Apersonal Singularity: Writing and Reading in the Work of Two ORIGINAL Poets[1]

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374 Contemporary poetry in mainland China has been in constant change in the last thirty to forty years, ever since the so-called *Menglong shi* (朦胧诗) or "Misty" poetry appeared in the mid-1970s.[2] The background to the post-Mao new poetry and subsequent poetic developments may be understood in terms of three main factors: first, the historical conditions of Chinese poetic modernism, especially during the New Culture movement in the early twentieth century; second, the exigencies of politics and ideology in contemporary China; and third, the influence of Western literature and theory. All three factors are quite complex and deserve separate and extended treatment. In this essay, I explore problems of the relation between writing and reading in contemporary Chinese lyric poetry, especially as these two notions impinge on the idea of an "experimental poetry" (实验诗) and on the function of the reader in the work of two poets, Zhou Yaping (周亚平, 1961-) and Che Qianzi (车前子, 1963-). The initial impetus of Che and Zhou was to move away from both the didactic model of writerly realism and the Misty mode of nostalgic displacement. While such "experimental poetry" has often been discussed in terms of its *thematic* or *stylistic* differences from Misty poetry, I argue that the central problematic should be construed not just in terms of how poetry is *written*, but also in terms of how it is *read*. Writing and reading are inseparable. My argument is that the shift from the so-called Misties to younger experimental poets such as Che and Zhou is not (merely) a shift from the heroic or epic to the unheroic or everyday, as many critics have emphasized, but fundamentally a shift from a conventional *passive* mode of reading, which identifies (with) and acquiesces to authorial and pre-determined meanings, to a new conception of the reader's *active* powers of interpretation and discovery.

I will first sketch out a sense of the mode of reading entailed by Misty poetry and some of its constraints. Then, in the main part of this essay, I will explore the fur-

ther questioning and transformation effected by the two ORIGINAL poets Zhou Yaping and Che Qianzi, who have led the turn toward what they themselves have named as a "formalist" or "language poetry." My discussion will highlight these two poets' endeavor to de-naturalize the expressive self in Chinese poetry and to move from lyric expressivism to exploratory and experimental writing that engages with what may be called the "language-world." In particular, I will focus on the role of the reader and a conception of the reader-function that their poetry has made possible and promoted.

MISTY POETRY AND ITS MODE OF READING

It was against the background of the subordination of the individual to the socio-political agenda during the Maoist years that the expressive lyrical self in con-temporary Chinese poetry becomes a meaningful problematic. The Misty poets—Bei Dao (北岛, 1949-), Shu Ting (舒婷, 1952-), Yang Lian (杨炼, 1955-), Gu Cheng (顾城, 1956-1993), among others—emerged during the mid and late 1970s in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. Their poetry arose in opposition to authoritarianism and political repression.[3] Its primary concern was with the valorization of personal and collective experiences in the midst of the socio-political turmoil of the 1960s-1970s, with a collective "expression" of a lost generation rather than with the exigencies of an emergent "modern" self. This so-called new "modernism" in the post-Mao era clearly recuperates the enlightenment paradigm of the May Fourth era, but with limited self-reflexive awareness of the implicit and inherent contradictions that remained unresolved. Like their May Fourth predecessors, the Misty poets tended to homogenize and monumentalize the state ideological apparatus (or "tradition" as in the May Fourth era) and to "concentrate the panorama of social life into an intensely tragic conflict in terms of individual experience and subjective conscious-ness" (Xudong Zhang 128) sliced up into ironic retrospects or bitter estrangements. With their evocative, ambiguous images and arresting metaphors, the Misty poets conjured up a world of perplexing complexity and fragmented experiences, as a sharp contrast and corrective to decades of ideological indoctrination and entrenched tra-ditions of "socialist realism." Misty poetry seemed to be chiefly interested in a certain psychology of personal emotion, in mood and interior feeling, and in an emotional-ism of personal separation or alienation in the poet's self-image.

However, what is neglected in critical accounts of the Misty poets is the *mode of reading* presupposed or entailed by the fixity of the poet's subject-position. The Misty poet's experience powerfully compels the reader to accept the poem's *predetermined* structure of meaning. In this sense, it is paradoxical that Misty poetry, initially known and criticized for its alleged "difficulty," "obscurity," and "ambiguity," often leaves little room for the reader's own active powers of imagination and interpreta-tion. Whether the self addressed is "I" or "you," most Misty poems narrate their

emotions and moods from a fixed subject-position, a position from which the self narrates at once the story of itself and the generic self of a whole generation. In this way, Misty poetry was *modally* not very different from the so-called socialist realist poetry. The expressive self seemed largely untouched by pressures of inner conflict or attrition. Part of Misty poetry's expressivity seemed to be an appropriation of Romantic expressivism in a poetry almost entirely controlled by the first-person pronouns.

The historical importance of Misty poetry lies in its renewed call for a centring of self and individual subjectivity, which helped to form a new cultural climate during the 1980s when critics like Liu Zaifu and others were able to reconstruct a new theory of *zhu-ti xing* or subjectivity.[4] It seems paradoxical that the Chinese poet tried to re-affirm the validity of a strong, coherent, centred individual self at a time when Western poststructuralism was exposing the social constructedness and fragmentation of the self. Yet the decentering of the self, of the individual subject, its fragmentation and dispersion, is also evident in much contemporary Chinese literature. This phenomenon may be viewed, perhaps paradoxically, as an attempt to gain subjective depth and resonance and to articulate the libidinal and psychic dynamics, against the traditional notion of the self as the surface, rather than the psychological depth, of the social. The mode of *indirection*, for example, in Chinese social and political life also has much to do with the fluid and ambiguous nature of the self as conceived in traditional Chinese modes of thinking. The implicit assumption seems to be that the deepest part, or the innermost core, of one's self is best left unclear and undefined. The self must even block its own thoughts, if needs be, in order to assume an acceptable exterior mask. The *self* hides behind the socio-political *persona* and the persona then becomes the self. The deepest self in this sense is just another persona, often a persona demanded by socio-political pressures. Thus in much of twentieth-century Chinese poetry up to the mid-1980s, there had been little recognition that lyricism as expressive of psychological conditions is simultaneously a discourse of cultural conditions, that writing the self is not simply a question of writing, but also one of reading, since both poet and reader would have to wrestle with the construction of self in relation to what engenders and constrains it—language, tradition, or socio-political forces.

These seem to be the very questions that have engaged the thinking of subsequent poets. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s and all the way up to now, the mainland Chinese poetic scene has been transformed by a whole new generation of younger poets, often collectively labeled "Poets of the New-Born Generation" (新生代) or simply "the Third Generation" (第三代). This label amalgamates a variety of individual voices, as well as new groups associated around poetry journals or collections such as *They* (他们), *Over the Sea* (海上), *Han Poetry* (汉诗), and *ORIGINAL* (原样), to name just a few.[5] Post-Misty poets are generally more preoccupied, if not obsessed, with the private and the personal, with a more acute sense of self-expression but motivated by a deeper sense of alienation grounded in everyday life and language.

The withdrawal by such poets into the private and the personal, as an anti-heroic and anti-sublime gesture against the Misty mode of collective political identity, can also be intensely solipsistic.[6] The paradox is that this aversion to politics is itself political. In these post-Misty poets, an acute need to step outside an entrenched political identity is often articulated as the recovery of a supposedly pre-political or politically under-determined self.[7] But this approach to politics and history has proved to be illusory and untenable.

The ORIGINAL Difference

In contrast to skepticism about time and history shown by most post-Misty new-generation poets, a very different kind of approach emerged towards the end of the 1980s, which began to break out of the impasse of an over-determining political discourse. This approach closely attends to the materiality of radical linguistic experimentation and tries to explore complexities of language in writing, as opposed to merely reacting to supposedly extrinsic politics. Instead of pushing the boundaries of language, these poets break them. Not that writings by other poets are not poetically innovative, but with them the reader can still rely on traditional conventions to be reassured of the poet's personal authenticity and authority. Such a sense of secure meaningfulness is seriously questioned by poets associated with the name of *Yuanyang* or ORIGINAL.

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Che and Zhou launched the "Formalist Poetry Group" in 1987 when they were both students at Nanjing University. Then in 1988 Che came up with the concept of a language-centred poetry, which he named *Yuanyang* (原样, literally "original" or "original type" or "prototype").[8] The core idea behind this concept seemed to be an emphasis on returning things to their "original shape or condition." The ORIGINAL poets as a group were active mainly in Nanjing and Suzhou (both in southern Jiangsu Province on the eastern coast near Shanghai) roughly from 1988 to 1992. The immediate literary historical background to their emergence was a strong reaction against the Misty poetic mode, even though some of these younger poets started out, or were commonly identified, as Misty-like poets. For example, several poems by Che (including the famous "Three Primary Colours") were included in a retrospective anthology of twenty-five so-called Misty poets published in November 1985.[9] However, poets like Che and Zhou differed significantly from the Misty poets and other contemporary poets in that they rejected the traditional conception of language as a transparent window on reality, or as an instrument for the "automatic metaphorization of poetry," in Jeffrey Twitchell's phrase (Twitchell and Huang 33).

Che Qianzi, whose penname is the name of the seed of a Chinese medicinal herb (车前子, "plantain seed"), now often writes under the name "Lao Che" (老车 Old Che or "old cart")[10] and Zhou Yaping now under "Yi Zhou" (壹周, the One Zhou or "one week"). Although the ORIGINAL poets no longer operate as a close-knit group and

Zhou and Che now write more as individual poets, neither of them has given up their distinctive approach of linguistic experimentation. Che's 2006 collection *Unicorns and Spices* (独角兽与香料), which includes a selection of seventy-eight poems written between 2000 and 2005, is even more experimental than his early poems. The publication of Yi Zhou's trilogy *What If Wheat Dies* (如果麦子死了), *Vulgar Beauty* (俗丽), and *Drama Fair* (戏剧场)[11] became quite an event in poetry publishing in 2009 despite a shrinking market for poetry.[12]

In contrast to the Misty poets before them who, in Yang Lian's words, "trust[ed] writing least" (*Non-Person Singular* 61) the ORIGINAL poets embraced writing. For Che Qianzi, "Coming back to script-writing (文字, "patterned marks") underlines a poet's six paths of samsara (回到文字是一个诗人的六道轮回)" ("Postface," *Unicorns and Spices*). Their primary approach was to question linguistic and hence semantic-pragmatic conventions through writing, which is marked by strategies such as misplaced or displaced pronouns (as opposed to the predisposed pronouns **378** in Misty poetry); linking of unconnected images through aural and visual puns, homophones and homonyms, assonances and rhymes; appropriation of seemingly innocent and unsophisticated qualities of folk songs or nursery rhymes; disconcerting collocations of syntactical and semantic elements; self-deprecating and dark humour as both world-directed and self-directed irony. Instead of assuming an uncontested authoritative voice that addresses and even imposes itself on the reader, their poems allow (and also require) the reader to work out their own relations to language and the world. This is the fundamental difference between the ORIGINAL poets and those before them.

The modern spirit for both Zhou and Che is grounded in an ironic awareness of antinomies between self and world. But irony in this case is not a mark of superior self-consciousness, but a sign of the subject's acknowledgement of the intrinsic difficulty and recalcitrance of reality. A short poem by Che, entitled "late autumn in suzhou" (苏州的深秋), though not overtly experimental in linguistic terms, can illustrate his phenomenological and self-reflexive interrogation of the very ground of self-consciousness, moving beyond a substantialist conception of the self to an engagement with the self's uncertainty and fluidity. Here is the entire poem:

> Hands begin to feel cold
> A bucket of water carried upstairs
> Shadow always in front of me
> Darkness drops like stone
> (Twitchell, *ORIGINAL* 17)

The title "late autumn in suzhou" seems to evoke a traditional trope of autumnal, elegiac meditation, very common in classical Chinese poetry. Suzhou also evokes a host of historical associations and poeticized sentiments (private gardens and falling leaves and so on). But the lyricism of the title is quickly subverted by the coldness felt by the body.

Hands begin to feel cold   手开始发冷

Syntax is here prosaic to the point of everyday speech. The body is a reality that resists easy identification and manipulation by a "disembodied" self-consciousness. The sensation of cold prompts the object-body or the body-subject to become aware of itself.

A bucket of water carried upstairs   一桶水往楼上提去

The second line questions the subjectivity established in the first. Agency is here muted or made indeterminate as the verb *ti* (提, "to carry") is placed after the nominal "subject" of the sentence ("a bucket of water"), which grammatically may also be the "object" of "to carry" (here rendered in the passive form in English). The verb's position here makes agency ambiguous. Someone is carrying the bucket upstairs. Yet the ambiguous Chinese syntax makes the line sound like a sentence in the active voice, making the bucket of water carry itself upstairs. This ambiguity has a distancing effect. The subjectivity thus made indistinct harks back to the coldness of the first line, which also marks the limit of an interpretive mode (from the reader's point of view) that takes first-person subjectivity for granted.

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Shadow always in front of me   身影总在我的面前

The mention of a shadow in the third line restores a sense of subjectivity, which, however, is no longer what it is in the first line. The shadow cast by the body always "foreshadows" consciousness and haunts it like an absent presence. This realization is a kind of illuminating moment that makes us aware of the nature of our subjectivity: If the shadow is "always in front of me," the immediacy of a spatial relation becomes palpable only at the expense of a limited consciousness.

Darkness drops like stone   黑暗坠落得象石头

In the fourth and final line, by starting a new line, "darkness" subsumes the dark shadow of the body by becoming a subject itself (both grammatically and semantically). Darkness drops like stone; it is the law of gravity. Yet if water can move upstairs against gravity, then the reader has to be alert to new ways of feeling and interpretation. In this poem, Che dramatizes a self-questioning subjectivity that does not take shape until the need of articulating it emerges, that questions itself by recognizing its own "shadowiness." In the end, the reader becomes aware of a mental space that both *incorporates* and *transcends* the physical space by means of both engagement and detachment. Yet the body becomes conscious of itself only through being jolted out of its normal subjectivity: the "shadow" of the body, but also of the body-subject's own consciousness, points to the limits of self-consciousness and self-mastery. Thus, the reader is called upon to recognize and construct a reality they have not made but share with others inter-subjectively, with other readers (and non-readers). Language is here recognized as the realm of a shared making and unmaking of subjective and objective meanings.

Again, Che's more recent "Improvisation (Name)" (written in 2005) captures the moment and momentousness of a bracketing of subjectivity:

Quite by accident, I discover
I have another name.
Under that name, I am wealthy
And have languid light
And the most procrastinating possible high-rises
A son on the rocky bank of Lake Tai, taking a casual look,
A superficial pink, like a daughter I have lost carelessly,
Tottering she holds a tree branch (can one see more clearly),
Flogging the cloth-sewn vicious dog,
In coins, in fields and gardens, also in Xerox machines,
Flogging the vicious dog, till the cloth is beaten to shreds,
Till the cotton-growing poet,
Entirely comes out of the cloth—
Under another name I have lived an endless minute.

<div align="right">(Unicorns and Spices 103)</div>

The "I" as the other, or the "I" under "another name," objectifies the subjective. Yet such duality is presented as accidental, residing in an improvised perspective. However, the perspective called "improvisation" has a necessarily double logic to it. "I" takes on a whole new life through the deliberately vague suggestions of a "successful" life. The new life takes the form of other people or other personal nouns. "I" become one with "a son on the rocky bank of Lake Tai" who is collaged with "a daughter I have lost carelessly." This surprising metamorphosis of the self enables the merged subjectivity to "[flog] the cloth-sewn vicious dog." The cloth has to be "beaten to shreds" in order for the "cotton-growing poet" to "come out of the cloth." "Cloth" (*bu*, 布) is an exact homophone of "no" (*bu*, 不). So "cloth" is both fabric or "fabrication" and its negation or "de-fabrication." A new poet is beaten out of the cotton shreds. But the shift here from "I" to the son and the daughter valorizes the self as both *fabrication* and *de-fabrication*. This is a central feature of Che's work: "Just now I spoke of subjectivity: but I immediately erased it: subjectivity is the object that has lost subjectivity (主观性是失去主观的客体)" ("Postface," *Unicorns and Spices*). The spatial impossibility of this dual logic forces the reader to make a self impossible to imagine without their own fabrication.

Active Reading-Writing

My argument is that the shift from Misties to younger experimental poets such as Che and Zhou is not (merely) a shift from the heroic or epic to the unheroic or everyday, as many critics have emphasized, but a shift from a conventional *passive* mode of reading that identifies (with) and acquiesces to authorial and pre-determined meanings to a new conception of the reader's *active* powers of interpretation and discovery.

One crucial problem to be addressed is precisely the reader's passivity and complicity in acquiescing to the poet's intention and authority. The reader's role is a key question that this avant-garde poetry tries to address as part of its radical poetic questioning. The reader may read passively and defensively in the traditional way, only to consume the poem as a depository of ready-made and take-away meanings. But reading, like writing, is an act of discovering, constructing and contesting meanings. Reading a poem is to discover what is virtual or potential but real in the self-performance of the poem's textuality. Discovery is exploratory and creative.

A word of clarification is necessary here about the relation between notions of self-hood and subjectivity and the notion of the reader. In this essay, I take a nominalist approach to the notions of self and subjectivity in lyric poetry. The basic paradox is that it seems impossible to observe the self, yet the self is precisely the very process of observing. Paul de Man has usefully proposed a typology of four basic ways in which "the problem of the self" may be considered: "the self that judges, the self that reads, the self that writes, and the self that reads itself." Two of these categories, "the self that reads," that is, "the self constructed through the intersubjective relationships between the author and the reader," and "the self that reads itself," that is, "the self as the author who is changed (and interpreted) by his or her own work" (39), seem particularly relevant to my discussion here. In recent criticism and theory, "self" is often distinguished from "subject" in that the former seems to connote an authentic identity while the latter seems to imply an identity positioned or constructed by social or ideological forces. But in this paper I simply take a subject (self) to be a self (subject) that emerges in textual processes. Subjectivity is then the process of constructing and producing selfhood in and through language. Subjectivity may be the capacity of a speaker to set him or herself up as a subject. In this sense, the reader may be taken as the other of the poet: the reader-function is both contractual and projective. The reader is the projective or hypothetical site where the poet constructs his or her subjectivity through an imagining and staging of a reader who *reads as a writer*. The poet responds to what he or she imagines the reader to be responding to. Thus, the self is a subject in process. Subjectivity is then the relation between textual processes and the kinds of selves that emerge in writing. The textual process is one in which contradiction and analysis are engaged and made tangible.

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Here, we see how Che and Zhou confronted themselves with the problem of the intrinsic difficulty of poetry and the concomitant lack of serious readership. In this respect, Che and Zhou are the inheritors of a critical consciousness in the Anglo-American modernist tradition as practiced by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. In their time, Pound and Eliot themselves did not really enjoy any serious readership, certainly not in the beginning. Their readers seemed always lagging behind. And the question for Pound and Eliot was in part to train new readers, to "create the taste by which [the poet] is to be relished," as William Wordsworth put it (*Letters* 151).[13] The problem of poetry readership was not new. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Wordsworth himself clearly recognized that there was no real social basis

for any serious readership of his new work, for example, his *Lyrical Ballads* first published in 1798 and written in collaboration with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In a sense, Wordsworth had only one reader, Coleridge, who was addressed as "Dear Friend" in *Lyrical Ballads*. For Wordsworth, Coleridge seemed to have internalized and textualized the extending and questioning aspects of his poetic text. The exertion of the reader should be commensurate with the power of the poet. This is how Wordsworth formulated the problem: the reader should be "invigorated and inspirited by [the poet], in order that he may exert himself; for he cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight. Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power, of which knowledge is the effect; and *there* lies the true difficulty" ("Essay" 410). It is well known that Pound's revisions to the draft of *The Waste Land* removed those passages of Eliot's draft sounding like nineteenth-century "narratives that make sense." Pound thought he was assisting Eliot to find *his* poem in *his* draft, not Pound's own poem. Pound was interested in bringing forth what Eliot could and should have written. Pound as reader and editor served as a maieutic proxy for Eliot. The concluding narrative of *The Waste Land* seemed weaker, but it was left in as it is, as an indulgence, by Pound. For Eliot, the end narrative now seemed weaker because of earlier cuts made by Pound, thus no longer really "making sense" in the new context of the poem as reconstituted by Pound. But Pound's point was precisely about not "making sense" any more. This is again evident in the most drastic cutting Pound made to the draft, with Part IV, "Death by Water." The Phlebas section became Pound's invention: it is an example of how the reader-function was internalized into the text itself.[14]

In much of the work by Zhou and Che, the reader is actively involved in the reading and writing of "meaning." Impersonality here means having no anxiety about selfhood or interiority, or not being obsessed with protecting the self from contradiction or questioning. Language is thus "impersonal" not because personal pronouns get lost or dispossessed in it. Rather, language is the site of a conflict and tension. The personality of the poet is a field of play and contention. Thus, the poet is "impersonal" in the sense that the inner speech that struggles to be "externalized" or "expressed" is not a private or personally psychological or subjective inner world that exists before its expression in language. The poet's personality or singularity moves deeper into language itself, and shows itself most vividly and energetically in the sound-patterns, the rhythmic movements, and the semantic oscillations of the poem itself. A good example is Che's short poem entitled "handle" (柄):

> Boundless father,
> Pay up
> Frame up. Narrow small fall. Large-minded (meaning a very broad table) fall,
> Fall sky five thousand handles:
> Tree trunk. Axe haft, axe handle. Father yellow and man.
> Tree trunk! the handle has found you.

A man called "Handle" is back.
(March 9)
(Twitchell, *ORIGINAL* 17)

无限父亲，
付清，
诬陷。狭小秋天。大方（意思是很大的方块）的秋天，
秋季的天空五千柄：
树干。斧柯，斧头柄。父亲黄色与人。
树干！有柄找到了你。

一个叫 "柄" 的人回来了。
（三月九日）

Here, there are homophonic puns on *wuxian* (无限, boundless) and *wuxian* (诬陷, frame-up), *fuqin* (父亲, father) and *fuqing* (付清, pay up). "Axe haft, axe handle" (斧柯, 斧柄) alludes to *The Book of Songs* (诗经), the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry. Poem 158 (操斧伐柯) of *The Book of Songs* is part of the implicit context or background of Che's poem: "How does one cut an axe-handle? / Without an axe it is impossible. / […] / Cut an axe-handle? Cut an axe-handle? The pattern is not far to seek" (Waley 68). How to cut an axe-handle impinges on how to seek measure in what is (seemingly) without measure. "Handle" (柄) gets an unexpected self-reflexive resonance in the context of Che's poem, which refers to the common occurrence that many fathers (and mothers) were framed during the Cultural Revolution; the word *bing* (柄, handle) also evokes *ba bing* (把柄 giving somebody a handle against oneself) and *hua bing* (话柄, butt of ridicule; subject for gossip or slander). Che's "'cloth' no. 2," like "Improvisation (Name)" quoted above, puns on the sound of *bu*, linking together homophones such as "cloth" (布), "horror" (怖), and "no" (不) (Twitchell, *ORIGINAL* 14-15). It is also striking to note the bathetic shift in "large-minded" (大方, largesse or generosity as a moral virtue) being glossed immediately in the parenthesis as merely "meaning a very broad table" (or more literally, "a very large square"). Such punning and interest in the linguistic and exploratory resources of the Chinese language are significantly absent in the work of poets before them. Che and Zhou aim to discover new relations and connections between self and world by tapping into the phonetic and visual potentialities of the Chinese language. As the ORIGINAL manifesto puts it, "the written characters alone (the code of recording language) is the starting point"; a "particular attention to the Chinese written character" gives the poet "the right to a firm individuality" (Twitchell, *ORIGINAL* 98). Chinese abounds in both spatial-visual patterning and aural-sequential movement. The ORIGINAL poets value both fluidity and rupture, in shifts of voices and styles, of subjects and viewpoints, in sudden shifts of register and break-offs, in cross-over movements of text and reader, in unexpected juxtapositions and turns of phrasing. All these generate *unintentional* effects of perception or insight. For example, Che's concrete poem "Tortoise" (龟) enacts the permutation and *literal* transformation, given in the sim-

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plified graphs, of the written graph 龟 (cf. unsimplified form: 龜) from 田 through 由 田甲　鱼由田甲龟　画鱼由田甲电龟　to 申 (*Unicorns and Spices* 63). The moot point here is the very contrast between these so-called simplified graphs and the absent "traditional complex" forms of some of them: 龟 < 龜, 鱼 < 魚, 画 < 畫, 电 < 電. Though perhaps not part of Che's intention, this very contrast may have political resonances. This seems to be a word-game, yet also more than just a word-game, since its intensely visual dimensions are devoid of a centralizing or controlling teleology, or of a privileged perspective. Indeed it is a perspective that puts itself into question. This graphic concrete poem also accentuates the linguistic nature of these signs by denaturalizing them as motivated sign-meanings. The poet is here both inside and outside language *at the same time*.

The group manifesto of American language poets was first published in autumn 1988, around the time when the ORIGINAL group was launched in Nanjing.[15] Key features of American "language poetry" include strategies and devices such **384** as appropriation, collage, citation, recycling, and deliberately imposed constraints on composition. One chief function or aim of language poetry is precisely to *forestall* direct or spontaneous self-expression and to resist stock responses from the reader. In Zhou Yaping's "story horse · red firewood (experimental texts)," a group of poets (Su, Fei, Xu, Xu, Xu) engage in a constraint game of writing. "First stipulate the numerical unit, specify that nouns and pronouns may contain metaphorical elements, and emphasize that the beginning of a new line should link up with the ending of the last. Those who procrastinate should be penalized." Each of them takes turns to supply the next line in a numerical sequence from 1 to 50. At the end of this poetic game, "Nobody felt her creation had produced the maximum of meaning, but the mystery of composing (and its language-feel) brought them the greatest of joys" (*Vulgar Beauty* 151, 155)

Two short excerpts from Zhou's taut but exuberant long poem "master of maize (jade rice)" (玉米师傅) may further illustrate this engagement with the Chinese language itself:

> She.
> She. In colourful checks.
> Walking the horse. Horse hooves tread on
> One's own "herd",
>
> Heard.
> Herd living.
> Little hooves.
> Big world.
> Husband looks after cousin.
> <div align="right">(Twitchell, ORIGINAL 46)</div>

> 她。
> 她。在彩格中
> 走马。马蹄又踩着

自家的 "群",

裙。
群居。
小马蹄。
大天下。
郎顾表弟弟。
>   (Zhou, *Vulgar Beauty* 13-14)

Here, we note an abundance of phonetic puns, visual symbolisms, idiomatic shifts and turns, homophonic echoes, and parodic associations. Such sound play and interplay of voices and echoes are unprecedented in modern Chinese poetry. For example, 彩 (colourful) is echoed by 踩 (tread or trample). 群 (group or crowd) is associated with 裙 (skirt), which leads to 裙带 (connection through one's female relatives; "nepotism"). 群居 (living in groups; gregarious; social) also homophonically suggests 裙裾 (skirt; female). Here, Jeffrey Twitchell's English translation brilliantly plays on "heard" and "herd," on the shift from "horse" to "herd," in order to recreate Zhou's attempt to *dislodge* pre-formed reading habits. These effects are by no means easy to translate into English. But in Twitchell's version we notice the connection between the individual and herd living (群居) or "herd mentality," as well as a sub-dued reference to childhood innocence and revolutionary violence. Such a powerful obliquity of association seems to be established on the level of the unconscious or subconscious, on the level of language as the institutionalized fabric of pre-conscious socio-political agency. Again, an ironic awareness of complicity in violence and of the topsy-turvy world of innocent duplicity is registered in the following passage:

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> Red tassel blooms on a helmet.
> Paper boat arrives in Norway.
> Jade Rice. Her hand. Firmly clasping a spear.
> 'Kill—', the governor tumbles into the water.
> >   (Twitchell, *ORIGINAL* 47)

> 红缨开在钢盔。
> 纸船到了挪威。
> 玉米。她的手。紧握梭标。
> "杀－－",总督落下水。
> >   (Zhou, *Vulgar Beauty* 15-16)

"Maospeak" is here ironically evoked—its comic-absurd potential, its fairy-tale fantasy, rendered palpable and parodied. "Red tassel" and "spear" can refer to the Red Guards in rebellion and their complicity in violence. "Paper boat" can be a catachrestic mutation of "paper tiger" and so on. *Zongdu* (总督 "governor") has colonialist, imperialist, and Cultural Revolution resonances.

In these examples from Zhou and Che, we see how the poet cedes much of the initiative to the dynamic power and resistance of words. The speaker in such a poem should be construed as a text-speaker, rather than a person-speaker. In Zhou's work,

the reader-function and dialectical process are more visible, whereas Che seems more cryptic and whimsical. In both Che and Zhou's work, very few poems feature a traditional lyric speaker apparently rooted in authentic lived experience. Instead, language speaks itself: locutions, idioms, sound-patterns and rhythms make themselves audible and also visible precisely as *patterns* of sounds and words and as "materials" of reality, as pre-formed and pre-fabricated blocks of ready-made meaning now put back into action, so as to make palpable the limits of what can be said and meant with such expressions.

Non-Person Singularity

The crucial difference between the Misty and ORIGINAL modes of writing and reading can be more clearly brought out in a comparison of Che Qianzi and Yang Lian
386 regarding the key concept of "Non-Person Singular" (無人稱 [无人称]) as formulated by Yang Lian in his collection of the same name. In that volume, "The Non-Personal Snow" is the title of a sequence of five short poems:

> we are all snow   slipping downhill
> innately non-personal and so squandering each person's death.

> 我們都是下山的　雪
> 天生無人稱因而揮霍每個人的死亡
> <div align="right">(Non-Person Singular 115)[16]</div>

Yang Lian's neologism 無人稱 seems on the surface to be a grammatical and technical term. While it evokes the category of personal pronouns (in the first, second, or third person), the non-personal highlights precisely that it is not part of that category. Yet Yang Lian's intention in coining this term seems to highlight the idea of alienation. Yang's poems are full of lamentation over alienating self-effacement. For example: "You are absent / as you write   so you are / a connoisseur of your own excision"; "I become something spiked by the sunlight / bending to sniff at my death-stench which grows daily stronger" (*Non-Person Singular* 21, 37). Self-alienation in Yang Lian is a way of authentic self-expression. In contrast, Che eschews the Misties' preoccupation with (autobiographical) authenticity and selfhood, with the autobiography of a generation or epoch:

> Whoever writes autobiography disappears,
> He self-transcendently abdicates as a witness.
> Epoch: a biography of people—
> Without people […]
> <div align="right">("Improvisation (unicorns 3)," Unicorns and Spices 109)</div>

Politics for Che and Zhou becomes precisely a problem of *pronouns*. Poetic writing becomes a dialogue between language and its own unconscious, which is enacted

only through a "non-person" perspective. Yang Lian's term "non-person singular," though he uses it in a different sense, is nonetheless an accurate term to evoke the condition of being *no one* in particular yet being *everyone*. This is in fact the condition of language, or rather of already being in language. The condition of "non-person singular" is neither intentionally thought nor impersonally projected. Indeed, non-person singular should be construed as *apersonal*.

Yang Lian's translator Brian Holton translates the book's title 無人稱 as "Non-Person Singular" but feels that this English rendition fails to capture the spirit of the last sequence of the book, entitled "The Non-Personal Snow" (無人稱的雪). Holton explains why it is difficult to translate this notion into English:

> Even 'non-personal' doesn't exactly convey the alienated, dispossessed, dehumanised feeling of the original—we might with equal justice render the title as 'Dehumanise'. But after much thought and discussion, we have let the title stand: in form it is modification of a grammatical term—'zero/non-existent person', as against the first, second and third 'persons' of pronouns and declensions. In feeling it is stronger than we have managed to express. (122)

While Holton's translation of this phrase may be accurate in terms of Yang Lian's intention, his (and Yang Lian's) interpretation of this important concept as meaning "alienated, dispossessed, dehumanised" is seriously limiting and patently mistaken and misleading. "無人稱" is literally *apersonal*, or even *im-personal*, yet this concept as Yang Lian wants it to mean is not really the same as *impersonality*. In the context of "The Non-Personal Snow," it should have meant *impersonal*, in that it indicates a grammatical category used of a verb expressing an action not attributable to a definite subject. For example, *it is snowing*, in keeping with Yang Lian's context. *Impersonal* can simply mean having no personal feeling or having no personality. But *impersonality* also refers to the assumption of a *persona,* as in "to impersonate." This usage is common in Anglo-American modernist poets.

Clearly, these are two different ways of conceiving "impersonality": Yang Lian's Misty emphasis on the "alienated, dispossessed, dehumanised" self *versus* the ORIGINAL attention to alienation *in* poetic language. This is the crucial difference: Che and Zhou embrace an uncertain, floating sense of self. It is the self's estrangement from itself in and through language. Yet this is how selfhood is generated by language, in time and against the cussedness of language itself. The political nature of language lies partly in the fact that before one possesses it, language is already "possessed" with others' meanings and intentions. This is an essential aspect of the violence of language itself. The materiality of language is itself the domain of the political both as a repository of political meanings and as the site of the enactment of political violence. In this sense, there is no essential difference between everyday language and "poetic" language, since their boundaries are blurred and even non-existent. "Language poetry" for Che and Zhou acknowledges and re-enacts the intrinsic correlation and complicity between language (be it poetic or political) and socio-political reality in which poets find themselves. Alienation in poetry may thus

take paradoxical forms. Self-alienation is at the same time the gaining of an individual voice. Gaining a voice is also the emptying out of the self. Che's recent poem "Alleyway and Snow," interestingly also a poem about "non-personal snow," imagines forms of emptiness and blankness, both collective and first-person singular:

> i was not quick enough to swoop into the emptiness, nobody in the alleyway
> snow came down to fill in the blank of the country
> this country is already blank enough
> […]
> i feel so empty
> yet whiteness is white only when it has not crashed […]

Here, Che plays with the idiomatic expression 乘虚而入, which usually means "to infiltrate by taking advantage of the other side's unpreparedness or weak point." Here, it may also literally mean "to swoop in by taking advantage of the void or emptiness." Then, toward the end of the poem, the poem's very words and sentences begin to fragment and dissolve into their smallest, even "empty" blank signs, bracketed by quotation marks:

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> thousands of years of fragments, more fragmented, poured into the empty stomach that
> cannot be undone by the system
> "i" "snow" "this" "take" "same" "and" "open" "as" "in"
> "pull" "snow" "spill" "knot" "thin" "house" " " " " " " "up"
> "i" "only"
> only blankness can insinuate itself into the void. not seeing me
>   (*Unicorns and Spices* 3)[17]

Here, Che's use of quotation marks (" " " ") to mark emptiness not only brackets or even erases words as conventional referents, but also brings into visibility the background of these signs and, most importantly, the *background* in which this poem itself is written and read. This poem shows that what "language poetry" points up is a more fundamental notion of the "subject" inseparable from its process-effects in voice and rhythm that are produced by the act of writing a poem. The alienation *in* poetic language is not the alienation *of* the poet or reader as a social-political subject. There is the fact of collusion or complicity or acquiescence between modes of writing and reading poetry and the status quo of a given social-political reality. Such collusion is most often concealed by "normal" poetic diction and syntax. Che Qianzi pinpoints "Chinese syntax" as the crux: "Single Chinese written characters all look beautiful on their own, but not necessarily so when combined. 'The mass viewpoint' (群众观点) is a noisy and boisterous amalgamation. Perhaps 'the mass viewpoint' is no more than noise or cacophony. Such a syntactic phrasing actually has a hidden mechanism (暗藏机关)" (quoted in Zhang Hou). It is necessary to expose and disrupt the self-evident naturalness of natural order of words and sentences, as well as of social and political relations. For Che, the poet's task is partly to diagnose and even *induce* symptoms of disorder so as to probe into its aetiology: "Since I am opposed to 'high-flown assertive eloquence,' I have the impudence instead to flaunt rashes and

warts and blotches." Che plays on the sound of the idiomatic expression 振振有词, (eloquent high-sounding assertion or self-justification) and demotes it to the status of skin disorders (the phrase 振疹疣疵 matches 振振有词 in sound, though not exactly in pitch-tone) induced by psychological distress (心理焦虑引发的皮肤病), which are merely clichés and platitudes (陈词滥调) (quoted in Zhang Hou). Instead, Che values what he ironically calls 花言巧语, literally "flowery words and clever sentences." For the same reason, Che values his own native Suzhou dialect for its "intonational" texture, which serves as an antidote to Putonghua or "standard language": "if a poet can speak fluent Putonghua his works inevitably have a kind of smoothness or slickness as glazed tiles (像琉璃瓦一样光滑), whereas I like the grainy texture (质地) of a poem. I dislike smoothness; instead it must have a certain jaggedness or boniness (嶙峋感)" (Che, "Conversation").

In Che's conception, language can be felt as a system of socially instilled dispositions, which can take both bodily and verbal forms. Language may be seen as the repository both of meanings already experienced, remembered and stored in language and of meanings that are to be discovered and activated only through the act of writing and reading. Poetry conceived in this way, in Zhou's words, pertains to "the study of language events and of language itself which have absolute control over objects" (Zhou, "letter" 100). Thus, the subjectivity that is produced by the writing and reading of a poem is a subjectivity that is at once virtual and recursive. That is, a poem produces a fictive "subject-hood" of the poet-speaker or text-speaker, which then re-enters the "real" world through a fluidity and indeterminacy that the fiction of a poem itself has produced. Che's long poem "fictitious fish (poem sequence)" (虚构的鱼: 组诗) explores the relations between subjectivity, language, and reality, recalling, among other things, Zhuangzi's Daoist allegory of dreaming that he was a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuangzi:

> A school of fish, not accepting the inclusion of water
> In concept, a fish
> Obliterates reality
> [……]
> Numerous fish unify their posture
> In one direction, also toward one centre, causing reality
> To become a corpse it has left behind
> ("section two")
>
> [……] But fictitious fish are not born
> Outside pictures, also outside writing
> Kept in thought
> ("section six")
>
> Collect one 'fish' character after another
> —The fish of writing is too abstract
>
> ("section seven")
>
> (Twitchell, *ORIGINAL* 36, 39)

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The complex relations of mutual imbrication between writing, fictionality, and reality are deftly explored. Che alerts the reader to the dangers of a self conceived as outside of "writing," untouched by the "fictionalizing" of writing. Che points to the potential for poet and reader to twist free, even if only momentarily, of some of the already rigid connections with the "real" world mired in doctrinaire frameworks, so as to experience and discover the "real" in and through language. In a short poem entitled "Grammar," Zhou offers a way of dismantling and deconstructing meaning, or rather, of constructing meaning from the ground up and of trying to discover how meaning comes to be constituted:

> 从汽车的尾部
> 挨次拆下汽车的零件
> 拆到第几步
> 汽车不能开走
> （*What If Wheat Dies* 24)

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> From the tail end of the car
> One by one dismantle the parts of the car
> Dismantle to what point where
> The car cannot drive away
> (Twitchell, *ORIGINAL* 50)

Dismantle to what point where: this is both an *imperative* and a *question*. It is an instance of dialectical composition as an active process of thinking. The poet's "intention" and the reader's awareness consist, at least partially, in a dialectical openness to experience and in testing the limits of what is *given* as well as what is *possible*. In the process both poet and reader are subject to the test of what is *real*. The *poetic* works on the reader most when it allows one to acquire, in reading, a sense of how things are, and also more importantly, to decide things for oneself, to decide on how one relates to language and through it to the world, and to discover limits that are discoverable only through dialectical questioning in the act of writing and reading. Questioning is both self-questioning and directed at the world. Thus irony is not at the expense of either subjectivity or the world, but rather a *marker* of the intrinsic recalcitrance of the real. Such language poetry is sophisticated both politically and aesthetically. The originality of Che and Zhou lies in provoking and promoting in the reader a radical shift of attention away from politics extrinsically conceived to politics conceived as embedded in language itself. What is highlighted in this poetry, more than any other Chinese poets or poetry groups since the early twentieth century, is this awareness it fosters of the making of a common world, which can be construed in at least two ways. First, ambiguity and indeterminacy of poetic meaning open up a space of interpretation for all readers who are obliged to construct and contest what a poem offers. And focus on the "language event" makes the event impersonal in that the individual engages and identifies with the event so completely that it is no longer restricted by any personal perspective the individual is bound to hold. Second, the

making of a common reality or world is possible only by way of the "non-personal" or the apersonal, by way of moving beyond the social and political person toward the non-personal or impersonal. The impersonal intimates an openness that is not restricted by the personal or the pronominal personal. Reality becomes common only because and when it is "non-personalized" or depersonalized, that is, when "I" becomes "non-personal." "Non-person singular" can in fact be construed in inter-subjective terms. A community can be formed of such "non-personal" subjects who paradoxically become "personal" through contesting and transforming the meanings and discourses in which they find themselves.

The ORIGINAL manifesto openly declares: "We do not need allegory [*yù*], only words [*yán*]!" (Twitchell, *ORIGINAL* 99). This dismemberment of the word *yùyán* into *yù* and *yán* in the original Chinese signals a heightened awareness of the dilemma and entrapment inherent in writing. In place of allegory (寓, *yù*), words or language (言, *yán*) alone constitute the field of play and signification. But in a fundamental sense, yùyán is inescapable. The word *yùyán* (寓言) is untranslatable; **391** its close equivalents in English may include "allegory" or "parable," or even "fable" or "moral." According to Che and Zhou, there will be no "parables"; there will be only "words," words as "anti-parables," so to speak. Or parables that are to be read in an anti-parable way. Yet, for Che and Zhou, anti-parable can prevent the automatic foreclosure and totalistic pre-determination of meaning and can instead open up a space for interpretation, contention, and disagreement. Anti-parable effectively subverts the traditional paradigms of social realism, as well as the Misty modes of writerly authority and readerly passivity, both of which demand a certain fixed outcome for literary relevance and ideological correctness. Such a radical rethinking of language represents an important step toward a truly "modern spirit" in contemporary Chinese poetry. In the "Postface" to his recent collection of poems, Che defines poetry as a series of paradoxes or antinomies, each of which is enclosed within quotation marks:

> "Poetry is a kind of compromise, but it often carries the banner of rebellion."
> "Poetry is a kind of conservatism, but it often carries the banner of avant-garde."
> "Poetry is a kind of counter-revolution, but it often carries the banner of revolution."
> "Poetry is a kind of mundane experience, but it often carries the banner of otherworldliness."
>
> ("Postface," *Unicorns and Spices*)

The modern spirit in poetry would be the spirit of the poetic whose power consists in making simultaneously parable and anti-parable, in being simultaneously conservative and avant-garde. Politics would then no longer be only in a dissentient register, but becomes a more radical *politics of reality*, in a spirit of questioning and construction. Poetics would then no longer be only aesthetic, but political as well, simultaneously making and unmaking the symbolic order of reality.

Notes

1. In writing this paper, I have greatly benefited from conversations with J.H. Prynne, University Reader in English Poetry at the University of Cambridge. I am also grateful to the two anonymous readers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Chinese are mine. All quotations in Chinese will be given in the simplified (*jianti*) style, except where the traditional "unsimplified" (*fanti*) style is used in the source text quoted. All emphases are original unless otherwise indicated.

2. In the preface to his recent collection of poems entitled *Drama Fair*, Zhou Yaping observes that the history of modern Chinese poetry (in the mainland) since 1919 can be neatly divided into three periods of thirty years each: 1919-1949, 1949-1979, and 1979-2009 (2). These seemingly arbitrary dates in fact coincide with the three major political turning points: the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and the initiation of full-scale "reform and opening up" in 1979.

3. For example, the following two popular English-language anthologies explicitly emphasize Misty poetry as one of political protest and dissidence: *A Splintered Mirror*, edited by Finkel; and *Out of the Howling Storm*, edited by Barnstone. For a provocative view of the vicarious expectancy of the outside spectator impinging upon the writing of poetry in Bei Dao, for example, see Owen. For critiques of this view and counter-arguments, see for example Yeh and Chow 1-4. Yang Lian himself resented the bias in the Western reception of Misty poetry as a poetry of political protest. In an essay published in 1996, he criticized Chinese writers for their tendency to "pander to Western notions of popular taste" with "narratives littered with Orientalist clichés" (Yang, "Living in the now and forever" 14). Bei Dao also noted this paradox or dilemma in an 1988 interview with Michael March: "I dislike poetry as propaganda. In a society where politics tries to control literature, even opposition is a sort of propaganda" (Bei Dao, "Conversation").

4. The parameters of the debate surrounding this new conception are clearly set out in the chapter "Romancing the Subject: Utopian Moments in the Chinese Aesthetics of the 1980s" in Jing Wang, especially 201-206.

5. Notable anthologies of "third generation" poets available in English include the following: *New Generation*, edited by P. Wang, and *Eight Contemporary Chinese Poets*, edited by Tao and Prince. This second anthology consists of selections from eight poets who can be conveniently paired in the following way: Jiang He and Yang Lian who turn to the mythical and the historical, Han Dong and Yu Jian who emphasize the mundane and the unheroic, Zhai Yongming and Zhang Zhen who as women poets deploy new forms of women's writing, and finally Hai Zi and Xi Chuan who draw upon and engage with Western literary and philosophical ideas. Finally, *Another Kind of Nation*, edited by Zhang and Chen includes twenty-four poets. Apart from well-known male poets such as Han Dong, Mo Fei, and Chen Dongdong, this anthology also features eight women, by far the largest selection of women poets in anthologies of contemporary mainland Chinese poetry: Cao Shuying, Lan Lan, Ma Lan, Tang Danhong, Zhang Er, Zhang Zhen, Zhao Xia, and Zhou Zan. See also a more recent, eclectic selection, *Push Open the Window: Contemporary Poetry from China*, ed. Qingping Wang, translation co-editors Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2011).

6. As one poem by Meng Lang (孟浪, 1961-) puts it: "I want only to live in my own house. / I want only to live in my own mind. / I announce this as my own exile" (Ping Wang 95).

7. See, for example, "Reality" by Lan Lan (蓝蓝, 1967-), which addresses such a disconnection (Zhang and Chen 139). In "A Simple Childhood Song" by Qing Ping (清平, 1962-), the speaker does not long for a more innocent childhood, but asserts instead: "What's more intriguing is longing for an / Age before I was born" (Zhang and Chen 209). The backward movement of time is evoked only to be cancelled out through the absence of forms that may measure such time—the measuring self was (and is) yet to be born.

8. Other members of the group included Yi Cun, Hong Liu, Huang Fan, and Xian Meng. For an informative discussion of the emergence of the ORIGINAL group, see Twitchell and Huang. The first collection of poems by the ORIGINAL poets was published in Chinese under the title *Yuanyang: Zhongguo yuyan shipai* (Nanjing and Suzhou, [1992]). For English translations, see Twitchell, trans., *ORIGINAL: Chinese Language-Poetry Group*. For background and context, see Twitchell; Zhang and Huang. Che was a featured poet at the Cambridge Conference on Contemporary Poetry in 2002. Translations of his poetry have appeared in various languages including English, French, German, Arabic, Dutch, Japanese, and Romanian.

9. See Anon., *Selected Menglong Poems* (朦胧诗选).

10. Since December 19, 2006, to be exact, according to Che himself.

11. These three English titles appear on the covers of the trilogy. *Drama Fair* (戏剧场) seems to be an ironic play on the well-known Chinese title of *Vanity Fair* by Thackeray (名利场).

12. The trilogy received such publicity that a full symposium was devoted to the discussion of Zhou's work in Nanjing, China, on November 8, 2009, which was attended by poets, critics and academics ("A Symposium on Chinese Language Poets and on the Poetic Work of Yi Zhou"). A similar conference was also held in Suzhou in the same month, organized by the Faculty of Arts, University of Suzhou.

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13. William Wordsworth, letter to Lady Beaumont, 21 May 1807.

14. See T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. For a discussion of Pound's collaboration in *The Waste Land*, see Badenhausen 76-110.

15. See Ron Silliman *et al*. See also Zhang and Huang for the translation of a selection of American language poets including Charles Bernstein. The apparently independent but historically parallel formulations of "language-poetry" by these Chinese and American poets are often noted by scholars. This question deserves to be more closely examined and explored in a separate article.

16. Chinese citations from this book are in unsimplified (*fanti*) Chinese characters, as given in this bilingual edition.

17. The last line in Chinese reads: "只有空白能乘虚而入。看不见我".

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