Chapter 68. "Who Am I?"

In reply to Kâśya, Magistrate of Huzhou, who asked me who I am

I, the Blue Lotus Layman, am a banished immortal, thirty years I’ve drunk too much and hidden away my name. Why, sir, do you need to ask? In my next life I’ll be the Gold Grain Buddha.659

答湖州迦葉司馬問白是何人

青蓮居士謫仙人
酒肆藏名三十春
湖州司馬何須問
金粟如來是後身

The name Kâśya tells us that the Magistrate is an ethnic Indian from Central Asia.660 So he is presumably acquainted with the Gold Grain Buddha. I had to look it up, though, and of course it’s somewhat involved. Here’s the story, starting with Li Bo’s sobriquet.

Blue Lotus Layman is the Buddhist name Li Bo discovered for himself — the lotus flower, always showing pure even while growing in murky waters.661 Li Bo’s line from another poem:

The blue lotus emerging from the muck.662

青蓮出塵埃

Layman — a lay.devotee or householder (jushi 居士), an ordained non-monastic. Well, there’s a serious Buddhist supposition that only a monk or nun can attain enlightenment, there’s no other way. But Buddha’s teaching was there before anyone thought monastically, and so even within the tradition we
have the case of Vimalakīrti, a great layman, contemporary of the Buddha, who attained that same realization with no ordination at all. In Chinese, Vimalakīrti is often called Layman Vima (Weimo jushi 維摩居士). In his previous life he was the Tathāgata Golden Grain of our poem, and in Li Bo’s own next life, he tells us, he himself is going to be that same Buddha. It’s a bit like telling someone, “Right now I’m your ancestor, and in my next life I’ll be your progenitor.”

The Buddhist layman and the Daoist immortal sit together in a single line of Li Bo’s verse, without even a hyphen between them. It would be a shame to think of them antagonistically or syncretically, as if there were two religions squeezing into a single body. But Li Bo also tells us he’s a banished immortal. And what is that?

We’ve seen how Dongfang Shuo pulls off the banished immortal role—his offensiveness, wit, practical wisdom. Here is another banished immortal, of a generation or two before Li Bo, to augment the contrast. I’m speaking of Ye Fashan 葉法善 (631–720), great magician and theurgist. An American scholar writes of him:

He employed ritual powers and spirit-helpers to perform countless amazing rescues, saving ladies and gentlemen, emperors and courtiers, from death, disease, demons, coups, and unprincipled sorcerers. […] His meritorious activities, in faithful service to grateful rulers, served to integrate the cosmos, uniting the world above, the world below, and every corner of the world of men, from imperial court to the most distant frontier.

He served five Emperors, and the Bright Emperor himself wrote his epitaph. At his death, on 12 July 720, “he ascended as immortal in broad daylight.”

Ye came with these abilities. He followed no human master, underwent no spiritual training, had no religious affiliation, wrote no texts, trod no path. It’s even unlikely he was ever ordained a Daoist priest (daoshi 道士). When he was six, he
Seemed to drown and was gone for three years. On his return, he told his parents that the Azure Lad had given him Cloud Sauce to drink, so he’d stayed away a bit. So how does an immortal get banished? We know that Dongfang Shuo stole the peaches of immortality. Sire Gourd (in chapter 31, the Grotto-Heaven) tells us that “I was inattentive to my duties, so I was banished, sent back for a while to this human realm.” Ye Fashan had been similarly inattentive:

Once Ye met three deities, all dressed in brocade robes and fancy hats. They said to him, “We’re acting on the orders of Laozi, the Great Highest, and we bring you a secret imperial rescript from him. Originally you were an official in the Left Office of Immortals within the Great Ultimate Purple Subtlety. But you were inattentive in copying out the registers of birth and death, so you were banished to the human realm. Make haste to gather merit by serving people. When your merit is complete, you can return to your old position.”

And so he spent his entire life in service to others, compelling spirits and demons — this was his sole function, or purpose. In particular, he was apotropaic guardian to the Bright Emperor and his State.

There seem, then, to be two causes for banishment. One is to be naughty, like Dongfang Shuo and Li Bo — it’s somehow taken for granted that Li Bo’s the kind of being who might offend a celestial bureaucracy. The other is to be inattentive, *buqin* 不勤. The second, though, sheds happy light on the first, for that phrase *buqin* also occurs in chapter 6 of the *Laozi*, but there with the positive meaning of “being without effort and thus inexhaustible.” So perhaps banishment is only a term of non-recognition, the name that a scoldy, work-obsessed society reserves for something whose unkempt inexhaustibility lacks all normal explanation. If we remove the stigma of punishment, then each of these immortals is actually a curious visitor to Earth, just a tourist, a style of functioning, certainly not an iden-
tity. From the perspective of the divine, banishment is simply a movement from here to here, from a Heaven to an Earth. It’s not something that happened once, and is done with, but rather a continuous down-pouring of blessings into the human realm.

This helps us understand why we have no traces of either Ye or Li Bo doing any work to develop their skills. Ye, at least, was born that way, and the Great Highest only sent him here for a bit, presumably because the State needed protection.678 The Catholic Encyclopedia of 1913 defines one division of hagiography as those texts that are “the spontaneous product of circumstances or have been called into being by religious needs of one kind or another.”679 This might also be a Tang definition of Ye Fashan, called here by circumstance, overseen by the Great Highest, and thus a functioning part of the Order of Things680 — his banishment was just the arrangement through which this could be achieved. Sometimes it’s difficult to separate cause and effect.681

The earliest account of a banished immortal among the official dynastic histories is in the Book of the Southern Qi (Nanqishu 南齊書).682 Like this:

During the late 480s a man named Cai lived on Cup Mountain in Kuaiji. His given name’s unknown. He raised rats there, dozens and dozens of them, and they’d come or go on his command. His speech was variable and mad. He was often called a “banished immortal.”683