we would have known had we lived in Xunyang some sixteen hundred years ago and known him as a next-door neighbor,” but that “what the ‘true’ self of Tao Qian is outside any textual construction is an immaterial and impertinent question.” For Zhang, the question is “how does Tao Qian’s simple language succeed in making the richness and complexity of his life experiences manifest in poetry?” It is not clear how we avoid positing a real person in understanding a text whose very meaning is said to consist in manifesting rich and complex life experiences, and indeed much of Zhang’s ensuing discussion is surprisingly traditional, emphasizing the directness of Tao Qian’s style and situating the text emphatically in terms of the familiar narrative that views Tao’s poems as addressed apostrophically by a neglected genius to readers of later ages: Zhang says that “Tao Qian actually speaks to the future and beckons to his own audience in future generations who will know his sound. To find his fit audience, however, he had to wait for centuries, because the significance of Tao Qian’s plain style was not fully recognized until the great poet Su Shi (1037–1101).”
Appealing as it may be, such an emphatic notion of lyric as tran-
stempral apostrophe, viewing the poem as a message in a bottle,
sealed off from its own age and set afloat in the hope of someday
reaching later readers, also challenges our historical imagination. What
happened between the lonely poet's sending of the message and its de-
layed reception? What processes intervened, and what if any changes
have occurred between that initial belated recognition and our own
readings? Two recent works of Tao criticism attempt, in Hans-Georg
Gadamer's words, to "break the spell of our own fore-meanings" as
these relate to Tao Qian. Both of these works aim, in quite differ-
ent but complementary ways, to bring greater historical complexity to
the ways in which we feel addressed by Tao's poetry. The first of these
works, Xiao Fei Tian's *Tao Qian in Manuscript Culture: Record of a Dusty Ta-
ble*, addresses not just the question of how Tao was read by traditional
readers but also how he was written. The book attempts to revisit early
manuscript versions of Tao through their fragmentary remnants in the
critical apparatuses of Song editions and argues that the version of the
poet who emerged with the onset of print was quite different from the
Jin dynasty writer we glimpse through the scattered variants of the old
manuscripts. The second volume, *Reading Tao Yuanming: Shifting Para-
digms of Historical Reception (427–1900)* by Wendy Swartz, surveys Tao's
reception history in detail and, by conveying a sense of the intellectual
and historical contexts of earlier generations of readers of Tao, suggests
that efforts to recapture an "authentic" Tao (if that is indeed what we
wish to do) need to be made with an awareness of the ways in which
each generation has produced its own version of the poet throughout the
centuries.

Both Tian’s depiction of the flux of manuscript culture (particularly
her revisionist suggestion that Su Shi’s “recognition” of Tao resulted in
chronic misreading, rather than delayed discovery, of an original poet)
and Swartz’s instructive survey of the divergent ways in which readers
of different inclinations and in different ages have assumed they knew
Tao Qian remind us of the need to maintain a critical self-awareness,
even or especially in those moments when Tao Qian seems to be
speaking directly to us. Tian characterizes the assumptions informing
the readings of Tao by Su Shi and Song readers, as well as many latter-
day readers, as amounting to the belief that Tao “was just 'living,' and
happened to write some poetry.”37 The humor of the remark reveals the fundamental paradox involved in the insistence on authenticity, transparency, and the seamlessness of the relation between the poet and the work, in which the time of the poet’s experience and the time of the poetic expression seem to merge in the spontaneous here-and-now of the reader who feels addressed by the poem.

Still, those moments do seem to occur in Tao Qian’s poems with unusual frequency, and that they happen is not due merely to the arbitrary whims of historically uninformed readers. Rather, this impulse can be traced to the text itself, where something close to this idea of “just happening” seems to occur regularly, often precisely in those lines that have become most renowned in the reading traditions around Tao Qian. To give but a few examples:

飢來驅我去，
不知竟何之。

Hunger came to drive me away—
I knew not where in the end I’d go,

where what is “just happening” is dictated by the force of hunger and not the poet’s will. Or,

相思則披衣，
言笑無厭時。

When we miss one another, we’ll throw on a cloak, and of our talk and laughter we’ll never weary,

one of many scenes depicting the spontaneous conviviality of the poet’s rustic neighbors. In such instances it is often difficult to pin down whether the scene is to be read as reported from the present or as happening in an envisioned ideal future. Or consider the fourteenth poem of the “Drinking Wine” (“Yin jiu” 飲酒) series:

故人賞我趣，
挈壺相與至。
班荆坐松下，
數斟已復醉。

Old friends who appreciate my ways, carrying a jug, have got together and come. Spreading brushwood mats, we sit beneath a pine, a few pours later, once again we’re drunk.

父老雜亂言，
觴酌失行次。

These geezers’ talk is wild and lacking order; the sequence for filling up our cups is lost.

不覺知有我，
安知物為貴？
悠悠迷所之，
酒中有深味。

No longer aware there’s such a thing as “I”— how should I know what things should be esteemed? Distantly, I lose track of where I’m going; in wine there is a depth of flavor,
where the idea of spontaneous conviviality is developed through the markedly haphazard banqueting arrangements and then through the emphatically presented loss of control and decorum as the party unfolds.

Finally, to return more directly to the issue of autobiography, we might consider this crucial instance of “just happening” described in Tao’s “Biography of Master Five Willows” ("Wu liu xiansheng zhuan” 五柳先生傳):

他曾读书，不求甚解，每有会意，便欣然忘食。

He loved reading but did not seek overly strenuous explanations; whenever he had a meeting of minds with what he was reading, he’d be so happy he’d forget to eat.

Suspending, for the present, questions of the authenticity of such moments as underwritten by a real Tao who really “just wrote them,” we may still observe that such passages present the reader with a vision of spontaneous happening, in which the reader feels invited to experience that spontaneity along with the author. Such moments suggest what it was about Tao’s poems that caused earlier readers such as Su Shi (along with later readers following in Su Shi’s footsteps) to hold so tightly to this model of apostrophe.

The phrase 会意, or “meeting of minds/intentions,” in the above excerpt from the “Biography of Master Five Willows” clearly plays a key role in that particular moment of spontaneity. The term is linked to the hermeneutic and philosophical discourse known as 玄 (so-called “Dark” or “Mysterious” studies), where it is associated with a form of understanding and textual exegesis that, transcending the focus on lexical gloss and paraphrase associated with Han 章句 ("chapter and verse”) scholarship, relies instead on approaching the text as the medium by which an author expresses an intention. Thus, rather than focusing on what the words of a text mean, one attends to the words as an indication of what the writer or speaker was getting at by using those particular words in that particular context.

The possible connections between such a hermeneutical model and the issues of apostrophe and the presence of the author behind the text are not far to seek. The tendency in studies of connections between Tao’s poetry and contemporary intellectual culture has been, however, to view the relation between poetry and thought within a schema of
form and content, such that “Tao Qian’s thought” is treated as a set of abstract philosophical or religious beliefs (in turn divided into discrete categories such as “Daoist,” “Confucian,” and so on) that are contained in the poems. The following chapters propose not to analyze the “content” of Tao’s thought as expressed in his poetry, but rather to use the particular kind of poetry he created, with the particular sorts of questions about the understanding of texts and of persons that this type of poetry foregrounds, as a window onto the poetics of reading and understanding in the classicist thought in his period, and then to consider how a more focused sense of that style of classicist thought might help us in turn to better appreciate Tao’s brand of lyric. What the comment on reading from the “Biography of Master Five Willows” quoted above shows us, after all, is not a percentage admixture of a style of thought we might label *xuan* that is exhibited in a larger hybrid body we can further label “Tao Qian’s thought,” but rather a particular way of expressing the delight that occurs in a moment of understanding.

Focusing on how such experiences are imagined and how they are shaped means attending not only to conceptual schemas and belief systems but also to related cultural practices, particularly those we often refer to under the rubric of “self-fashioning.” This means treating the poem not as a container but as a meaning-producing act. In fact, as becomes evident in the following chapters, to call the poem more precisely “the trace of a meaning-producing act” is not to import willy-nilly a bit of poststructuralist jargon but to attempt to think about text and understanding in a way that was quite familiar to writers and readers of Tao’s era. Our historicist desire to challenge our own projected understandings of texts with the alien usage of the text’s historical world should include a desire to recapture historical languages of understanding itself. A poem is among other things an artifact of a historical activity that included, not incidentally but as an essential dimension, the activities of reading and understanding.

A crucial set of practices relevant here are those relating to the figure of the ideal reader such as we glimpse it in Shu Xi’s “Fu on Reading.” A historical reexamination of Tao Qian’s poetics of presence and concealment must consider the rhetorical topoi and meaning-creating practices (themselves also centering on ideas of presence and concealment) that belong to the concept of the “unworldly scholar.” Another dimen-
sion of early medieval meaning-producing practice important here is the dynamics of textual authority and textual understanding involved in the reading and exegesis of the classics themselves. Partly because of its central role in Tao Qian’s writing, as well as in the discourse of eremitism, and partly because of its central importance for general reflections on the significance of the classical legacy for many scholars of the period, this study focuses in particular on early medieval commentarial practice centering on the *Analects*.\(^45\) Gaining familiarity with this field of practice—again not as a “theory” or as a discrete set of doctrinal or exegetical positions, but rather as a broadly coherent set of strategies employed in understanding classic texts—may pay dividends for our own understanding of aspects of Tao Qian’s poetic language that might otherwise seem opaque.

One thing we notice when we do this is that readers of Tao’s era have their own distinctive vocabulary and conceptual tools for thinking about something similar to the problem of apostrophe as it has arisen in the critical reception of Tao Qian in later ages. When early medieval writers and commentators reflected on the problem of how the words of a text might properly be understood by a latter-day reader, they often spoke of recapturing the original meaning of the speaker or writer by resituating it in its context of utterance, where the words originally pointed toward a situation-bound meaning. Thus, to understand is to imaginatively recreate that original situation and, in particular, the presence of the original speaker or writer. To be a good reader, in this period, is among other things to be adept at accounting for or inferring contexts of utterance. Conversely, the words themselves always present the danger of misleading those who fail to provide the right context or to see the intended context-bound point.\(^46\)

To return to the question of understanding Tao Qian, imagine for a moment that we *were* his neighbors at Xunyang in the early fifth century: how would we have understood him, and how would he have expected us to understand him? We note from the outset that questions of understanding and misunderstanding texts are already both complex and crucial for Tao himself. He, like us perhaps, is committed to correctly understanding past writers, and thereby joining in a likeminded community of readers across time. For Tao Qian, as he himself tells us, being a good neighbor means not only farming and drinking and convers-
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The first of the following chapters, “Transports of Reading,” outlines the general issues involved in an effort to read Tao Qian within the horizon of the culture of reading of his age. The quality of transparency that many readers have identified in Tao Qian’s writing—the way in which his work can seem to transport us into the poet’s immediate experience—in fact masks assumptions about the kind of writing Tao is engaged in. In order to complicate our reading of Tao’s work by a closer engagement with history, we need to make room for a more laborious form of transport, one that incorporates aspects of the early medieval praxis of reading and writing into our conception of the poet’s aims. In fact, it is useful to remind ourselves that the early history of the literati 诗 is one of a series of experiments in creating textual hybridity, staging claims, within what began as a popular song form, for engagement and continuity with textual and cultural authorities from the classical past. The fluid boundaries in this period among seemingly diverse sorts of activity such as imitation as the basis of literary training, the “filling in” of textual lacunae in received textual traditions, and the creation of supplements to such traditions through new composition remind us to be wary, in reading texts of this era, of overly simple distinctions between literary and scholarly writing, or between the aes-

昔欲居南村，非為卜其宅。
聞多素心人，樂與數晨夕。
懷此頗有年，今日從茲役。
弊廬何必廣，取足蔽床席。

鄰曲時時來，抗言談在昔。
奇文共欣賞，疑義相與析。

In the past I wanted to reside in South Village—it was not for the sake of the homesite.
I’d heard there were many folk of unsullied mind, with whom I’d gladly count mornings and evenings.
I’ve held this wish for quite some years,
today, I set upon the task.
As for my run-down hut, what need that it be large?
I’ll find sufficiency in a roof over bed and mat.
From time to time the neighbors will come;
in high-flung phrases we’ll talk of ancient things.
Rare writings together we’ll enjoy and appraise,
working out the doubtful meanings together.
thetic and ethical efficacy of texts. In fact, a careful reading of early documents in the reception of Tao Qian reveals not so much that he was undervalued in literary terms as that he was highly valued, but within an essentially different vocabulary—namely, the vocabulary of moral influence associated with the figure of the unworldly scholar. To explore the conceptual and rhetorical landscape of the unworldly scholar in this period is to examine models of the transport of reading, both as a form of delight that provides validation of the moral stature of such figures, and as compensation for worldly pleasures they forego. The final sections of this chapter outline key terms in the conceptual world of early medieval reading and scholarship, with particular attention to the ways in which successfully negotiated acts of understanding are figured as temporal transport to a more primordial and authentic state of the world.

The second chapter, “Reading Hermits,” examines the rhetorical topic of the “unworldly scholar” as it took shape in the early medieval period, and the central role played by this figure in early medieval thought about questions of textual and ethical understanding. One obstacle to our understanding of the cultural significance of the hermit and of the sphere of eremitic values in medieval China is an overly simplistic view of the typical stance of unworldliness adopted by the hermit. There is at times a tendency to interpret eremitism as the renunciation of a dominant public ideology, particularly of the tradition of the Confucian classics as emphasizing engagement in the world and adherence to the duties dictated by the social and political hierarchy. In fact, close attention to the primary sources reveals a significantly more complex picture, in which the options of both service and withdrawal are formulated within a distinctly classicist vocabulary, and in which the values of public and private spheres need to be understood not in terms of simple opposition but of mutual definition and reinforcement. The ethical dimension of medieval classicism is in fact preoccupied with questions of timeliness and of the situational choice between action and non-action rather than reflecting any supposedly fixed orientation toward public engagement. The figures most renowned as classicist scholars are felt to possess, by their recognition of the underlying patterns within the flux of history, an outlook that is in a deep sense unworldly. Along with the terms in which the ethical choice between public action or
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eremitic withdrawal is formulated, the basic vocabulary of eremitism itself is drawn pre-eminently from the classicist tradition. The figures of the hermit and the classicist scholar are in fact often identical, both as repertoires of rhetorical topoi and as actual modes of literati self-fashioning, during this period. Questions of understanding centered on the problematic relation between “trace” and “intention” turn out to be crucial both to the proper assessment of the hermit’s character and personal worth and to the hermit-scholar’s own interpretation of the textual legacies of past exemplars.

The *Analects* is the single most important text with and against which Tao Qian builds his own poetic language, and not coincidentally, the text for which the overlap of the personal and textual dimensions of the hermeneutics of trace and intention is most prominent for readers of the period. The role of the *Analects* within Tao’s poetics, however, has been one of the most persistently elusive aspects of Tao Qian’s thought and writing, particularly in modern criticism. A set of what prove to be unwittingly ahistorical assumptions underlying previous efforts to filiate Tao Qian’s thought to one or another tradition have made the question of the *Analects* in Tao Qian a more or less intractable problem. In an effort to reach a more historically grounded appreciation of Tao Qian’s poetics in relation to early medieval classicism, I devote considerable space, in the third and fourth chapters, to this central problem. Chapter 3, “Six Dynasties Reading of the *Analects*,” sets out to reconstruct, to the extent possible with the surviving evidence, the distinctive approach to the *Analects* and the central importance of this text within the brand of hermeneutical thought associated with the xuan-inflected classicism of this period. Although later Confucian orthodoxy was habitually leery and dismissive of this brand of classicist thought (a dismissiveness that impacts much scholarship on the period to this day), the picture that emerges from close attention to surviving primary sources is one in which the figure of Confucius, as the pre-eminent sage of “lower antiquity,” is if anything even more prominent than in Tang and later Confucian discourse. Among the key elements of this view of Confucius and his textual legacy that bear on early medieval reading of the *Analects* is the notion of the sage’s language as pointing towards (rather than stating as propositional content) the sage’s fundamental concerns. This means that to achieve proper understanding re-
quires an appreciation of the central sagely faculty of timeliness in re-
sponding appropriately both to the immediate circumstances of the
given utterance and to the more general character of the historical age.

The distinctive ways in which xuan-school classicists approached the
scenes in the Analects where Confucius encounters hermits are obvi-
osely of interest for our exploration of the sources of Tao Qian’s poet-
ics, but are also quite revealing as expressions of period tendencies in
explicating the intent of the sages and in understanding how the ex-
pression of that intent was constrained by history. Analects exegesis of
this period, in contrast to later styles of reading that might see the her-
mits and Confucius as representatives of opposed views of the world,
consistently starts from the assumption that the role acted out by her-
mits in their exchanges with Confucius was essentially similar to that of
Confucius’s own disciples; such exchanges serve as exemplary scenes
that ultimately help in elaborating the final intent of the sage’s teaching,
or in protecting that teaching from possible misconstruction or abuse.
For readers of this period, the Analects is the pre-eminent text for raising
issues of situational understanding, and of meanings to be recovered via
an imaginative re-creation of the immediate presence of the sage. Dur-
ing the sage’s time, this meaning is conveyed through the sage’s col-
laborative interaction with worthy interlocutors. Once the sage has left
the world and his meaning is entrusted to the legacy of the classics, it
requires the ongoing efforts of latter-day readers, worthies in their own
right, to renew it and protect it from abuse.

With a clearer sense of the characteristic historical use and range of
meanings of the Analects for the early medieval period, we are better
equipped to consider how Tao Qian himself uses the text in creating a
distinctive type of lyric, and it is to this set of issues that we turn in the
fourth chapter, “Tao Qian’s Reading of the Analects.” Many supposed
problems relating to the role of the Analects in Tao Qian in fact simply
dissolve once we consider the Analects not as a fixed ideological refer-
ence point, but rather in terms of the historical process of negotiation
and creative adaptation to contemporary concerns that we see in Ana-
lects interpretation during this period.

One aspect of the relation between Tao’s poetry and its primary
predecessor texts merits examination in some detail, namely, the ques-
tion of the significance and range of the relations to source texts we
commonly refer to under the general rubric of “allusion.” On looking carefully at the wide variety of relationships covered under this blanket term, we discover that the *Analects* serves in Tao’s poetry not merely as a source of poetic diction but rather as a full-fledged interlocutor text, against which, through a centrifugal relation of considerable tension, the text of the poem articulates its meaning. The model of the relationship between Confucius and his interlocutors within the *Analects*, which contemporary scholars often treated in terms of exemplary scenes aimed at indicating a meaning beyond the actual words spoken, gives us a useful perspective in reconstructing the set of assumptions within which Tao Qian could have anticipated his own lyric use of the *Analects* would be construed. A particular dimension of Tao Qian’s lyric language that becomes considerably clearer when we place it in the context of contemporary styles of canonical interpretation, especially of the *Analects*, is its concern with questions of historical time in its bearing on language and understanding. This chapter concludes with a discussion of these issues in light of contemporary assumptions about time and the meaning of the classics.

This book is subtitled “Text and Understanding in the World of Tao Qian,” and much of its concern is to fill in those aspects of the cultural forms of textual practice and understanding of this period that are often overlooked in later readings of Tao Qian. The concluding chapter considers the specific ways in which the distinctive brand of lyric text created by Tao Qian, drawing on aspects of the rhetorical and cultural models of the unworldly scholar, gives new and forceful expression to problems of textual understanding and the reconstitution of the personal presence of the writer. The definitive problem of ethics and expression for Tao Qian is that raised by the ideal of “steadfastness in adversity” (*gu qiong* 固窮). In Tao Qian’s poetry, this term becomes emblematic of a fundamental and endlessly productive paradox: *gu qiong* represents a steadfastness that includes indifference to one’s outward circumstances while at the same time, as the foundational category of cultural memory underlying much of the literature of moral exemplars of the past, seeming to offer the possibility of a form of cultural immortality.

One prominent feature of the rhetoric of eremitism is its reliance on tropes of substitution. Sequences of contrasting pairs of terms serve to
articulate the differences between the central or cosmopolitan space of “worldly” affairs versus the peripheral rustic space occupied by the hermit-scholar, such as concentrated populations versus empty wilderness, finery of clothing or food versus crudity and deprivation, and so on. The tradition of poetic treatments of the theme of the “summons to the recluse” exhibits a range of variation in the deployment of this rhetorical schema, in which writers invite their addressees away from cosmopolitan pleasures into a reconstituted mode of conviviality and pleasure in the realm of the recluse. Tao Qian indeed draws extensively on this tradition in articulating the rusticity of his own poetic persona; yet, along with the more routine functioning of substitution tropes as a way of articulating the eremitic sphere, we see in Tao Qian’s recurrent use of the solitary banquet an application of this rhetoric that has significantly different dynamics. The text of the poem, rather than being voiced as a summons into a realm alternatively of rustic or of cosmopolitan fellowship, becomes itself both the deferment and the potential site of recovery of a form of fellowship that exists from the outset solely in the experience of reading.